



ANIMAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

... THE RAT ...

G·M·A·HEWETT



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**Animal Autobiographies.**

**THE RAT**

“But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee.’—JOB xii. 7, 8.





MR. SAMUEL, H.T.



ANIMAL  
AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

THE RAT

BY  
G·M·A·HEWETT

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Who's that knocking a rat-tat-tat?  
Who can the caller be,  
Wiping his feet on my nice clean mat?  
Peep through the glass and see.

Queer old beast in an old gray coat;  
Doesn't wear boots or hat;  
Bit like a weasel—bit like a stoat:  
Says he's a rat, rat, rat.

'Gi' me a drink and a bite of cheese.  
Mornin', sir! Are you well?  
Haven't a card, sir; but, if you please,  
Name "Mr. Samuel."

Enter, Sammy, my ancient foe!  
Come, and a tail unfold.  
Not much point to it! 'Well, sir, no;  
Still, sir, I'll make so bold.'



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# THE RAT

## I

### 'THIS COMES HOPPING'

OF course, we do not really hop at the very beginning of our lives. No rat is ever allowed to hop until he has done something which compels him to hop. I, for instance, have lost one of my fore-paws, and so I am what we call 'a hopper.' I believe that you call it 'a marquis.' At any rate, it means that I am a person of some considerable importance. In fact, I am even more important than that, because I have only half a tail. Therefore you can never be quite so dignified as I am. A cousin of mine, who is writing the biography of a man, says that marquises do hop, because they live on port-wine, which gives them something called 'gout,' and that this is almost as dignified as losing a paw. But he knows more about men than I do, and a very great deal more than ever I want to know. To be quite

candid from the very beginning, I am inclined to dislike and distrust the whole breed of you, boys especially, and, as far as I can judge from your behaviour, you are not over-fond of us, either.

‘Which would I rather have—half a tail or only three paws?’ Is it a riddle? If so, take it away. A boy had the cheek to try to catch me in one once, but I bit the string in half before I went underneath, and then I got a fine herring’s head, and bolted before he could make out why nothing happened when he pulled the string.

Oh, you only wanted to know, did you? Well, so long as you talk civilly, I am quite ready to answer questions. A paw counts most because it shows. Anyone can see that you are ‘a hopper,’ but you may be ‘a tailer’ for quite a long time before your friends know anything about it. My cousin says that the same remark might be made about marquises and tailors. Anyway, I am both, so it does not matter to me.

My name? Ah, yes! you remind me of my manners. But introductions are rather going out of fashion among us. Still, I ought unquestionably to have begun with a proper introduction, only I wanted to put something nice at the top of my first chapter, and I could not think of any good quota-

tion which would bring in the subject of names. Besides, if you begin at the beginning you are bound to go on to the end, whereas if you begin right in the middle you can then stop when you are tired, which suits me much better. I recommend you to practise that bit of advice when you are next set a horrid long lesson to learn.

My present name is Mr. Samuel, H.T., and I do not think that I shall get much further. Let me explain. You will not think it a bore, will you? We don't have to explain much in our country: things have a way of explaining themselves. But names are just one of the things that do require a word of explanation.

When I was born I was called ‘Sammy.’ Lots of rats never get any further than that, because one year, as things go, is not a bad age for a rat. But, thanks to my mother's teaching, and to a fair slice of luck, and, perhaps I may be allowed to add, to a certain amount of wisdom and intrepid courage on my own part, I reached my second year, and consequently became ‘Sam.’

‘Sam,’ of course, is a great deal more dignified than ‘Sammy,’ as I dare say you know. Your uncles, I should say, tip you nearly double as much when they happen to meet you.

It is much easier to get safely through your second year than through your first, as I will show you later on, and I managed it all right, though I lost half my tail. That gave me the right to put T. after my name. This honour is not so very uncommon, and I did not swagger about it a very great deal. I only cultivated a bit of sideways action in my walk. Some rats will twist their stump first to one side and then to the other as they walk, but I call that rather bad form. Also, it is dangerous, and, for that reason more than any other, against my principles. I make all my principles to suit my own advantage, I fear. They do it 'to be seen of men,' as I believe you say, and that is just why it is dangerous, because if you flick things about you *are* seen of men, and then 'whang comes something'—half a brick or a great stick. Ugh! how I remember some of the escapes that I have had, even when I was sitting quite quiet!

However, my third birthday came at last, and my name changed to 'Samuel.' I was now a person of some importance among my nephews and nieces, which was not quite such a bore as it may sound to you, for I had considerable luck in the way of losing a very great many of them. It was a bad year for the young and inexperienced. There was

a sort of crusade against us in our parts. Farmers offered bribes for our tails. Much obliged to them, I am sure! Very considerate indeed! They got most of my troublesome little nephews and nieces, but they did not get me. I had long been intending to take a trip to town, so I seized the opportunity, and for once in my life turned my back on danger. I do not mean to say that I have never done so since. I should not be here to tell the tale if I had not made discretion the better part of valour now and then. Anyway, I went to town, and my fourth year saw me ‘Mr. Samuel, T.,’ and before a month of it was gone the loss of a paw made me H.T. So now, when you write to ask me how I am getting on, please address my letters ‘Mr. Samuel, H.T.’; and if you want any further address, ‘Culverlea, Winchester,’ will do.

Whether I shall ever reach five years I cannot say, and I am not sure that I very greatly care. It is a trying life, and, provided always that I am not shot, I am safe now to be a ghost for a year, and that is better fun than being a very old rat, I expect. One does get so battered about, you see. Well, well, I shall gain nothing by lamenting. You don’t care. If you saw me now you would throw something that might hurt my aged bones.

Ah! I was forgetting my new name. I should be allowed to put a hyphen between *Mr.* and *Samuel*, and become 'Mr. — Samuel, H.T.,' but I do not somehow like the look of it. I think I'd rather die. If I do happen to get over it and live to be six, then I shall be '— Samuel, Esq.,' and one day of that is sure to finish me off. And then, hey! for the joys of ghost-land!

I have now more or less introduced myself to you, though I am afraid that there are many wrong ideas still firmly rooted in your brain. Never mind; a vigorous and determined rat can root up most things, and I will have a try presently, if you will allow me. But first of all I want you to tell me one or two things that I can never quite understand. It is fairly your turn to talk, and if you have a drink about anywhere, a drop of milk for choice, or even water, it would give me great pleasure to drink to the hopes of a better understanding between us, for I am a very thirsty animal, and a little talking soon gives me a dry mouth. I hope that my language is polite, and such as you are in the habit of hearing. Thank you very much: most refreshing; not a headache in a hogshead, I'll warrant! Now I can listen in comfort.

What I want to know, if you will pardon my

curiosity, is why you all persist in saying ‘As still as a mouse.’ I have often heard you tell somebody that you will be as still as a mouse if they will only let you come with them. Why on earth don’t you say ‘as still as a rat’? No wonder that they keep on shaking their heads in that horrid way of theirs, and saying ‘No, dear, not this time.’ They know as well as I do what ‘as still as a mouse’ means. A mouse has no more idea of how to keep still than you have — always fidgeting about and nibbling at something, and then scampering about because it is frightened at the noise which it made itself. They never seem to learn, any more than you do, that it is only the silly little noises that count, and make people want to buy cats, and throw boots about, and set traps.

A real big noise, like a great trampling thunderstorm, makes people frightened, and then they cannot be angry. I know all about that, and when I come into a house to stay for a few days I just keep really quiet for most of the time, and then, when I feel that I must have a scrimmage or else I shall burst in half, I make such a proper noise that people say that it is ghosts, or burglars, or tigers, and hide under the bedclothes until I have had enough exercise. You try next time whether

my way is not the best. And if you find that you get what you want better by making a really big noise, or else none at all, then mind that you always say 'as still as a rat.'

That is *one* of the things about which I wanted you to give me some information. What! you didn't get a chance of telling me anything, because I would talk all the time! Well, upon my word! Wasn't I telling you not to make a noise and there you go trying to jabber away before I get a chance of finishing what I was going to say! Half a cup more milk, please, *with* cream and sugar. Listening is thirsty work.

Now, then, if you have quite finished, we can go on. I hear people—boys, at any rate—say 'Rats!' in a nasty sort of way. I do not mean the disgusting tone of voice which they choose to assume when they want their nasty dogs to poke their noses down our doorways, and bark, and frighten all our poor babies out of their life. 'R-rats!' they say, with about sixteen r's in front and twenty t's and s's at the end; and then 'Yah-yah-boohoo!' comes the yell of their impudent dog, right on my very doorstep. How would you like it yourselves if somebody brought a great stripey tiger and set him snarling at your door, showing

his ugly teeth, and wanting to seize you by the back, and worry you all to little pieces? Would not you want to call him names—the very rudest names that you could invent? Well, those are just my identical feelings about you.

But it was not about that way of saying ‘Rats!’ that I wanted you to tell me. You have another way of saying the word, when you curl up your noses, and put an m in front of the r, and a lot more a’s into the middle of the word. It looks to me as if you meant to say, ‘You go along; I don’t believe one single word of what you are telling me.’ Only the other day I was listening to a couple of boys—or, rather, I was not listening to the little villains, but I could not possibly help hearing them, they were talking so disgustingly loud. I wished that I could have changed places with them just for a couple of hours, so as to let them feel what it is like to live as I do. If I talked out loud, as they were talking, and made just as much noise as I pleased, I should be stiff and cold and dead in no time, and either eaten up or left about for everyone to kick and say, ‘Ugh! you ugly beast! Ugly, indeed! You would not look pretty, either, if you were knocked on the head and left to lie about just anyhow.

‘*Look* at those sparrows!’ one of them was saying: ‘If I had not had my catapult taken away this morning, just because I smashed a silly window with it, I’d soon show you how to bring one down.’

‘M-raats!’ said the other; and his pal looked so cross that I feel sure that the word meant, ‘You couldn’t hit an elephant if you tried! Can’t think how you smashed that window. Must have been aiming a jolly long way in the other direction.’ Is that the sort of meaning which you would give to the word? And, if I am right, do tell me how it is that the name of my special branch of the family has come to be so used. I do not call it a very nice meaning for one’s name to bear; it seems to me much the same as ‘What a liar you are!’ and I have never heard a rat tell a lie in my life.

Before you can answer questions which deal with my character and reputation perhaps I ought to tell you a little of my family history. My family is a very ancient one, but the records are not very clear. Everyone allows that we came over in the Ark in some form or other. I have very little doubt that most of you have, or had, in your arks a wooden animal which you called ‘a rat,’ but very often it might just as well be something else, and that

is precisely where the difficulty comes in. Nobody seems to know exactly how big the Ark was, though I am told that the measurements are given, or how many animals it would hold.

The idea which is now generally prevalent in the highest scientific circles, to which, of course, I belong, is that there were two animals called ‘rodents,’ with long front teeth set close together, just like the pictures which Frenchmen draw of Englishmen when they want to be rude. These two rodents no doubt lived behind the wainscot, in order to save room, or somewhere up in the roof, and the other animals tried to kill them, and Noah set traps for them, but they were not such fools as to be caught. And when at last the Ark landed, and all the creatures came out, Mr. and Mrs. Rodent spread themselves out, so to speak, and became not only rats, but mice, and beavers, and porcupines, and squirrels, and rabbits, and a whole tribe of similar animals. The beavers, of course, say that *they* went in, and became rats and other things, and so say all the other members of the family, I suppose. But I have no doubt in my own mind that the place of honour in that well-built ship was occupied by two fine rats.

But there is a much more important subject of

discussion among us, and that is whether the brown rats or the black rats are the real aristocracy of the family. There seems to be very little doubt that England was once populated with black rats; in fact, we ourselves acknowledge their claim to the title of 'Old English Black Rat,' and they are allowed, if they like, to put the letters O.E.B.R. after their names, which are otherwise like ours. But there are so very few of them now—in fact, I have never met one myself—that the question of precedence really does not matter much. If you never meet a particular kind of rat, it does not make the smallest difference whether he or you has the right to go into the hole first. Otherwise, of course, the question is a very important one, as sometimes there is not time for more than one to get in before a dog or a boy or both together come up, and then there is bound to be big trouble for those who are left outside.

What *they* say is, that we are nasty vulgar interlopers, who have come across the sea from Norway or some other outlandish place (as a matter of fact, we came from India or China some time after the Flood), and that they could not stand our nasty common ways, and so went away. *We* only say that they were here, and that then we

came. Now we are here and they are gone. Therefore it seems highly probable (we don't care to put it any stronger than that, for fear of hurting their haughty and aristocratic feelings) — highly probable, I say, that we have always had the right of going in first, and that they got killed off gradually, because they were left outside among the dogs and boys and sticks.

‘Which goes in first now?’ Which of *us*, I suppose you mean? Well, that is rather a difficult question to answer. I do not think that we have any regular rule of precedence. If there is a rule, we all of us break it. The general sort of etiquette is that the rat who gets there first goes in first. It is more useful than most rules, because it teaches us to ‘do’ and not to ‘don't,’ because it teaches us to run fast, without any need of prizes, which you seem to require before you can learn to do anything.

What we do punish very severely among ourselves is taking more time to get into a hole than is absolutely necessary, because the delay may cost somebody else his life. ‘Clear the line quickly’ is the public rule put up in the streets, and we teach our children a sort of private one, which is, ‘If you see that somebody else runs

faster than you, don't waste any time in running after him, but look around for another hole for yourself, and, if there isn't one, go somewhere else as quickly as you can.'

Perhaps that looks rather a long rule to learn, but at any rate it is better than always learning 'Don't'; and besides, when you know that your life is pretty certain to depend upon it sooner or later, it is wonderful how quickly you can learn any rule. You are sure to see one or two of your friends and relations killed every month because they have not learnt the rule quite thoroughly enough. You are lucky if they are not the persons who see you killed, and all that sort of thing is a wonderful help to memory. If you were told that 'last into bed' did not have to 'put out the light,' but very likely got his own light put out—that is to say, got spifficated himself—you would be in a much greater hurry to get into bed than you are. I often wish that you would go quicker when I am waiting for the light to go out in order to get my supper.

So far as I know, my family does not figure very largely in the history of the world. The spiders are very proud of an ancestor of theirs who taught some ancient hero to persevere, and they have also

a story to tell of another member of their family who spun a web across the entrance of a cave, thereby saving the life of a distinguished fugitive, because his pursuers thought that he must have broken the web if he had gone in to hide. The mice try to talk big about one of their progenitors who delivered a lion from the meshes of a net. The ants never forget that they have been held up as an example to all sluggards. And the doves and ravens coo and croak about the Ark.

But, according to our ideas, history is only stories, and not a nasty collection of names and dates; also it is not mere boastfulness, like the records which I have just quoted, but tales of good and tales of evil. Perhaps you will understand better what I mean if I tell you two stories out of what we call the history of our family, in one of which we did evil and in the other good.

There was once a beautiful valley, full of meadows and cows and sheep, and fields of corn all swinging and waving in the breeze. And in the middle of the valley there was a pretty village, where children played in the roads and ran in and out of thatched cottages covered with honeysuckle and roses. There were pig-sties and cow-sheds and stables—fine places for the rats to live in during

the winter, full of pigs with curly tails, and milky cows, and horses waiting to be taken out to work in the fields. And right in the middle of the village, where the roads went across one another, there was a church, whose bells made music all along the valley.

Among the cornfields and meadows ran a stream, as clear as crystal, with a mill and a big wheel, covered with paddles, which the water kept moving and singing to itself, 'Click-clack—tickety-tack.' That mill was always full of corn and flour, and the miller could never keep the rats away from it. He killed lots and lots of them, and still more and more came and scampered about at night, when there was no need to keep quiet. It was a beautiful mill. I know one like it now, and I sometimes go and stay there for a while, when the weather is cold and snowy, and the ground hard, and food scarce, and when all the owls and weasels are as hungry as they can be, and watch everywhere for a nice rat to eat.

Beyond the valley, unfortunately, as far off as you could see, there was a big town, with tall smoky chimneys and red, fiery furnaces, blazing and flaming like a pillar of cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire in the night. And the

people in the town wanted to be sure of always having plenty of clean water to drink, so they built a big wall called a dam, right across the top of the valley, over the course of the stream, and far up the two sides. And the little stream stopped running down the valley, and all the little trout gasped and wriggled in the tiny pools that were left, till the village children came and caught them and ate them for supper. The wheel also left off singing, because there was no water to turn it round, and the people had to draw water from their wells.

And all the while, at the top of the valley, beyond the dam, the stream kept on flowing and flowing up against the great strong wall, and it gradually grew into a beautiful lake, which filled up all the top of the valley, and pushed hard against the dam, while the little waves came jumping up against the shore, and all turned into singing fairies as they reached the land. And the people in the town made big pipes to bring the clean water down among the furnaces and chimneys, whenever they wanted it, and there was always plenty to come, because the stream kept the lake full.

And then one day came a clever little cousin of mine, the water-rat. I suppose that he was part of

us when we were in the Ark. If there was to be any spreading out of the family afterwards, some of it was bound to turn towards the water, after seeing so much of it for forty days. Men have come to regard him as a harmless little lunatic, who does not eat trout, after all, but only lives on lettuces and water-radishes and cress. Personally, I can never see why he should not have a trout now and then, if he fancies one. But he cannot swim quick enough. He just pops about the banks and sometimes swims across the stream, trailing behind him a long stalk of water-weed, which he eats, sitting up on his hind legs; and then he scratches his head, as a way of saying grace, and pops into his hole.

That is the little fellow who came to the banks of the lake, and grew and multiplied, because nobody took the trouble to kill him. And one day he made a hole in the dam itself, and burrowed deep into it right under the water, and the water came in after him, and ate its way further and further in. He was not drowned, because he burrowed right up to the top and got out, but the water burrowed downwards, and kept on eating deeper and deeper, till at last it came through on the other side, with a spout and a shout, and the whole lake pushed so hard that, with a great heave and bulge, all the im-

prisoned water got free, and rushed with a mighty swoop down the beautiful valley.

It lifted the poor old mill right off its legs and tossed it about everywhere, and all the village was swept away. Was it not awful? And it was all the doing of my clever and harmless little cousin. Of course, lots of us were drowned too, though we can swim very well, for we were stuffed up in the corn-stacks and pig-sties, and could not get out in time: and even if we had got out, we could never have contrived to swim in all that monstrous whirl of water. We call our cousin a national hero all the same.

That is the end of one story, and I have just time for one more—a pleasant one this time for a change. It begins badly, but everything comes right in the end.

There was once a prison full of dark and gloomy dungeons, where people sat in chains and boundless misery, and ate their meals on the floor, because there were not any chairs or tables. That would have been nice enough if the floors had been clean, but they were hideously dirty. Very few of the prisoners had done anything wicked: they were only there because somebody who did not like them had caught them and put them there. It was quite

hopeless to think of trying to escape, because there was only one tiny window in each dungeon, far too high up for anyone to be able to reach it and climb out.

The worst dungeons of all were underground, and the damp trickled down the walls, and covered them with a green and loathsome slime, which oozed off the stones and made a nasty carpet on the floor. And, to make things still more hopeless, strong chains of rusty iron were locked round the prisoners' ankles. People did not live very long in these dungeons, as you may well imagine, though sometimes their friends contrived to come and take them out just in time.

It seems strange, does it not, that anything should voluntarily go into one of these dark and gloomy dungeons. And yet history says that the rats went; but then, of course, they could always get out again when they chose, which makes all the difference. The walls, which looked so massive and solid, were really hollow in places, hollow enough for a rat to climb about, unless extreme old age had paralyzed his limbs. This did indeed happen sometimes, because these dungeons, though they were terribly deadly to the prisoners, were very safe places for rats to live in. The gaolers considered

them as part of the tortures which the prisoners had to undergo, and so never tried to set traps for them; and many of the prisoners called them their best friends, because they were the only friends whom they could possibly have. And so these rats often lived to extreme old age.

Now, it so happened that into one of the very worst of these dungeons a kindly-hearted and gentle prisoner was suddenly thrust. He had been a great knight in his own country, and everyone loved him, because he dealt out equal-handed justice to rich and poor alike. No rich man could buy from him the right to cheat his poorer brother.

But on one day of black misfortune he was conquered and taken captive by his wicked and tyrannous rival, who cast him into prison and put heavy chains upon his limbs, knowing full well in his evil heart that death would soon rid him of a man whom he both feared and hated, because all men loved him. Twice a day only did the gaoler thrust into the gloom of his squalid cell a plate of bread and a jug of water. And twice a day out came the rats, and danced upon the floor, and asked for food. And the kindly knight called them all by names of his own invention — ‘Mutton-chop,’ and ‘Beef-steak,’ and ‘Plum-pudding’ and ‘Mince-pie’—just to remind

him of what a real dinner ought to be, and he threw a crumb of bread, now to this one and now to that.

Poor fellow ! he could ill spare even the crumbs from his scanty meal, but he told the rats that their cheerful presence did more to keep him alive and in his right mind than many loaves of bread. For in those lonely cells the prisoners often went mad, and with the strength of madness tore their chains from off their limbs, and so died, beating with their naked hands against the pitiless walls.

But at last his friends collected a great army and conquered his cruel rival, and came with torches in their hands, but with small hope in their hearts, for many days had now passed away. And judge of their surprise and delight when they found him well and cheerful ; and they smote the fetters from his limbs, and carried him tenderly away, and laid him softly in a room full of flowers and other delights, to call him back to the joys of life. But his cruel rival they haled off and cast into the self-same dungeon, where, because he had a mighty dread of rats, he went mad and died. But the kindly knight passed a law in his land that for three months in every year no rat should be killed, except it were by accident, which is perhaps as

much gratitude as could be expected, seeing that he was but a man after all.

Doesn't it end nicely?

And now, having introduced my family and myself to your notice, I must take leave of you for a moment, for the night is dark and squally, and few enemies will be abroad, and I may venture to take a small walk, to quench my thirst at the pond, with a reasonable hope of returning safe and sound, to continue my narrative with a greater sense of intimacy and mutual confidence.

## II

### 'MY INFANCY'

As you would expect, after what I have told you about our ancient and aristocratic ancestors, we manage our birthdays on a different system to most of the commoner creatures. We have no particularly fashionable time of the year for birthdays. I will say this for your credit, that you share this peculiarity with us. My birthday was on February 14, and some cousins of mine were born on May 31, and some more on September 10, and I believe some more about December, but one soon loses count with so many relations. One blessing is that you cannot possibly give them all presents, and so you keep most things for yourself. Also there are no rules about brothers and sisters being always nice to one another, which are so difficult to keep. You just bite anyone who gets in your way, or who looks as if a bite would do him good, or who looks as if he would not bite back ; and, contrariwise, you help anyone who looks nice,

or who seems to be in particular need of help, and there is no one to say that you have no business to talk to common little children.

My birthday was at rather a good time of the year, because I was big and strong when the winter came, and it was beginning to get warm when I had to leave the nest. Of course, one cannot stay in it for very long, when there is sure to be a new family coming soon, who will want cosy lodgings ; but I had to leave it even earlier than I expected, owing to an accident, as I will tell you presently.

It is very difficult to say exactly which is the best month for a birthday. I heard one of you grumbling and growling once because his came at Christmas, which enabled people to mix his Christmas present and his birthday present all into one, and he did not seem to think that they allowed enough for the mixing. Anyway, it is much nicer to have two presents a long way apart than only one all in a lump. But that sort of thing does not matter to us. What we have to think about most is whether we shall live or be killed, which is a far more interesting question than whether we shall get one big present or two little ones. With us it is always a question of one

big present, the big present of life, or none at all, and really, with all the extraordinary dangers that lie about to catch us, one has to regard life as a very big present indeed.

‘Hardly worth having,’ do you say? I cannot agree with you. I have enjoyed every bit of it, even the dangers, in a way. It is the only thing really worth having which I possess. And, that being the case, I don’t call it very nice of you to be always trying to take it away from me. However, that is too large and difficult a question for us to discuss. You may go on trying as much as you like now, partly because I fancy that I am a bit too clever for you, unless you have an extraordinary genius for setting traps, and partly because I have had nearly enough of it. I cannot do the things that I once found so easy, and my teeth are getting out of order, and sometimes I think that I am almost ready for a good steady smack with a stick, or for a terrier’s teeth in my back, as long as I can die with my yellow old tusks well fixed into his lip. I will wait a bit longer, at any rate, until I have told you enough about myself to make us better friends, if possible.

I keep trying to get back to my birthday, and then something always gets in the way. Do you

ever dream that you are a railway-engine? Don't be surprised at my knowing all about such things, because I often take a run along the line, to look for things that have dropped off the trains, when a big frost makes food scarce. I once even got a ride in a truck that had some corn sacks in it, and they never knew that I was there, any more than I knew that I was going on a journey. I *was* scared when they started off. Luckily, they only went as far as the next station. I had one of my many narrow escapes when they came to unload, but they were so surprised when I jumped out that I contrived to dodge them all. Fortunately, there were no dogs or sticks. They could only kick at me with their clumsy boots, so that it was not really very difficult to escape. But it took me a long time to find my way back again, as I was not so used to travelling then as I am now. Ever since then I dream about engines, and I always want to go straight on, and then I come to a horrid bumpy shunting-place, and off I go somewhere else, and have to keep on coming back again.

You did not know, perhaps, that rats had dreams. What a lot you have to learn! How were you to know? Well, dogs have dreams, for I have seen

and heard them on the hearthrug in front of the fire through a crack in the boards. Nasty beasts! kicking their legs about, and squeaking, and thinking that they are catching us, I expect. And if dogs have dreams, why in the name of common-sense should not we have dreams too? Dogs and rats always go together, too much together sometimes, far too close for my taste, though I once made my home under the kennel of one for a time, because I knew that nobody would think of looking for me there. Wasn't that clever?

Why did not he catch me? How well I know the silly sort of questions which you ask! How could he, when he was chained, and the kennel so heavy? Besides, he was what is called a sporting dog, whose trade was to smell out grouse and partridges, and he did not bother his old head about the smell of rats. I doubt whether he even knew that I was there. He left very nice bones lying about sometimes, which his great clumsy teeth had not half picked, and I was very sorry when circumstances compelled me to change my quarters. I had the place all to myself, but a lot of other rats came prospecting, and took up their lodgings in the stables and sheds, and I knew what that would mean, so I took my departure

before anyone came with ferrets and sticks, to make things a little too lively for my taste.

Now, did you ever see anything like it? There’s that silly old birthday of mine gone dodging out of the way again. It is just like another sort of dream that I often have. I dream of a beautiful herring’s head, not too fresh, the sort of head that you can smell from some distance without taking the trouble to sniff too hard. This beautiful and smelly head is hanging not *quite* out of reach, if I stand on my hind legs, in the silly way which you seem to prefer. You must know really that it is not the right way to get about, because when you are babies you always begin by crawling about the floor, and if you were only left to yourselves, you would go from crawling to running like we do, instead of waving your fore-paws in the air; and you are so proud of it, too, that you go and teach your horrid dogs to do the same. However, it is useful to us sometimes, when we want to reach anything, like the beautiful herring’s head in my second kind of dream. I so nearly get it time after time, only I cannot quite make my teeth catch hold. It just slips away when I think that I have got it at last, and swings back ‘bump’ against my head; and then I get cross and jump at it, and it

only swings away further and comes back harder, till at last I take a huge and monstrous jump, so big that I seem to be flying, and when I get to the place where it ought to be it has gone and disappeared, and I come down 'splosh!' And sometimes that wakens me up, and sometimes the 'splosh' turns into a river, and I go on swimming and swimming, till I think that I cannot swim a single stroke further with any of my paws; and then I remember that I have a tail, and I try whether I can swim with that, by wriggling it round and round in the water, like an eel, and then I go so fast that I soon come 'bump' into the bank, and that generally wakens me.

Let me see! I know that there was something very particular that I was thinking of telling you. I wonder what ever it was! Something to eat? No! I know that I had not got as far as that, and I don't think that it was anything to drink either, because that is just as far. Upon my word, I am growing terribly forgetful. It was so awfully particular, too. I wonder if you could possibly help me? I hardly expect that you can, because, if I cannot remember, I feel pretty sure that you cannot, either. My memory is generally so good. I remember, one day—— What did you say? It is

very rude to interrupt, just as I was going to tell you something else, and I have a good mind not to tell you at all now.

Yes, to be sure ! How very stupid of me, and I have been trying to get back to it for such a long time. My birthday ! Let us make quite sure of it this time. Say it over a lot of times, like twice seven are seventeen, twice seven are seventeen—birthday, birthday, borthday, brothday. Why, broth was what the hounds had in the kennels where I lived. What ? getting away from ‘birth-day’ again ! Drat that silly old birthday of mine ! We always say ‘drat’ instead of ‘bother.’ It is so like our own name that nobody thinks of stopping us. Now I have got into three stories : that birthday, those kennels, and ‘bother.’ Which will you have ? The kennels won’t take a minute ; but the birthday *ought* to come first, as I had to be born before I could live in the kennels, don’t you see ? I might forget the kennels if I don’t put them in now ; and I will really promise, if you will remind me very hard, to go straight on to the birthday afterwards. The only way will be to go off with a great rush, and then we are sure to keep straight.

In the kennels, as you will insist on having that story first, when I am wanting all the time to tell

you about my birthday, I lived for a long time under the floor of the place where the hounds slept. And they fed the hounds on the flesh of very old horses, which had to be killed because they were so very old and tired that they did not want to live any longer. And I used to go out at night and gnaw the bones that were lying about, and eat the meat. It was beautiful meat, with lots of smell in it, and it made my teeth very deadly and poisonous; and one day a terrier dog nearly got me, before I could get into my hole, but I turned and bit him just as he was going to catch hold, and then squiggled down my hole, while he was thinking how brave a rat I was. And two days afterwards they brought him and buried him, with his head and neck all puffed up, and not a bit like a smart little terrier, and I heard them say something about 'those nasty rats being as poisonous as vipers.'

I killed a viper once who thought that he was going to kill me, by jumping on his back as quick as lightning when he struck at me. I jumped far quicker than you can jump, though perhaps you would like to try. You can be the rat, and Johnny or Sally can be the viper. I bit him right through the back of the neck, and he was just going to die when I ate most of him.

Now I can begin to tell the story backwards way, and then we are sure to get to the birthday at last, and I shan't want any reminding. After they had buried the dog which I had killed with my deadly and poisonous teeth, they came to the holes which we had made, and sent down the most awful smelly smoke. It came crawling right along the passages, and we could not endure it for a moment, and were obliged to make a bolt for it. You see, it was not anything that we could bite, so we were not so very cowardly. I was very lucky. I wanted to run first, as usual, but there were three other rats in the way. And while they were smacking these three with their horrid great sticks I got off safe, being rather too quick for them; and they had not brought any dogs, for fear of our poisonous teeth. It does not always pay to go first. ‘Go in first, come out last,’ is my rule now.

And so we come backwards way to my birthday quite easily, and as that is the very beginning, I cannot possibly get past it on to any other story. I cannot think why we found it so difficult. I must remember that way of remembering. It was on February 14, and I told you that it was a good day, because I got big and strong before the winter. You see how easy it is to remember when one

really tries. But it was a bad day for another reason. Young rats have a silly time in their lives, just like you have, when they think that they know better than anyone else, and eat soap, and do all sorts of stupid things, in spite of people telling them that they are sure to be sick, and wish that they had eaten something more wholesome. And they go out at the wrong time, just as you do, only you catch a cold, while we catch nothing—something catches us. That sounds like the answer to a riddle. ‘What is the difference between a boy and a young rat?’ How will that do? ‘One catches cold when he goes out at the wrong time, and something else catches hold of the other.’ Silly old riddle! I hate riddles of all sorts.

Well, my silly time came just wrong, because the owls had hatched out their young ones, and wanted lots of nice tender little rats for nursery food, and they came and sat on trees just over our holes; and whenever a fat young rat went out for a walk, contrary to the advice of his parents, down came a great fluffy owl with claws as sharp as needles, and just about as long, and sometimes there was one tiny squeak and sometimes there wasn’t, and away went Mr. or Mrs. Owl to the old crow’s nest in the fir-tree, and another young rat



THE OWLS CAME AND SAT ON TREES JUST OVER OUR HOLES.



was eaten up. I got so frightened at the way in which my companions vanished that I only crawled about very quietly in the hedges, except on very dark nights, and even then only very late, long after your bed-time.

Our nest was in a nice warm bank on the side of a wood, which was covered with primroses soon after I began to grow. It was rather a good place to choose, in spite of the owls, because the wood was full of pheasants, and the keepers put down plenty of corn all through the hard weather—beautiful yellow Indian corn—and sometimes raisins, and there were drinking-troughs full of water, which was never allowed to freeze. Nothing could have been nicer or kinder. And they did not try to set traps for us, either, because, as I heard them say once, where there are plenty of rats the foxes and the owls don't bother much about the young pheasants. Of course, just now and then, as a treat, we had young pheasant for dinner, but it was generally only a sickly one or even a dead one, because the others can run very fast, and their mother is always on the look out to protect them, and it takes a very big rat to catch a young pheasant when the mother is at hand.

So we were left in peace to keep the foxes and

the owls amused, and they both loved us dearly, especially the foxes. It is very nice to be loved for one's own sake, but not, perhaps, quite so much as the foxes loved us. There was one great red fellow, who had given the hounds many a fine run in the winter, and had always managed to keep his splendid brush safe in spite of all their efforts to catch him. He used to come and lie watching our holes, night after night, and got a lot of us to crunch up with his great white teeth. He kept the owls off, however, and he was not quite so dangerous as they were, because I soon got to know his smell; and he was not quite so quick as an owl, nor so deadly quiet. I can hear a hawk a long way off, but an owl comes swooping down without an atom of noise: it has such a lot of silent, fluffy feathers.

I was out one night in my silly season with one of my sisters, when down came an owl. Luckily, he took my sister, but I give you my word of honour that the first thing that I heard was poor Sal's squeak as the claws went in. So she never lived to be Sally, or Sarah, or Mrs. Sarah. I ran so fast that I was quite out of breath when I got home, but the others guessed pretty easily what had happened without my telling them. I did not think it quite kind of them to say that they wished

it had been me, because Sal was so nice and quiet and useful in the house. I am afraid that it *was* my fault, perhaps, because I persuaded her to come out, when she really did not want to come. I told her that she was a ‘molly-coddle,’ and that I believed that she was afraid, and then, of course, she was obliged to come. Poor Sal! I remembered her little squeak for two or three hours at least; however, I am sure that she was tender to eat, because I had a nibble at her myself once, when she was in my way. I feel sure that Mr. Owl chose the right one.

I forget now how many we were when we were born—six or eight, I expect, as that is the usual number. Jolly little pink beggars we were, quite blind and with blunt noses, and our nest was a gorgeous heap of soft stuff of every kind that you can possibly imagine. It must have taken mother days and days to collect. I rather fancy that she must have been down a rabbit’s hole to steal some of the fur which Mamma Rabbit strips off herself to keep her young ones warm; but there were lots of soft grass as well, and bits of paper torn up into strips, and sheep’s wool and cow’s hair. I know where she got the last ingredient, for there was a big post not far off our holes which the

keepers had put up to catch the owls, and the cows came and rubbed themselves against it, and they rubbed so hard that they rubbed off a lot of hair.

Yes, I knew that you would ask how a post can catch an owl. I can't say that I like owls, but I did think that post rather a low trick, and I fancy that now even men call it 'playing the game rather low,' which is their way of saying 'savouring of cruelty,' I suppose. No owl that ever was hatched, or hawk either, can resist perching on the nice smooth top of a post, especially when it is just opposite some rats' holes or rabbits' burrows.

So the keepers put a post in some such place, and on the top of it a nasty round trap with iron teeth, just the size of the top of the post and tied to it with a chain or string. And when the owl comes flying along and sees the nice tempting post, and sits down on it, 'snap' goes the trap and catches him by the leg, and down tumbles the trap with the owl in it, and the poor beggar hangs there for hours, perhaps, before someone comes and kills him. Well, it is an unkind world, and I don't think that men seem to try very hard to help on the kindness when they do such things as that. Do *you*, now? Perhaps you even wish that you had not asked me to tell so horrid a story. Don't ask for things, then,

unless you are quite sure that you want them. You will find that a very good piece of advice.

My father was a pretty good father, according to our ideas. That is not saying a very great deal, however, for fathers count for very little among us. Very few rats ever see their father, and a good thing too! for he is just as likely as not to eat one of his own children if food is scarce, and sometimes his wife helps him. Just fancy how you would feel if your dad strolled into the nursery or school-room one day, with his hands in his pockets, whistling a cheerful tune, and then, when you all ran up to him, hoping to be taken out for a nice safe walk, suddenly seized and devoured the tenderest and juiciest of you! If that sort of thing was liable to happen to you any day, you would not be so anxious to be made of ‘sweets and spice and all that’s nice.’ ‘Snips and snails and puppy-dogs’ tails’ would be much better, but I doubt whether even that would save you, if he was as hungry as Papa Rat often is.

I heard great bumpings and squealings going on in the house next to ours one day, and I went to our door to listen, and presently out came a great big ‘buck rat,’ as we call our gentlemen, licking his lips, and looking half-cross and half-pleased. I did

not let him see me, and soon a friend came up looking very thin and hungry, and they began to talk of the difficulty of getting a really nice little dinner, with these late frosts, and our next-door neighbour said that he had just managed to get one of his own kids, but that he had had a hard fight for it, and that 'the old woman down there' had bitten him badly. So that was why he was licking his lips, partly because he was enjoying the taste of a tender young rat, and partly to take the pain out of the bite. I have had a good many children of my own, two or three hundred perhaps, but, as far as I can remember, I have never eaten one, though I often thought of doing it. It is not a bad way of punishing them, after all, in case they should ever be naughty. I heard a man say once that he always beat his boy whenever he saw him, because he was either going into mischief or coming out of it. If he had only eaten him at once, just think what a lot of trouble would have been saved! 'Little boy, little boy, come and be beaten,' is what you have to learn, but we learn, 'Little rat, little rat, come and be eaten,' and I think that our lesson is the harder.

Our mother was a dear, so soft and warm to cuddle up against, when we were little tinies with

blunt noses ; and so brave and careful, too, when our fur had come and our noses were growing nicely pointed, and we wanted to poke them out into the world, which smelt so sweet, and was really so dangerous. Sometimes I wish that I could not smell so well, and again sometimes I am very glad that my nose is so reliable. In one way smelling is the root of all evil, for it takes you into traps and all kinds of danger. You have no idea how hard it is to resist a really nice smell, even though you know as well as possible that it means danger. I have grown to be so careful now that I always run away when I meet a really nice smell, or when a really nice smell meets me: I don't mind which way you put it, but perhaps the latter is the better, because a smell not only meets you, but very often runs after you, when you run away, so fast that it must have hundreds of legs, like those crawly things in the garden. Draw me a picture, if you can, of a rat running away, and a very nice smell running after it. You must draw them both running as fast as possible, and mind you make the smell very nice indeed, or the picture won't be true. That is the danger of smells, but sometimes they are very useful. I told you, for instance, how I could smell the fox, and a man

smells nearly as strong, and is really a lot more dangerous, because I know pretty well what a fox is going to do, and how he is going to do it—first creepy-crawly, and then with a bounce and a jump—but you can never be sure of a man. He is always inventing something new. Therefore, whenever I smell the man-smell I am always extra careful, because something is liable to happen. ‘Sit quite still for a few minutes,’ is the best rule, ‘and don’t move even the tip of your tail.’ Luckily, I have also learnt the smell of iron, which is a great help. I cannot tell you exactly what it smells like: something like cold teeth mixed with jumpy springs. Now do you understand better? Also there is generally the smell of cheese or herring or bacon-rind mixed up with the smells of man and iron. The combination of those three is sure to mean a trap. On the whole, I think that my nose is more useful than dangerous, now that I have thoroughly learnt to obey it when it says ‘Go away,’ and never to listen to it when it says ‘Come along.’

‘Noses cannot talk,’ can’t they? Yours can. Yours says ‘Atishoo,’ whatever that means, and your dad’s says ‘Boowatcher,’ which is just as difficult to understand. Mine says ‘Stop,’ or ‘Come on,’ and therefore I would much rather

have mine than yours. Besides, I call mine much prettier. Mine does look like part of my face, while yours—well, I could make as good a nose by sticking a lump of mud on a barn-door. That’s what I think of yours. I am sorry. I will apologize at once, before it becomes too difficult. When people begin to say rude things to one another it is quite time to talk about something else. But it was really your fault for saying that my nose cannot talk, when it really talks to me all day. However, let us change the conversation.

One day we were all playing outside the hedge with mother, all except sister Sal, who had gone away to feed the young owls. That sounds just as if they were her pets, does it not? I call it rather a nice way of saying that she was dead and eaten. We hardly ever use the word ‘dead’ if we can possibly avoid it. It is too horrid, and so common and vulgar, too. You can always distinguish a really well-bred rat by the way in which he describes an accident. ‘Where’s Jimmy to-day?’ asks somebody. ‘Feeding the hungry’ is a nice answer when somebody has gobbled him up. ‘How’s your wife to-day?’ asks somebody else. ‘Dancing in the pig-sty’ would mean ‘Caught by the leg in a trap.’ ‘Singing in the larder’ is a way

of saying 'Squeaking in a cage.' 'Lying down with a bad pain in her back' can mean either 'Killed by a stick' or 'Nipped by a dog,' though we generally call the latter accident 'Playing with the puppy.' You see, we are hardly ever ill, so that there is very little chance of people failing to understand. Perhaps you could now tell me how to say prettily and politely that your sister was dangling in the air with a noose round her neck, or that Billy was squashed quite flat under a large stone. Mind you make him *quite* flat. I could do that easily. I *must* tell you my answer: 'Playing at being a pancake.' Now you make a better and politer answer if you can.

To go back to my little story. We were all playing outside the hedge in a grass field. It was very early in the morning, but not quite early enough, for the birds were awake, and suddenly we saw a horrible hawk hovering over us, with his wings all quivering with excitement. He was there all in a moment, with his savage head and beak pointing straight down at us. No wonder that his wings quivered with excitement if he was at all hungry, for we should have made a lovely breakfast for him. It looked as if he had only to choose the fattest, and I believe that the fattest at

that time was this very child who is now talking to you. I was uncommonly plump, at any rate, in those days, and I felt sure that I could see his eyes, with little gold beads all round them, pick me out for the first breakfast dish.

‘Run for the hedge!’ squeaked mother. ‘Run quick!’ And run we did. I got there first, as usual, and precious glad I was when I felt the grass rubbing against my fat little sides. I nearly squealed when a thorn pricked me. I felt sure that it was the hawk’s claw, and that I was done for. Once inside the hedge and safe, we peeped out, and saw the brave mother having a terrible battle with the kestrel. Luckily, it was not a sparrow-hawk, or she would not have had much chance: they are so much quicker and more savage. I expect that a sparrow-hawk would have whisked away with one of us before ever we could have reached the hedge. But the kestrel only blundered down, and found nobody there but mother, and she was quick enough to jump out of the way of his ugly claws, so that he only sat down on the grass and looked about to see where his breakfast had gone. He must have been rather surprised when his breakfast came at him with a jump, and took a mouthful of feathers out of his neck. Just fancy if

such a thing were to happen to you, how startled you would be ; if you sat down nicely in your chair, and then ‘ Bang ! ’ came the plate of porridge and bit you in the neck. Unfortunately, his feathers were too thick for her to catch hold properly, or she would have taught him better manners. Four or five times he jumped up into the air and tried to pounce down on poor brave mother, but she was always too quick for him and jumped out of the way ; and every time that he just missed her, she jumped back at him, and did her best to catch hold, but she could only get feathers. I almost forgot the deadly nature of the contest and laughed, when I saw her spluttering the feathers out of her mouth. And then a man came round the corner, luckily without a dog or a gun, and the hawk had to fly away and look for his breakfast somewhere else, and mammy popped back quickly into the hedge, rather exhausted, but very proud of her victory. We always call it a victory in our country when we are not beaten. When we win, it is ‘ a glorious victory,’ and when we lose but get safe away, then it is ‘ a moral victory.’ When we are beaten and eaten too, then one of the polite expressions comes in, unless we call it ‘ a slight reverse.’

One more battle did our good mother fight for us, and that was the last, and it is rather a sad story to finish up with ; but I am bound to tell it to you, or the chapter of my infancy would not be complete.

We had gone for a sleep in our nest—the only three of us who were left. All the others had—what nice expression will do for them all ? ‘ Taken up their abode elsewhere ’ might do, though it is not very poetical ; ‘ Gone to see how the violets and primroses grow ’——I don’t know : you try. Mother, as usual, was drowsing in front of the nest. Suddenly we were awakened by the sound of a hideous conflict, and we knew from the smell that a weasel had come down our passage. We lay there trembling, and listened with all our ears. The bumpings and scufflings meant that neither could catch hold ; but we were terribly afraid, because a rat wants room to fight really well. A weasel is a clumsy fighter in the open compared with an active rat, but he is quicker in a hole. I saw one once try to catch a young rabbit, who was so terrified that he could hardly move. Of course, he was much bigger than the weasel, but he was so paralyzed with fear that the weasel had only to jump on to his back, and fix his sharp little

teeth behind the ears, and then all would have been over.

No doubt he would have been killed at last if a man had not come out of the hedge ; and the rabbit had just strength to crawl between his legs, and the man picked him up and threw his stick at the impudent weasel, who stood there peeping out of the hedge, and saying as plainly as possible, ‘ Hie, you there ! drop it, that’s my rabbit ! ’ The man came and picked up his stick, took two or three smacks at the hedge, just to show who was master, and then walked off with the rabbit in his arms. And would you believe it ? out came the weasel, and started trotting along the road after them. I suppose he guessed that the man would either put the rabbit down, after he thought that it was quite safe, or else that the rabbit would jump out of his arms when once it recovered its senses. I will say this for a weasel, that when once he has made up his mind that he wants anything he generally gets it in the end. The man turned round once and saw Mr. Weasel following. I heard him say, ‘ Well, I’m blowed ! of all the cheeky brutes—— ’ and he picked up a big flint and heaved it. His pursuer just popped into the hedge for a moment, and the last thing I saw was



THE MAN WALKED OFF WITH THE RABBIT IN HIS ARMS.



the man walking away carrying the rabbit, and the weasel hopping along through the rough grass beside the hedge. I expect he got that bunny at last.

Well, I must come back to my sad ending. Once or twice we heard mother jump forward, and once there was a squeak from her deadly enemy; only a little squeak, however, which meant that he was hurt, but not badly. And then there was an awful bumping, and mother began to squeak—horribly and hideously at first, and then more and more faintly, and at last we could only hear the sound of sucking. And we knew that it was all over, and that the weasel was drinking her blood. Poor, brave mother! that was all. The weasel had enough, and did not try to come on after us; and that is how mother saved our lives again, but lost her own.

We stayed there for a long time, and then burrowed our way past her cold corpse, and left her and the nest and our infancy for ever, and went out into a cold and cruel world.

### III

#### SUMMER DAYS

I SUPPOSE that you are too old to remember your first summer. How funny it must feel to be still quite young, when you are so much older than I am! Here am I, old enough in a great many ways to be your grandfather, talking to a kiddy like you, and knowing all the time that you are young and foolish, while I am old and sensible and gray-headed, and yet you are probably quite twice as old as I am. Just try to fancy yourself talking to quite an old man, who knows how to take care of himself only about a quarter as well as you know; he has seen very few of the things with which you are quite familiar—in fact, he seems to you just like a queer kind of baby, with funnier and more incomprehensible ways than even the droll ways of babies, and then perhaps you will begin to understand how difficult it is for me to talk to you.

For instance, it seems to me utterly idiotic not to remember your first summer. I could under-

stand it much better if you said that you could not remember your last one, because the last one is so like all the others that there is nothing very special to remember. But the first one—dear me! I believe that I can remember every single thing that happened, because every single thing was new to me. It was new to me to see the grass grow, and the flowers come out, and the butterflies flitting about, and the birds making their nests in the banks and hedges. It was all new, and it was all lovely. I don't see how you people get any fun out of life at all. Things must happen over and over again so often that they cease to be amusing. You always have breakfast in the same room, and sleep in the same bed, and you do everything day after day at the same time and in the same way. You wash yourself in the same silly bath, with the same silly sponge.

What did I hear you say? I was going on to tell you a whole pile of stupid things which you do at just the same time and in just the same way, and then you go and interrupt. You really are rather trying to my temper. You wear different clothes, do you?—especially on Sundays—while I always wear the same silly old fur coat. Well! That is rather a clever idea for you, but it is just wrong.

I change mine once a year, and I send it to the wash every day, which is more than you do, to judge from your appearance. Dirty, untidy little pig! And I think it much more sensible to go to the wash with it myself, and see that it is properly done, than to entrust it to some careless washer-woman, who would probably spoil it. Aren't I (you ought to say 'Am I not') afraid of getting the moth into it? I wish they would try. I rather like moths for dessert now and then.

I call gipsies and tramps much the most sensible of all human beings. They feed and sleep in all sorts of different rooms, sometimes in that biggest of all rooms, which has only the stars for a ceiling and the moon for a night-light. The green grass is the carpet, and the flowers make the pattern. The trees are the furniture, and the stream is the bath. And the great winds of heaven are the housemaids, who sweep the carpet and shake the furniture. That is the best of all bedrooms; but some people turn cold and grow frightened, because there is too much air and too much room. There is no doubt that all the windows are open. What are the windows? How you do bother! The places where the winds come in, of course. That is why they are called windows. You spoil yours

by putting glass into them, so that they are not windows any longer, but only *lightows*. There are four big ones called north, east, south, west, one on each side, and four little ones high up in the four corners of the walls, called north-east, north-west, south-east, south-west. And because the little ones are small and narrow, the wind comes in much harder and fiercer than it does through the big windows in the sides. And that is why gales come from the south-west and north-west. They have no glass in them, of course, or else the winds could not come in, and yet they always seem to me to be of different colours. Perhaps the colour is in the wind, or perhaps the different coldness of the winds makes us see different colours. The north window looks blue, and the east window green, and the south window golden yellow, and the west window red. Perhaps that is why people look blue when the wind comes in at the north window, and why the earth grows green in spring, when the wind comes in at the east, and why the corn turns golden yellow in summer, and the red comes bubbling out of the apples and grapes in the autumn. Perhaps once upon a time all the winter babies had blue eyes, and the spring babies greenish eyes, and the summer babies orange, and the

autumn babies reddish-brown eyes, until everything came to be so mixed up as it seems to be nowadays.

What a lot of ‘perhapses’! I love perhapses: they are so much nicer than knowing for certain. That is partly the reason why it seems to me that a tramp ought to be a happier man than you. You know all about your breakfast to-morrow: porridge, bacon and eggs, muffins and strawberry jam, coffee or tea—you can hardly put ‘perhaps’ in once. But very often the whole of a tramp’s breakfast is ‘perhaps’; and although I am very fond of perhapses, I should not care to have nothing else for breakfast, however nicely it was cooked, unless they put an awful lot of sauce and trimmings round the side. And a rat is better off still. He never says anything without beginning with ‘Perhaps.’ His whole life is so very perhapsy, though he can generally find something to eat, if only he is alive to eat it. We are really very particular about our food, when we have the chance of being particular, but if it comes to the worst there is hardly anything that will not do, until something nicer turns up.

I have eaten boots and bootlaces, backs of books and antimacassars, tallow candles and blacking,

willow bark and dead man, and one other thing that gave me perhaps the biggest fright that I have ever experienced. You would never guess what it was, even if I allowed you a thousand guesses. I was pottering about one night in the kitchen of a big house. I had just lost my seventh wife, and was wandering about looking for somebody to take her place. The last three had been bad wives, and, being rather aristocratic in my tastes, I had made my way into the big house in question in the hopes of finding the lady of my dreams, a queenly sort of rat with a very pointed nose. Not one of my previous wives had quite reached the standard of my ideal lady, but luckily they had all met with accidents, and had left me free to pursue my quest.

Unfortunately, the house which I had selected, though its exterior was very imposing, was terribly barren within. It was ruled by a woman with a rod of iron, and where a woman rules rats have a poor time. A man can be trusted to make some sort of litter, if he is only allowed his own way, and he is rather fond of keeping a few rats about the premises, to give his mind a little gentle exercise in the way of inventing traps; but a woman always tidies away all scraps, and never rests until she has cleared the house of rats. She generally keeps

about six great cats, where a man would keep dogs ; and dogs in a house are very harmless beasts, while cats are an unmitigated nuisance, if I may be allowed to express my feelings rather strongly on the subject.

The lady ruler of this mansion insisted on her poor husband smoking at night in the kitchen, or, rather, I believe that she tried to put a stop to his smoking altogether, and he just slunk down now and then to enjoy a moment's peace over his pipe before the kitchen fire. So it came about that, as I was questing around for stray crumbs (there was no chance of getting at anything better in the way of cheese or bacon), I came across something rather like a small candle, which did not smell so very bad. I cannot say that I exactly liked it, but it was better than nothing, and I was nibbling at it in a meditative sort of way, when suddenly my teeth encountered a hard substance, and there was a hideous spurt of flame right against my poor nose. I thought for one awful moment that my head was blown off by some deadly new invention of the man who had been smoking in the room, and when I recovered my senses I fled from the house, never to return. I know now that I had only encountered the business end of a wax match



I CAME ACROSS SOMETHING RATHER  
LIKE A SMALL CANDLE.



which had been dropped upon the floor; but my poor whiskers took months to recover, and I hoped that the match remained alight and burnt the house down. I did not wait to see, as I have said.

Something seems to have taken me away from my first summer, as usual. I remember that we had a great deal of bother of the same sort once before about a birthday, or something of the kind, owing to your incessant interruptions, so just you keep quiet and let me go on in my own way. I was telling you that I enjoyed it enormously, and could remember every day of it. Of course, after poor mother's tragic end, I was very lonely at first, the more so as my remaining brothers and sisters soon vanished. They may have lived, but when there is any doubt we generally suspect the worst. I had always been my mother's favourite child, though I had not altogether enjoyed her partiality, as it meant extra washings and less chance of going away on my own hook, and a lot of lectures and good advice, while the others were larking about and falling into mischief and other troubles. But I was glad of it now, for I remembered all her rules, and stuck to the thickest part of the hedgerows, and lay very quiet in the daytime and evening. I chose the very early morning as my time for feeding,

and all through my life I have found that an early breakfast of large dimensions tends to produce health and longevity.

Luckily my first summer was a very fine one, of the sort that begins early and ends late. I found a haystack in the corner of a field, and made myself a comfortable hole right underneath it. A cornstack would have been better in the way of food, but it was too late in the season to find one, or too early, whichever way you look at it, and I am glad now that this was the case, as they are nasty, dangerous things. Boys and ferrets and dogs may turn up at any moment, and a cornstack never stays for long in one place. Men always seem to be taking them to pieces in a hurry, and if you happen to be there when the removal is taking place the odds against your survival are very heavy. A nice haystack, on the other hand, often lasts for more than a year, and for some reason is only used up gradually; you may always rely on receiving plenty of notice that it is time to quit. But food is never exactly plentiful in May and June in the open country—not the best kinds of food, at any rate—and after my first season I generally kept nearer to human habitations. Just at present I was too inexperienced to care to pit my cunning against man, and so I gave him a

wide berth and stuck to my home under the haystack, and picked up enough odds and ends to keep me alive, though very lean and active.

There was an old boot in a ditch, not exactly a nice boot ; a good deal of the flavour had gone out of it, but it was very satisfying, though not exactly a nutritious diet. I only used it to fill up the gaps in my inside, and there was still plenty of it left when the fat days of harvest came. I had one lucky windfall, for a cuckoo laid an egg in the nest which a pair of hedge-sparrows had built, where the hedge actually touched my hayrick, about a yard above the entrance to my burrow. The two old birds were very proud of the honour, which seems to count for a great deal in birdland, and chirped and chattered over it all day. I got rather bored with hearing so much about it, not realizing that it was going to concern me a good deal. It did not strike me as anything very special until some time after the young cuckoo was hatched and had begun to grow. When this happened, I fancy that Mr. and Mrs. Hedge-sparrow found the honour rather a burden, for it *was* a hungry child ! Backwards and forwards they went as fast as ever they could fly, bringing in caterpillars and grubs of all kinds, to satisfy the hunger of that voracious nestling. I

suppose that their very own children got some of them, too, for they were beautifully fat and juicy when my turn came.

I had just looked out of my front-door one morning: it was a pretty safe front-door, as the hedge protected it; and when the wind blew the branches of the hedge about they scratched out some of the hay, so that there was a regular screen over my head, and nobody could have the least idea that there was a rat's hole there, unless it was a prying weasel, and weasels were very scarce thereabouts, owing to the care of the keepers in exterminating them. So that I was not doing anything very rash in sitting at my front-door one morning. And as I sat there I heard a bit of a scrimmage overhead, and down dropped a plump young hedge-sparrow just in front of my very nose, so that I could hardly help eating it. It was exactly like a very juicy sausage, and I wondered why it had fallen out of the nest. It could hardly have been learning to fly because it was quite naked, and I never saw a naked bird fly yet. I enjoyed it so much that I went out again on the next day, and I was well rewarded. I was watching the nest this time, when I saw that wicked young cuckoo deliberately push them out. There were two of them this time. He was evidently

growing fast, but I was rather surprised that the old hedge-sparrows did not give him a good beating for being so naughty. However, they never seemed to notice that their very own children were being pushed out of house and home by this impudent changeling; I suppose that they were so worried by the amount of provisions that were required every moment of the day that they had no time to notice anything but the young giant who was rapidly growing too big for their little house.

Personally, I did not think it my business to interfere. Two fat young birds make a beautiful breakfast when good food is scarce, and I was quite disappointed when nothing came on the third day, nor on the fourth either; that stupid cuckoo seemed to have left off growing, and I had to console myself with a bit of my old boot, which seemed more tasteless than ever after my luscious breakfasts of the last two days. On the fifth morning I found my breakfast lying cold and dead on the ground; the cuckoo had grown in his sleep, and had ejected the last of the real owners of the nest. I prefer a warm meal, and felt inclined to turn up my nose at the cold and clammy dish that awaited me; but I thought of the old boot, and set to work, and found that there was plenty of nice

flavour in cold hedge-sparrow after all. I had hopes that the irate parents would now discover their loss and eject the cuckoo by a united effort, and I smacked my lips loudly, partly to try to call their attention to the brutal way in which their own children had been murdered, and partly in anticipation: he would have been a plum-pudding indeed. But they were quite infatuated with their infant prodigy, and continued to feed him until he was able to fly.

I can never understand why cuckoos should get off all the worries of family life. They do not even undergo the trials of building a nest, and of then seeing it pulled to pieces by some wicked boy. They just lay an egg and put it away into somebody else's cosy nest, and then go off and enjoy themselves, and the other people have all the trouble. Of course, papa rat has a pretty good time himself in that way; he gives his poor wife very little help in bringing up the family, except in the way of eating one up now and then, as I have told you. But, then, you must remember that he is a learned and dignified person, who has some sort of right to be excused from the cares of a family. But cuckoos—why, their name has become a byword for silliness and incapacity! I

can only suppose that some curse has been put upon them which makes it necessary for them to say 'Cuckoo' all day, and that they would never be able to carry enough caterpillars to feed their own children, because every time that they opened their mouth to say 'Cuckoo' the caterpillar which they were carrying would drop out and escape. But I should like to know who did it: he must have been rather a feeble magician, because it seems to me that he has let them off a great deal in trying to inflict a curse upon them. I shall take care not to employ him when I want a good heavy curse laid upon any of my enemies. The only consolation is that they look so like a hawk that they sometimes get shot by accident; in fact, I heard a keeper say once that he always shot them whenever he got a chance, because he knew that they turned to hawks in the winter.

I wonder if the reason can be that five young cuckoos in one nest would be more than any two parents could possibly feed in a day, or perhaps the curse is that a big bird like the cuckoo was really once a hawk who accidentally killed a robin, and then the curse was uttered that he should henceforth eat nothing but caterpillars for ever. That would be quite a nasty curse even for me, who eat

most things, and a cuckoo would want such a pile of caterpillars to keep him alive that he would have none to spare for his family. And so the breed would have become extinct if the good fairy, who likes plenty of music in the spring, had not said that he could lay a little egg in the nest of somebody else, who would always be proud of the honour.

And so July came at last, and the corn began to ripen. You can hardly realize all that the coming of July means to a multitude of creatures. The birds, indeed, have been pretty well off for a long time in the way of food, with plenty of insects and caterpillars about ; but, then, they have had all the worries of nursery life, and have had no real time for enjoyment, and the rats and mice, except for the joy that spring awakens in the blood, have been living on very indifferent food. Green grass, fresh and young, and wet with dew ; daisies and buttercups ; the music of larks and blackbirds ; the busy hum of bumble-bees and gnats—all these are very delightful. The world and I were young together, and I found it a very jolly playmate. I rolled in the dewy grass to wash my back and face ; I ran races with the little puffs of wind, and squeaked with delight to feel the flowers tickle my sides as I

passed them. I made jumps at the butterflies, and got stung by an angry bee, and I never want to feel that pain again ; and I listened day and night to the birds, to the plovers calling over the fallows, to the larks up in the blue, and most of all to the merry sedge-warblers chattering away all through the night in the osiers by the stream, for a rat loves good music. But all the time I was never quite full of the right sort of food, and I felt that the world, with all its music and youth and happiness, was not yet quite an ideal place for a hungry young rat.

And then July came, and everybody began to shout, 'This way to the corn-fields!' Old birds, with their young families just able to fly, chirped the glad tidings as they passed over my head ; clucking partridges, with their big broods of merry boys and girls, echoed the message as they ran past my door ; the family of rabbits in the bank packed up their baggage and ordered a fly ; and the grass was alive with mice of all sorts, with their little noses turned in the same direction. So I thought that it must be time for me to join in the general exodus, and, after a good sleep, I bade adieu to the burrow under the haystack which had sheltered me so long and so safely, and on a dazzling summer morning I started off on my travels. It was really

my first journey into the world, for I had never gone far away from my haystack, and that was not far from the home of my infancy, and I went on my way very nervously, listening with all my ears to catch every sound, and stopping to wrinkle up my nose at every smell. After all, it was no very great journey, though I had to swim a small stream, and for a first attempt I flatter myself that I swam pretty well. It was so cool and refreshing that I had half a mind to turn into a water-rat for a time, but as all the other animals kept moving onwards, I thought that I had better go with the crowd, and, after threading my way carefully along two or three more hedgerows, I found myself in the promised land.

I suppose that a corn-field seems to you to be a very ordinary kind of thing, but that is because you have only looked along the top of it. Even when seen in that way it must look rather pretty when the wind is sending the waves of shadow over it. But if you were to crawl along the hedge among the edging of tall grass and flowers, ragwort and scabious, and poppies and knapweed, which grows round every corn-field that I have ever seen, and then lie down and put your head close to the ground, and look in among the thousands of stalks of corn, I

feel pretty sure that you would want to crawl in. Unfortunately for you, you are so big that you would only make a great pathway and spoil it all. If only somebody would teach us both how to change our size whenever we wanted an alteration, we should be much happier. Whenever I was in danger I should just whisper the words of the charm, 'Dumb Crambo Boanerges,' or 'Topeeka Lithyoxylon,' or anything else which sounded nice and mysterious, and then I should instantly be so enormously big that the danger would vanish. How startled a boy would be if he lifted up his stick to hit a rat, and then suddenly found that it was as big as an elephant! I would give a solemn promise never to hurt any of my enemies if I could only grow enormously big for a moment, just when some terrible danger was hanging over me. Perhaps there might also be another charm, which would enable one to take a different shape as well as enormous size, and then, whenever a savage owl pounced down, he would find suddenly a huge prickly hedgehog instead of a tender rat. And if he was pouncing so terribly fast that he could not stop in time, and pricked himself badly against the spikes, that would be much more his fault than mine, would it not? I don't think that

anyone could say that I had broken my promise not to hurt him. What fun it would be! And then you, for your part, could suddenly become quite tiny, could *ungrow*, so to speak, and crawl down the holes of the worms among the roots of the daisies, or creep into that delicious corn-field. Only it would be rather awkward for you if you forgot the words of the charm, and were obliged to stay tiny; it would not matter so much for me. A giant phenomenon is all very well, but a wee, wee mannie would have a very poor time, with all the animals wanting to pay off old scores.

However, as this is out of the question at present, I must try to give you some idea of what that corn-field was like. First of all, I was afraid to go in, for fear that there might be savage animals hidden away in those mysterious depths. I dare say that you have felt the same kind of fear when you went into a strange wood. But when I came to think it over, I made up my mind that I could dodge about among the stalks pretty nearly as fast as a weasel, and that at any rate it could not be much more dangerous inside than outside, and so I plucked up my courage and crept in, and very nearly frightened a half-grown rabbit out of his wits by pretending that a weasel was after me, and practising a clever

escape as fast as I could go in and out of the corn-stalks. I suppose that he thought that I was mad.

That bit of exercise took me a little way into the field, and then I began to be afraid that I should lose myself if I went any further, so I sat down and rubbed my nose against a stalk, and the earth was so deliciously warm that I lay down at full length and rolled about for a while, in order to get used to the feel of the place. And as I rolled about and revelled in the warm sun, and the smell of the ripening corn floated around my nose, it gradually dawned upon my mind that this was really Paradise, and that it did not matter in the least whether I lost myself or not. There was my breakfast, my dinner, my tea waving over my head, and, just to make sure that it was all right, I nibbled a stalk in half, and pulled down a lovely ear of corn. After all, when you come to think of it, how on earth can you lose yourself when you are there all the time? You can lose somebody else, and somebody else can lose you; but I had nobody else to lose in particular, and I did not in the least mind who lost me, as long as no unpleasant person found me; and I felt, at any rate, that I was safe from the hawks and owls, with all that beautiful waving sea of corn over my head. I call it a sea because they couldn't see, you

see. You have no idea what a comfort it is not to be obliged to be always looking up above your head. Any danger that came must come along the level, and it was not in the least likely that anyone would set traps, except round the edge (not that I knew much about traps yet ; that was an excitement still to come), so I gave a little chuckle of utter contentment, and walked straight on into the very middle, as if the whole place belonged to me.

And it did belong to me in a way, because everyone was so happy and contented in the midst of all that plenty that we called it *our* field, and there was no quarrelling at all : one part of the field was as good as another, so that you just pitched your camp where you pleased, and had a nice word to say to all your neighbours. Being an ignorant young rat, I thought that this state of things would go on for a long time, and so I dug for myself a comfortable hole under the shelter of a green tuft of wild convolvulus, which put out long runners to climb up the stalks of the corn ; and these soon hung out pretty pink and white flowers, making quite a charming screen to protect my new house from the excessive heat of the sun.

Hardly had I got my bachelor quarters nicely finished, when what should I do but fall head over

ears in love with a charming young rat whom I met one day wandering about rather disconsolately, because she, too, was a lonely orphan. Pity is akin to love, and I took her straight away and showed her my house. She admired my taste in the way of choosing an ornamental situation, but set to work at once to make alterations and enlargements, saying that the house itself was not fit for a lady to live in. I thought her promptitude a trifle cool, as I had not by any means made up my mind to marry her ; however, she had evidently made up hers, and so that settled the question, as it so often does in the world : and it was something to get possession of a wife without a quarrel. Food and wives are the only two things which seem to me to cause quarrels among animals, and it would have been a great pity, when food was so plentiful, if quarrels had come into Paradise over a wife. We were great friends for quite a week, but after that time had elapsed she began to treat the house as if it was all of it hers and none of it mine, so I went off in a huff and dug myself another a little further on, near enough to be friends, but not near enough to quarrel, and I talked to her quite politely whenever I met her.

My new den was just under the nest of a harvest mouse. I do not personally care for mice : they

have all of our faults and none of our virtues. I look upon them much in the same way as you regard monkeys, as distant relations rather to be ashamed of; but really the little lady who owned this nest, and the nest itself, were both rather pretty and attractive. She had built her home right up in the sky, just like a bird—a round nest made of twisted grass, with a tiny hole in the side, tied securely to about four stalks of corn. Can you imagine a more delightful cradle for the tiny mice to swing about in? ‘When the wind blew the cradle did rock’—never too much, but just a nice gentle swing backwards and forwards. I quite wished to live in such a house myself. And the pretty little brown lady, too, must have softened the hard and stony heart of even a tom-cat. Tawny brown she was on the back, shading to paler buff on the sides, with pure white fur underneath, and she ran up the slippery stalks as easily as a spider runs up a thread. When she came down she was even more dainty, for she just twisted her tail two or three times round the stalk and then slid down. You people are very proud of having lost your tails, as proud as a young rat who has just got rid of an inch of his; but if you had seen that merry little lady come down a corn stalk, I feel sure that you



SHE SAID THAT THE HOUSE WAS NOT FIT  
FOR A LADY TO LIVE IN.



would have wanted your tail back again, in order to enjoy such a jolly new game. I was so charmed with her that I tried to start a conversation one morning, but she snubbed me so terribly that I went to see how my own wife was getting on, and, as I got much the same treatment there, I made friends with an old buck rabbit, who seemed also to have been catching it at home, and wanted to have a long quiet talk with one of his own sex.

He broke the sad news to me that this delightful state of affairs was rapidly drawing to a close. It seemed, from what he told me, that the corn was not really meant for us, but that men came and cut it all down with a noisy machine, which went round and round, driving the animals further and further in, till at last, when there was only a tiny strip left, they all had to make a bolt for it, and that then there was generally a hideous slaughter, in which neither age nor sex was spared. This was, of course, very horrible news to me, when we were all living together so happily and contentedly, and I asked him how soon he thought that the machine would come. He hesitated for a moment, as if he had half a mind to let me take my chance, and then I suppose that the friendly feelings, which the pleasant summer life had kindled in all our hearts, drove out

the ancient remnants of an ancestral feud, for he whispered anxiously that he feared that the end might come at any moment, as he had heard a fat farmer saying that the birds seemed to be getting at *it* terribly, and that it was quite ripe enough to cut. That was quite enough for me, so I went off home, after a polite word of thanks to the old rabbit, and warned my wife, which was rather forgiving on my part, after the nasty remarks which she had recently addressed to me, and, shouting a parting word of advice to Mrs. Mouse, slunk away quietly and sorrowfully into the hedgerow.

I was not exactly pleased with those stupid and greedy finches and sparrows, who had given the show away by always coming in clouds and pulling the corn about. We might have enjoyed our life of peace for another week, or even ten days, and I vowed to take vengeance if ever the chance came in my way. But there was nothing to be done except make the best of it, and be thankful for a timely warning. And as I am now at last to make a more intimate acquaintance with man—and that always spells trouble and sorrow—it seems only right to close this chapter with a long sigh of regret for the peaceful days that I was destined not to enjoy again until I had passed through the furnace of many afflictions.

## IV

### ‘LET NOT HIS MISCHIEVOUS IMAGINATIONS PROSPER’

BEFORE I proceed any further, as I am going to be brought into close contact from now onwards with man the destroyer, it seems to me to be reasonable that I should enter a solemn protest against all the wicked designs whereby man seeks to ensnare us ; and if my language at times becomes rather dignified, and loses some of the sprightly insouciance which has characterized it hitherto, you will recognise that I am speaking under the stress of strong mental emotion.

I think that the above sentence may be rather a thorn in your side. I dare say that you know a few people who are clever enough to explain the words to you—your mother, or your governess, or even your father ; but in case they have all gone to bed, or in case you are shut up in a room by yourself as a punishment, with nothing to keep you company but this book of mine, I may as well give

you a rough translation. What I wish to say is, in plain English : All these disgusting traps and snares have given me the hump, and I mean to say so. So far I have kept a civil tongue in my head, out of respect for your youth and innocence. Now I cannot promise that my feelings will not be too much for me ; they may compel me to use long and difficult words. Therefore I would advise you to have a dictionary handy. Bring one bound in leather if possible, as I may want something to eat at intervals when my feelings overcome me, and a bit of leather is very sustaining.

You may wonder whether I am not afraid of putting ideas into your head in telling you something about the many ways in which my life is jeopardized daily. I have three reasons to urge in support of my action. Firstly, you are bound to be so wicked already that it cannot make much difference ; you inherit what is called ‘original sin.’ Secondly, I hope that this record of an eventful life may fall into the hands—paws, I mean—of rats as well as of men ; but it must be bound in calf, or else no rat who cherishes the smallest particle of self-respect will have anything to do with it. Thirdly, I must confess that I am rather proud of my knowledge, and feel a pardonable desire to

make a display of it. You see, very few rats know as much about traps as I do. In our country the fruit of the tree of knowledge is generally death, even as it was to have been in the Garden of Eden, and very few rats get the chance of more than one bite at that attractive apple. Of course, I have had a lot of luck, I cannot deny that for a moment, but I have also had a very tough constitution ; and I must say, though it may seem to savour of boastfulness, that I have not only exercised great wisdom and self-restraint, which some people call cowardice, but also, when circumstances over which I have had no control have brought me into trouble, I have secured my ultimate escape by means of a happy combination of audacity, *sangfroid*, and contempt of pain, which you would do well to imitate. The charge of cowardice I reject with contempt ; all that can be urged against me is that, when fools wanted to press in where I feared to tread, I generally allowed them to do so. When another fool has sprung the trap, *you* can get the bait. If it is a question of making a bolt *into* cover, I am always anxious to show off my speed of foot and be the first to arrive ; but whenever there has been any dispute as to who should take the lead in going *out* of cover, or in approaching a dainty piece of

food left lying out in the open, then I have realized how beautiful and attractive a virtue is true modesty, and have kept myself in the background. And if I may venture on translating my own rules of conduct into good advice for you, I would say: 'Be the first to enter the schoolroom and the last to come out.' It only means a minute at each end, and those two minutes may save you a licking.

Throughout a long life I have always thoroughly appreciated the fact that my own life was more valuable to me than that of another. I believe that you hold other views, but then you possess such a multitude of other things that you must rather lose sight of the value of life. As I have already observed, life is my only possession. Therefore, when sister, cousin, brother, wife, aunt, or mother have fallen into trouble, while I have escaped, I have shed a tear of grief—I confess the weakness freely—but I have also breathed a sigh of thankfulness when I realized that, but for the display of reasonable caution, the victim might have been myself, and the tear in the eyes of others. A sigh of thankfulness is better than many pocket-handkerchiefs to dry the tears of sorrow. Let me recommend that profound truth to your

notice, so that, instead of making day hideous with your howlings and disturbing my slumbers when you have been smacked for your sins, you may rather remember that you might have been eaten, body and bones, by a justly incensed father, and the sigh of thankfulness will quench your grief.

My mind is apt to wander, I know. You may have observed how I approach every subject with caution. I can urge two excellent excuses, if you will listen for a moment. You expect your own excuses to be heard, and so you ought, by all the rules of fair-play, to be ready to listen to mine. All objects, such as a piece of cheese, bacon-rind, scattered corn, string, even smells when they are strong enough to be an object, have to be approached with infinite caution. It is well to walk round and round, to approach and then retreat again, to put out a paw and draw it back ; and if this care has to be exercised over an object, why not, pray, over a subject ? That is one excellent excuse. The other is, that no rat, or man either, can do two things at once. Therefore, it is quite impossible for me, who can never wander just where I like, as far as my bodily progress goes, to resist the temptation to let my mind wander about in every possible direction. You find it just the same, I know. When your

body is shut up over lessons, your mind wanders everywhere, over hedge and ditch, into ponds and rivers, through woods and meadows; and, again, when your body is free and wandering among all these delightful scenes, your mind is most awfully careful never to wander in the direction of lessons at all. Now, perhaps you can forgive me if I let my mind wander, to make up for having to be so terribly particular about my body.

First and foremost then, to make a plain beginning, let us dismiss all the traps that are sold in the shops as puerile and foolish. I was on the point of writing 'puerile, and *therefore* foolish,' but I am beginning to lose the desire to trample on your feelings. Of course, rats *will* find their way into them now and then, but it is very foolish of them. If they would only learn to trust, or distrust, their noses more, they need have no anxiety about such traps as these. Can you imagine any rat of reasonable age and wisdom walking deliberately into one of those wire cages, with the bait hung on a hook in the middle? It is too silly! You pull the bait and the door slams, and there you are; and there you will be until the end comes, until the door is opened, and the prisoner runs out to play at hide and seek, with far too much 'seek' in it and far too

little 'hide,' like a plum-pudding that has lost its raisins.

And yet it seems only the other day that I saw my old friend, — William, Esq., H.T., sitting in quite an ordinary cage. There had been no attempt to hide it, which always makes them rather more dangerous, no covering up with sticks or dead leaves or bits of carpet, no empty boxes piled about. It had been just dumped down anyhow, and I could smell the evil odour of man all over it. I asked William how it had all happened, and he was quite rude and told me to mind my own business, and so I felt bound to go on talking to him out of self-respect. I told him that old rats, who had lost the power of smell, ought not to be allowed out of doors without their wives to look after them. That made him show his ugly old teeth. Then I asked him whether he was so tired of life that he had made up his mind to commit suicide, and he naturally answered that, if he could only get out, he would make me want to commit ten suicides before he had quite done with me. The poor old fellow looked really so ashamed of himself, in spite of his angry temper, that I felt a bit sorry for him, and tried my best to help him ; but the bars were too hard even for my strong

teeth, though I polished them up a bit in places and left my mark upon them, and the door was too stiff for me to push it up.

When the old man saw that I was really sorry for him, and had not come there to mock, he told me all about it. He did not find it very easy to get nice food with so many active young rats about, and in his younger days he had been very clever at walking into cage-traps and getting behind the bait, so as to pull it backwards, if any pull came in spite of all his care to nibble it off neatly, without disturbing the spring. It had been one of his show tricks. This trap, he said, must have been very well set, or else age had made his jaws clumsy, for he had hardly begun to detach the bait when 'bang' went the door, and there he was. And he turned to the bait in his anger and ate it all up before my very eyes. I saw him alive and well a week afterwards, and he told me that the dog had been only a frightened puppy, after all, who had barked round him and pretended to catch hold, but had never come within six inches of him, and that he had contrived to reach cover and escape under some palings. He was lucky. That kind of thing does not often happen, and when it does it is liable to make rats presume on their luck and try the

same thing again, and then they get into real trouble.

The other kind of trap which is sold in your shops is meant to catch the unwary rat by the leg. It is a nasty savage thing, with iron teeth, and any accident in which it plays a part is liable to be painful, as I will prove to you in another chapter, But here, again, no sensible rat has any right to be taken in, either literally or in the other way, which is called 'metaphorically,' though I ought not to make myself out to be too much of a fool. There is generally the bait to give you warning of danger ahead, and even when that is wanting (and it is then that these traps are dangerous), there is always the smell of man and of iron. And here, again, I feel sure that a good many rats are caught with their eyes open, so to speak, because they *will* fancy themselves too clever, and try to steal the bait without releasing the spring. It is wonderful how many people go wrong in this world from a desire to make a display of their cleverness. Unless these traps are very cunningly set, the spring is too stiff, and it is not very difficult to pull the bait away without anything happening; but if you do happen to make a mistake, it is a far simpler way of going behind the scenes than many others,

as the teeth catch you by the neck and choke the very squeal in your throat. But I shall have more to say about this common and ugly old trap when I come to tell you of my own accident.

The really interesting traps are those which are invented by a man out of his own brain, and constructed by his own hands. Do not be surprised at my admiration of such things. I hope that my mind is broad enough to admire cleverness, even when its object is my own destruction. Besides, the cleverer the trap, the more credit a rat gets who contrives to avoid falling into it, or running into it. Both kinds of accident may happen.

The thing which would really please me more than anything else, if I could only be two people at once, would be to be able to turn into a man, and then try to trap my other self, which would still be a clever old rat. Just think what fun you could have on a wet day! The man part of you would shut himself up in a room, with plenty of nice things to eat and drink, and would screw up his forehead and think and think ever so hard, and at last an idea would come into his head, and he would rush out and get sticks and string and anything else which formed part of his idea, and then he would take his knife and get everything made

exactly as he wanted it. After that he would eat and drink, before he made himself too dirty, and would then rub his hands all over with earth and mud, to take away the smell of man, and he would take off his boots, in order to avoid the smell of leather, and put on an old pair of stockings, and walk about in the dirt until he smelt of nice clean earth all over. Then he would sally forth full of evil devices. He would have enough of the rat half left about him to know exactly what a rat would be likely to do, and he would set his trap accordingly; and then he would forget the man half and be the rat half, and would come sniffing about, and wonder where the trap was and what it would do. And sometimes the rat half would be the cleverer, and would find out all about the trap, just as I have often done myself, and sometimes the man half would win the game, and there would be a click and a squeak and the rat half would be caught. And it would not matter in the least, because you could always take yourself out of your own trap, and let yourself go again and have another try. There would be no end of fun to be got out of it, if only Nature had not taken such precious care to make it impossible. Perhaps, if it were not so impossible, it would not sound so amusing.

I don't quite know where to begin, now that I have come to the really interesting traps. Perhaps the very simplest of all will be the best to take first. We rats have several peculiarities, of which man has taken a most unfair advantage, and one of these is the desire to run into a hole. It is just as natural for us to run into a hole as it is for you to go in at a door, perhaps even more so; for you do not naturally run into every open door which you may happen to see, while any hole seems to have an irresistible attraction for us. So what does man do but buy a big jar, an enormous jar, big enough to hold about twenty rats. When he first buys it it is probably full of beer, or, if not, he soon fills it and soon empties it, because he is fond of beer, and because the smell of beer makes it all the more attractive to us. Beer is made of malt, you know, and 'This is the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.' We also learn that poem, though we generally leave out the verse about the cat, because we do not consider it dignified to be killed by a cat. We go straight on—'this is the dog that killed the rat.' We say 'killed' in poetry, because many words which one would not use in daily conversation are considered to be quite polite in poetry.

When all the beer is finished, the man wonders what to do with the empty jar, and looks at it rather sourly, and, if he has enough money, he very likely sends it back to be filled again. But one day, when money was scarce, and the rats had been rather troublesome, it occurred to a certain man, who took a pride in circumventing the wary rat, that this jar would hold a lot of us, if he could only get us into it. He inspected the mouth of it, I suppose, and thought how like a rat's hole it looked—just a nice size. But, then, if a rat could run in, it could also run out. Then the idea came into his head that they could not run out if he could only stand it upright while they were still in it; but, think as he would, he could not contrive any device whereby to stand it up before the rats could get out. And he went on thinking and thinking, and his face grew more and more gloomy; but at last a smile came creeping round about his mouth and up to his eyes, and at last he burst into a huge chuckle, and in that chuckle lay the lives of many rats; and he slapped his hand upon his leg and exclaimed, 'Got it, by Jove! got 'em!' Then he went off and found a pricker and a hammer, and he chopped away very carefully at the side of the jar where there is a big bulge just below the neck,

using the pricker as a small chisel, and the marks which it made were just like those which the teeth of a rat would have left. And, after a long time, he had made a nice round hole, just big enough for a full-grown rat to pass through, and he smoothed away the edges very carefully, for he was very particular about little things, which is the only way to catch rats. Then he took the jar out of doors to a place where the rats came out in the evening, and dug out the earth, and buried the jar right down, so that the surface of the ground was just on a level with the hole which he had chopped; and he covered over the top of the jar with branches and straw, and scattered a little corn outside, and went away singing to himself. He must have rubbed his hands well in the earth before he began, for I could smell nothing.

Yes, I was the foolish rat who found it first when we came out in the evening. The others, whom I had allowed to go out before me, according to my rule, had begun to eat the corn, and, seeing that there was no trap under the corn, I trotted up and got my share. Then I saw the hole, evidently made by the teeth of rats (I saw the marks of the pricker, you know), and I wondered who had made such a nice cosy house, with an

elegant door under the branches and straw, and I peeped in. It was all dark, but there was a lovely smell of malt. I did not mind the dark, but the smell of malt made me a trifle suspicious, and I drew back again. However, I had never been trapped in a hole yet, nor was there any record of such a thing in our histories, so I peeped in again. The hole seemed to go down rather suddenly, but holes do drop down pretty straight sometimes, and I had always found it easy enough to walk out again, so in I went, and came down 'flop' on to the bottom of the jar. It was rather a long way to fall, but I was not particularly hurt nor particularly frightened, and I sniffed round in the hopes of finding the malt.

Hardly had I begun my investigations, when down came another rat, and then another. We thought it rather a funny place: the sides seemed so smooth, and we did not seem to be getting much nearer to the malt; but we had not begun to be alarmed, so that when someone else shouted at the hole to know if all was right, we only grunted, 'Of course it is; come along!' and down came three more. Then we found that we were getting packed rather tight, and were only moving round in a circle, and we tried to get out; but, of course,

the slippery sides of the jar were hopeless, and so we set to work to scramble about in all directions, and we fell to biting one another in our terror ; and those silly fellows outside thought that we were fighting over the food, and down they came one after the other till the jar was nearly full. What happened to those who were buried at the bottom I cannot say ; they must have had a very poor time. Personally, I contrived to keep on the top of the scrimmage, and at a moment when I found a steady foothold I made a tremendous jump at the opening, and just clambered out. It was a near thing.

I had scarcely recovered from my panic, when the door of the house opened and the man came out with a lantern ; he kicked away the straw and stuff, took hold of the jar by the handle, and carried it off, chuckling to himself and whistling for his dogs. They all went into the house together, and I never saw my companions again, either alive or dead. I suppose that he buried them under one of his apple-trees. I was rather badly bitten, but I could not think of staying anywhere near that man ; he was a bit too clever for me. So I crawled off into the fields and licked my wounds well, and made a careful note in



HE CARRIED IT OFF, CHUCKLING TO HIMSELF  
AND WHISTLING FOR HIS DOGS.



my mind to beware of holes in the future that smelt of anything but rats.

So much for one man's mischievous imagination, which prospered all too well. Now for another tale of sorrow. Picture to yourself a nice comfortable corn-stack in the corner of a field. It had stood there longer than usual, and the corn was now beautifully rich and mellow within it. This, combined with the fact that there was an admirable little pond at a distance of about twenty yards, made it an ideal home for us. We rats are very fond of water, and another of our peculiarities, which we share with rabbits, is that we always take the same track night after night. The obvious result was that the ground between the stack and the pond looked rather like the outside of a big railway-station, with tracks leading in all directions. We had made most of our holes in the foundations of the stack, and from each of these holes there was a well-worn track to the edge of the pond. It is an unfortunate habit of ours, this habit of making roads for ourselves, as the sequel will show ; but it is also very convenient, if you get any sudden fright on a dark night, to be able to start off at once in the right direction, running as fast as ever you can, and to know that you are certain to come to your

own front-door ; and our parents, or rather our mothers, always insist on our learning to run exactly on the given line. It is the most compulsory part of our education. I dare say that, if one could work out the whole sum, this peculiarity of ours would be found to have saved more lives than it has thrown away. The worst of it is that one can never see the whole sum, only a little bit of it, so that it is very difficult to get the right answer. The bit of sum which I was able to work out one morning gave about as unsatisfactory an answer as possible—in fact, I may say at once that it added up to fifteen dead rats. The only satisfactory part of the answer, to my mind, was the fact that I was not one of the fifteen ; if I had been, I could not have done the sum, and you would never have heard the story, so I hope to hear you say that you are glad. I assure you that I was most thankful myself that things were no worse ; but it gave me a terrible shock, for I realized that here, at any rate, was a trap which might always catch me, however careful I was, so long as I clung to the teaching of my infancy and trod the beaten track. Originality among us is very liable to lead to disaster, but in this case it does look as if it would be safer always to take a line of your own. The

great danger of the trap is that there is no bait to act as a warning: you may be alive and well one moment and dead the next. I think, perhaps, that the experience of that terrible morning taught me that, unless you can get absolutely away from man (and then you are liable to starve), the safest place is to be as close to him as possible, provided always that there are not too many of you. A lot of rats make a man angry and vindictive, but the presence of one or two, if only they are reasonably well behaved, seems to keep any decent sort of man in a good temper, breathing round him an atmosphere of friendliness and good fellowship.

The previous day had been wet and muddy—the sort of day which always seems to awaken in the hearts of some men the desire to catch rats—and I had noticed a two-legged trespasser in our paradise very busy between the stack and the pond. In fact, I was pottering about in the hedge bottom when he came, and for a long time I stayed there, keeping very quiet and watching. But after a while I began to feel terribly sleepy, as I had been out, contrary to my usual habit, for the greater part of the day and during a part of the previous night as well. So I ventured to make a bolt for

home, and I got there quite safely, as he had no dog with him. But I heard him say, 'All right, my beauty; see how you look to-morrow.' Visions of dogs and sticks and a broken back flashed across my mind, and I made sure that he was going to move the stack on the following day, so I determined to lie down and get a good sleep, and to leave the stack early in the morning before operations commenced. That sleep was my salvation, I believe. I told the others—those of them, at any rate, who were awake—what I had heard, and that I supposed that we should have to clear out early next day, and they agreed with me that it would be wise to do so. One of them made the very unfortunate remark, 'What a nuisance! I wish I could stay here always.' Poor fellow! he was one of those who stayed.

I enjoyed a most refreshing sleep while the tragedy was being enacted. There was never a squeak to arouse me from my slumbers. Softly as the lights at evening they went out at a puff of the breath of man. When I awoke in the early morning, behold, we were all dead men!—at least, I thought so at first when I stepped lightly out of my door into the fresh air of a fine November morning, for the first sight that met my eyes was

a multitude of corpses hanging in the air, dangling from long sticks, and their tails waggled limply as they swung in the breeze—sure sign that they were *dead*: the word must out. I did not shriek or fly; what would have been the good of it? I drew carefully nearer, and added up the sum to fifteen—fifteen, and all limp and unnatural—and in my heart I was grateful, not, perhaps, that there were so many survivors, but that there was *one* survivor in particular. Then I ventured to inspect the terrible means by which their end had been brought about. Luckily, one of the traps was still un sprung, but every one of the others had got its victim, and it seemed to me that if the man had only set more traps not a rat, except myself, would have lived to tell the tale.

And this was the manner of the trap; I trust that I shall be able to make it all clear to you. The actual parts were: (1) A long hazel wand, stiff enough to have plenty of spring, and pliant enough to bend easily; (2) a little knob of wood, about an inch long, with a deep notch cut into one side of it; (3) a foot of string; (4) a snare of fine pliant wire; (5) a strong peg pointed at one end, with a deep notch cut in the blunt end. Simple materials and inexpensive. I much prefer to see

an expensive trap, for then I know that there will not be many of them.

The pointed peg had been driven into the ground, within two or three inches of our run, with the notch facing the run. The hazel wand was also firmly fixed in the ground, so far from the peg, and behind it, that when it was bent well downwards into a strong curve the tip of it was exactly over the peg. The string was tied by one end tightly to the top of the hazel wand, and by the other end round the knob of wood, having about an inch to spare, on to which inch the wire snare was securely fastened. The hazel wand was then bent downwards till the notch of the knob could catch very lightly in the notch of the peg, the pull of the wand keeping them in their places. Then the snare was extended exactly over the run at the height of two of your fingers above the ground, which is just the height of a rat's head as he runs, and it was opened just wide enough to admit my head comfortably and no more. I did not put my head in to try, for fear of accidents, as you may well imagine, but I could see that there was exactly the right amount of room. A tiny twig on each side of the run kept the snare in its place in case the wind might blow it to one side.

Now mark what would happen when a rat came

running along the track. There would be no smell to guide him if the man had known his business, and had rubbed his hands well in the mud—no smell of iron, no smell of bait. So he would just come trotting along quite happily, dreaming of nothing but the pond ahead of him and of the delicious drink awaiting him there, his head would go through the noose, the two notches would be pulled apart—the least little jerk would do it if the trap was well set—the hazel wand would spring upwards, jerking the noose tight round his neck, and up he would fly into the air, leaving the way absolutely clear for the next rat to come along the same track. There would be nothing to tell him of the tragedy which had just happened, and the same fate would overtake him a yard further on, and the path to death would again be clear. As I have said, I believe honestly that if that man had taken the trouble to set a hundred traps he would have cleared out the greater part of our merry colony.

Luckily he was idle, and was content with sixteen, one of which failed, because, I suppose, most of the rats went along the other tracks. But I remembered the hideous sight of those fifteen corpses dangling in the wind for at least a day, which is

a long time for a rat to remember anything, unless he comes to write a book and really tries to recall the scenes of his past life, as I am doing now. Something else is sure to happen which wipes out the recollection of yesterday, and it is just as well that it should be so, or we should not be the merry, happy animals which you would find us to be if only you knew us better. For instance, even as we were flying panic-stricken from that scene of sorrow, a rat, who was quite a friend of mine, so far forgot the precepts of his youth and the practice of his age as to rush through a tempting little gap in the corner where two hedges met—always a most dangerous path for any animal—and in so doing he displaced a neat little arrangement of sticks, pretty much the same as you will find in the ordinary brick trap which boys set for our friends the sparrows, thereby allowing a heavy tile to fall upon himself; and that was the end of another fine rat, as fine a rat as you could wish to see. It was very foolish of him, for the trap had been set by a gamekeeper for our enemy the weasel. I had watched him set it myself, but never thought to warn a clever, well-educated rat not to run carelessly through so dangerous a place.

I might tell you how, one very severe winter, I

was tempted by hunger into one of those brick traps myself, thinking that I could soon burrow my way out if anything did happen. I forgot that the ground was frozen as hard as iron, and I made such slow progress that the boy came before I was halfway through. He put his hand in without looking, expecting to find a sparrow or a blackbird, and when I bit his finger to the bone he luckily gave such a start that he upset the bricks, and I made good my escape from yet another very tight place. He carries the mark of my teeth to this day, you may be sure. But I hope that I have told you enough about the dangers which lie in wait for us to awaken your tenderest sympathy. I cannot think that you will ever try to increase the burden which we bear so bravely and so cheerfully.

## V

### AT THE FARM

AFTER I left my beloved corn-field, I worked my way gradually from stack to stack and from bank to bank towards the habitations of man. What it was exactly that turned my steps in that direction I cannot say; probably the same instinct which sends the missel-thrush in spring to build her nest in the orchard, possibly some relic of the memory of the garden of Eden, where man, and beast, and bird lived together in harmony and love in days which have now, alas! faded far away into the past. I cannot say that my progress thither was uneventful, because it was full of adventures and risks; but they were none of them at all out of the ordinary routine of a rat's daily experience, and I do not propose to linger over them. I was never really driven into a corner by man, or bird, or beast, though I had plenty of escapes which were quite narrow enough to be exciting. I married my second wife in one of the stacks, and left her to take

care of the family. I have never seen her since I left her, and so it is reasonable to suppose that she and the kids ended their days when the stack was pulled down, or even sooner. I advised her to choose a safer place, but she was an easy-going soul who loved peace and comfort, and my arguments were of no avail against her stolid obstinacy.

It was also during this short period of wandering that the viper tried to kill me, and found me a trifle too active. He was not bad eating towards the tail end, but tasted rather bitter when I tried him about the middle, so I left him for somebody else. The beetles would take care of him and see that he was not wasted in the end, even if all the other scavengers of the earth and air rejected him. I only killed him in self-defence, so that I did not feel that it was my bounden duty to consume him utterly when I did not like the taste of him. You remember, of course, the beautiful poem from which I quote the words: 'Who made his shroud? I, said the beetle.' I do not expect to use a shroud myself, they are out of fashion among us at present, and, from what I have seen, I should say that the beetles have abandoned the making of articles for which there is so little demand, and

have adopted the ancient and honoured profession of grave-digger instead.

It seems only the other day that I saw them busy over the body of one of my intermediate wives, who had met with an unfortunate accident. They were hard at work scooping away the ground underneath her, and I thanked them for their kindly attention to a helpless female. They asked me not to apologize, and said that they hoped to do the same for me some day. Humorous little beggars they are, but on that occasion I thought somehow that their humour had a bit of sharp edge about it somewhere. They must have Scotch blood in their veins. Personally, I prefer the Irish humour, which is smooth and mellow all over. Jests ought to play like kittens, and keep their claws within the sheath. I asked them about the shroud, and they told me that when they had got her fairly underground they intended to be her shroud themselves, and that sixty was about her measure, from which I gathered that her flesh was not to be wasted, and that she would make a meal for sixty. As there were only twelve of them, I worked out the sum to five meals apiece. I think that is right, is it not? Poor wife! she was always rather proud of her small measures, and the idea of measuring

*sixty* would have been a great shock to her. I supposed that my measure would be over a hundred; but as I hoped that I had no immediate need of a shroud or shrouds, I did not offer myself for measurement. I am not one of those uneasy folk who like to buy their coffin and keep it ready in the house in case of accidents.

I suppose that the idea of being eaten, especially by beetles, is rather horrible to you, but *we* are so used to the thought of being eaten by something eventually, if not sooner, that I think that we should regard it as somewhat of a dishonour to be just left to lie about anyhow, and refused a place at the hospitable board of everybody. It would mean that there was something extraordinarily nasty about us, and that is a much more horrible thought to my mind than the idea of making a pleasant and healthy meal, even for a beetle. They do bury us first, at any rate. And when it comes to being eaten by man, that, of course, is a pretty high honour, which we should recognise by adding letters to our names if only the letters could ever be used. But when you are eaten it is just too late. Your name has vanished, and you cannot add anything, even letters, to nothing. You see, we do not employ tombstones to record our virtues and titles.

Men *have* eaten us, even for pleasure. During sieges and times of starvation we often appear, even on the tables of the wealthy; but that compulsory attendance can hardly be counted an honour. The fact, however, remains that here and there a man has been found possessed of sufficient taste to declare that a fricassee of rats is a dish not to be lightly rejected, and we are a common ingredient in the very mixed stew-pots of the gipsies. The stew-pots may be mixed, but the gipsies are an ancient and honourable race, whose taste ought to be beyond discussion, and the mixture is generally savoury, and contains such notable ingredients as chickens, partridges, hares, and rabbits, to say nothing of hedgehogs, who put themselves far above *us* in the social scale. So that those conceited partridges need not give themselves such airs! This being so, I can never quite understand why your anger is so kindled when one of your dogs, after killing an honest rat, shows a desire to complete his evil work by making a meal off the carcass. It looks to me rather like an effort to dishonour the slain, which I have always heard to be against your principles.

I reached my new quarters towards the end of October, and I do not think that I could have

found a more charming retreat wherein to spend my first winter. There stands on the bank of a small river a mill, with a little farm attached to it. The mill is run by a kindly old man called John, with the help of a water-wheel, of course, and his equally good-natured wife is mainly responsible for the management of the farm. She was always called Mrs. or Missus. I suppose that they each had another name, according to your wasteful custom, but I never heard it used. Behind the farm buildings was a pretty orchard, through which I made my cautious approach one windy night. It was the first time that I had ever drawn near to the abodes of man—the seats of the mighty, so to speak—and you may be sure that my heart was in my mouth, and that I stepped warily, with every sense on the alert. I wonder that my nose did not lengthen into an elephant's trunk in its anxiety to reach out and catch all smells before they became dangerous.

The wind had blown down a few apples which had escaped notice when the trees were picked, and I thought them delicious. I had eaten corn till I was tired of the taste of it during those days of plenty in the harvest field, and I vowed to myself that I would often sally forth into that orchard for

a little dessert from whatever stronghold Fate might apportion to me, thinking in my ignorance that I should find apples scattered about among the grass all through the winter. I was a bit of a cockney, in spite of having spent my whole life in the country, and it would not have surprised me in the least to find mushrooms growing on trees ; but I soon learnt to be wiser than that. Wisdom comes quickly when you live among men. That sounds like a compliment, but I am not very sure that it is as buttery a one as it sounds. Cockney or not, I had not been long in that farm before I found my way to the storehouse where the apples were kept, lying on shelves. It would have been hard indeed to miss the way to it, so sweet was the smell of those rosy-cheeked and russet beauties ; by all the rules of rat-land, the place ought to have been full of traps, but I never saw a vestige of one during the whole winter.

I was not the only person who paid surreptitious visits to those shelves. Ever since the Garden of Eden apples have been a good bait to catch boys and girls. Adam and Eve may have been grown up in a way, but they had not been alive long enough to have got over their taste for this delicious fruit. If we were to change positions, and I were

to set traps for you, I should catch you every time as long as I used this ancient bait.

There was a merry little pair of rogues called Billy and Betty, only son and daughter of John and Mrs., who continued to find their way at times into that sacred chamber as long as there were any apples left. The door was kept locked, as a rule, but sometimes Mrs., who was a busy woman, was called away in a hurry, and forgot to take the key out of the lock, and then steps would be heard along the passage, the key would be stealthily turned, and my pair of friends would make a bolt for the shelves, seize what their hands and pockets could hold, and beat a hasty retreat, to devour their booty in some secret hiding-place. My own tactics were much the same, though the matter of the key did not concern me, as I had a private entrance of my own. I could always climb into the bottom shelf, where the smaller apples were scattered; there I would select a juicy-looking specimen and drop him over the edge of the shelf, jumping down after him myself, to fix my teeth securely in his side and carry him off to my den in the wall.

I suppose that we were rank thieves, all three of us, because we took what did not belong to us; but personally I consider that all things belong to me,

so long as I can get possession of them. That is how the law stands among us. We have so very little of our very own that we are obliged to help ourselves. How can I get apples for dessert unless I help myself? I cannot buy them—at least, *I* never heard of a rat taking a sixpence between his teeth, and going into a shop, and standing in front of a counter, and bargaining about the price of apples—nor have I ever had delivered at my front-door a nice present of a barrel of apples addressed to Mr. Samuel, H. T., ‘this side up, with care; perishable.’ Also, if I risk my life every time that I help myself, *that*, I suppose, is sufficient atonement for the crime.

The case of Billy and Betty seemed to me to require much more argument than mine, and I was lucky enough one day to hear them discussing the matter between themselves. It came about in this way. They had come into the storehouse rather suddenly, and they caught me in the very act of abstracting an apple. I had just dropped it over the edge, and was on the point of jumping after it myself. Naturally, I was rather in a hurry when the door opened, and was making off to my hole, but when I saw that it was only the two kids I became quite brave, and went back and got my

apple, and strolled away sufficiently slowly to hear Miss Betty exclaim, 'Oh, you wicked thief!' I suppose that something in my eye pricked her conscience. I know that my eyes are rather sharp, but I never thought to find them sharp enough to reach the feminine conscience. Anyhow, we happened to meet on the following day in the barn among a pile of loose straw, into which the two little scamps had burrowed, and had made for themselves a cosy nest far away in the corner, where a large hole in the wall let in enough light, but not so much as to spoil the cosiness.

I had been out for a stroll in the fresh air, since there was plenty of cover round about for me to hide myself if any danger threatened, only it hardly ever did threaten me in that beautiful farm, and as I came creeping in through the hole in the wall, when I was tired of being out of doors, I heard Betty's voice exclaim, 'Look, Billy! there's that jolly rat whom we caught stealing apples yesterday.' 'He wasn't stealing any more than we were,' replied Billy sturdily; 'he was only taking.'

That all sounded very nice and friendly; I am not used to being called 'a *jolly* rat.' I am afraid that the rude word 'beastly' is much more often used to describe me—by boys, at any rate. So I

continued my journey boldly, and crept quietly into the straw, where I remained to listen, and I heard the question of the legality of helping one's self very fully discussed. I gathered from their conversation that Walter Johnson's father called it 'stealing,' and that 'Walter Johnson,' whoever he was, was thereby driven to realize that he was a wicked thief, and that the knowledge hurt his feelings, just as his father's stick hurt his other feelings if he happened to be caught in the act; and as he simply could not resist an apple whenever he got the chance of taking one, it seemed that both his finer feelings and his coarser feelings suffered a good deal of pain. No one likes to feel himself to be a thief, any more than he likes to feel himself in the clutches of an irate father, so I was rather sorry for Walter Johnson.

Billy and Betty were in a much easier position, for it appeared that their own mother had never opened the question at all, but that 'Dad' had refused them unlimited apples, though only on the medical grounds that the results might be painful. They argued, therefore, that so long as they were modest in their selection, and continued to enjoy good health and freedom from internal pain, the question of robbery need not be brought into the

discussion, which seemed to me to be a very sensible conclusion.

The subject of the next conversation that I heard among the straw was of far more personal interest to me ; in fact, it was myself. Billy was either a bit of a coward at that time, or else he was only putting on a pretence of cowardice in order to disguise the better certain evil designs which filled his young heart. He urged upon Betty the argument that it was hardly safe for them to hide themselves in the straw, because rats were liable to bite defenceless children, and he wove a blood-curdling story of how we had been known to fly at people's throats, and how we refused to relax our hold until either the victim or ourselves perished ; the natural conclusion of his argument was that he thought that perhaps he would buy or borrow a trap to catch me. It was his concluding remarks which made me doubt whether his anxiety was quite genuine. Betty was such a friendly little maid that she would never have allowed Billy to attempt to injure 'that jolly rat' unless her fears had been sufficiently aroused, and she ruled Master Billy with a rod of iron.

May I pause for a moment at this point to make a confession ? I was once living in a house where

there were a lot of boys ; in fact, it was a school. You may think it rather a strange dwelling-place for a rat to choose, and perhaps it was. I did not make a long stay. Really I am so ashamed of myself that I hardly like to go on with my story. I was the only rat on the premises, and I can but suppose that the solitude had rather turned my head. Also it was such a very riotous solitude that I may have caught the infection of the noise. Those wicked young scamps were always playing tricks upon one another, especially upon one very rosy-cheeked and juicy youngster, who seemed absolutely to enjoy having pins stuck into him. I often went up to their bedroom to pick up the crumbs of cake which they let fall upon the floor. I wanted, of course, to do them a good turn, because they were most strictly forbidden to have cake up there, and the crumbs would have betrayed them in the morning.

Now, on this particular evening of which I am talking they had enjoyed a gorgeous scrimmage, and my lonely life made me greatly desire to take part in it. I had not had a good romp for weeks. But I could not do anything as long as the lights were burning ; there might have been rather more of a scrimmage than I bargained for. However,

when at last the lights were put out and all was quiet, I jumped gaily upon the bed of Rosy-cheeks, and—and—I bit him through the fleshy part of his ear. He awoke with a howl, and I fled for dear life. That is my confession, and you may think, after hearing it, that Billy's tale of horrors had some foundation of truth. But I assure you—upon my honour I assure you—that while I listened to the talk of the children in the straw I was as innocent as the babe unborn. No taste of human flesh had ever defiled my lips, and I felt no pricks of conscience, only righteous indignation, as that young ruffian Billy piled up his tale of atrocities. If ever I wanted to bite a boy, it was then.

But Betty, my sweet little rogue Betty, would hardly listen to anything which might bring her 'jolly rat' into danger or discredit. She was so convinced of my innocence that I almost made a vow never to get into mischief again. I suppose that I did not do so because I really was not conscious of any special wickedness which could be laid at my doors. It is not easy to be sorry for what you have never done or thought of doing, and one wants to keep one's vows for the really big occasions. If there is one thing more than another that I dislike about boys, it is their way of getting

excited and fussy about mere nothings, and exclaiming, 'I swear I won't!' 'I give you my word of honour!' when nobody wants to question their honour, and a simple 'Oh no' would be quite enough.

*Now*, of course, I have one or two things upon my conscience which trouble me at times, though nothing so bad as biting 'Rosy-cheeks' through the ear. I bit another boy badly once, who had the impudence to put his hand into my hole in the side of a corn-stack, and to haul me out ignominiously by the scruff of the neck, and I was compelled to bite him three times before I could make him loose his grip; even then he only just gave me time to wriggle out of his fingers, though he was bleeding freely, and must have dearly wanted to suck the place. I was quite sorry then, because he was so brave and determined, but I did not feel that I had done anything *very* wicked in saving my own life.

Perhaps I ought to tell you rather more about my new quarters, though I have already told you the most important point of all—namely, that there were no traps. I am afraid that I cannot suppose that there was any special desire to keep us there from love of us and our innocent ways; but we were not there in any great numbers, which is always a

good thing, and John was such an easy-going old soul that he rather liked a few rats for company. *Mrs.* also kept the farm-hands far too busy for them to trouble their heads much about us, though they naturally heaved half a brick at us now and then, more from instinct than from any real desire to hurt us ; I never heard of any casualties resulting from their stray shots.

I have said elsewhere, I believe, that I dislike houses where a woman is in command, but I must certainly make an exception of *Mrs.* Shall I say, rather, that I dislike lean and fidgety women ? *Mrs.* was so very stout that one might call most of the rest of her sex lean by comparison. That would make her the only exception. At any rate, we all of us regarded her with something very like affection, so much so that we were very careful never to incur her displeasure by venturing into the house where she ruled supreme.

After all, we had a beautiful domain of our own without trespassing on her sacred precincts. I have told you already about the apple-room and the barn, but we only went there on special occasions, when we felt particularly clean and good, when we were wearing our nice frocks and clean pinafores, so to speak. I have lived among you quite enough to

know that you are allowed to come down to dessert sometimes, looking very smart and pretty, but feeling rather shy and awkward, and glad to get away with an apple to more comfortable quarters. Well, that is exactly how I felt when I went into the apple-room ; it was a kind of treat, but I was glad to run away with an apple. The barn again, with its beautiful pile of clean straw and its nice clean floor, was like your drawing-room, into which you are ushered on a wet afternoon or in the early part of the evening to play polite games, but where romping and shouting are disliked—the sort of place where you feel that you must be distinctly on your better behaviour, and where muddy boots, and torn frocks, and breeches with holes in the knees are out of place.

Our own particular rooms, in which we lived for the greater part of the day, were elsewhere—in the outhouses, the poultry-runs, the cowsheds, the stables, and especially the pigsties. Now, I will defy anybody who has ever seen a pigsty—one of the good old-fashioned kind—to mention a place better suited for a rat to live in—an ordinary rat who likes plenty of mess and litter, and who does not care to be perpetually told to wipe his feet when he comes into a room. I am that particular kind of

rat : none of your new-fangled sanitary schemes for me ; a reasonable amount of dirt and untidiness I call *comfort*—not actually on my coat, for I am rather particular about that, but round about my feet and on the premises generally. I always sympathize with the Irishman who went out to work one day (a very unusual thing for an Irishman to do, I am told) and on his return found that his kindly landlord had insisted on having his cottage swept and garnished, which is also rather improbable on the face of it ; but it is all true. He looked about in a perplexed kind of way, and when his wife assured him that he was really in the right house, he remarked, ‘ Bedad, thin, and it’s glad I’d be to know what thafe has stolen my furniture !’ Those being my views about a comfortable amount of dirt, you may be pretty sure that I made my own special run behind the wooden trough out of which the pigs ate their food. I am fond of pigs’ food, and I always used to climb into the trough at night to make my supper off the pigs’ leavings. They were so well fed, because John and *Mrs.* liked their bacon to be fat, that there was sure to be plenty of caked barley-meal left sticking to the sides of the trough, and I began to put on flesh myself as the result of good living. But I was

always careful to take plenty of exercise and to keep in good training, because a rat never knows exactly when he may have to bustle for his life. We do not get a month's notice of the date of the race, so as to enable us to get into proper training : ' Sir, this day month you will run a race with Mr. Brown's dog, Jock. The distance will be ten yards, and you are allowed a start of a yard and a half.' A notice of that kind would be a great convenience. Also, think how awful it would be if you ate so much that you stuck fast in your own doorway, and had to be dug out by your friends and relations. How they would laugh !

Anyway, it was easy enough to get plenty of exercise, because all the buildings were old, with hollow walls ; and when you have spent the greater part of the night with your friends racing across the yard, and playing 'hide and seek' up the walls of the cowshed, down the walls of the stable, across the roof of the barn, down a pole which leans against it on the outside, away to the mill, with perhaps a swim in the river to finish up the night's revelry, and then a roll in the straw to dry your coat, a certain amount of good food not only does your muscles no harm, but is absolutely necessary.

That was the kind of happy and careless life

which we led, and we hoped that it would go on for ever. But one day I heard a strange voice, or rather voices, on the premises, and I crept nearer among the withered grass which fringed the river-bank to listen to what was being said. I arrived just in time to hear John growling something about 'the rats never having bothered him; there weren't a many of them, either, and his little maid, she were fair fond of them.' Then came a boy's voice, urging that they did so want to try their ferrets, that they were not allowed to have a dog, and that they could not possibly kill many. 'Besides,' chimed in another impudent youngster, 'there will be young chickens about in the spring, and the rats are sure to get at them, and then you'll jolly well wish that you had let us kill some of them, because your wife will get cross, and where will you be then?' That seemed to touch John on a sore place, and after a little more growling he gave in, which seemed to me to be very cowardly behaviour—I was never afraid of any of my wives—and he gave them leave to come on the following Tuesday. So they went away rejoicing, so pleased, in fact, that one of them had the cheek to shout back, 'I say, John, you'll give us an apple apiece for every rat's tail, won't you? and another

voice added, 'You're a brick, John; we'll see that nobody comes near your orchard next autumn.'

I was fairly sickened by what I had heard; I thought John 'a cowardly old fool,' and the boys 'cheeky little ruffians.' Just as we were all feeling ourselves so happy and comfortable too! I longed to be able to talk, so that I might seek out Betty and implore her to protect us. Billy would be in the very thick of it, I was sure. However, nothing worries a rat for long, except perhaps a puppy, and when Tuesday came we had all of us entirely forgotten the whole conversation, which I had duly reported to the others, and had taken no precautions. Luckily for me, I heard them come in, and I lost no time in taking up my position in the roof of the barn. The starlings had made a hole under the thatch, so that I could peep out and see how things were going on.

The little ruffians came swaggering into the yard, all armed with sticks, and carrying a little brown sack, which wriggled about when they laid it on the ground as if something was trying to get out. Imagine *your* feelings if somebody came into your yard with a couple of savage tigers shut up in a bag, and then you will understand how terrified I was, in spite of my advantageous posi-



THE LITTLE RUFFIANS CAME SWAGGERING INTO THE YARD  
ALL ARMED WITH STICKS.



tion, when I saw that bag moving about. The very smell of a ferret scares a rat for days.

Master Billy soon joined them, and they presently disappeared into the cowshed. After a few anxious moments, I heard yells and the smacking of sticks. 'There he goes!' cried someone, and another voice howled out, 'Look out, you pig! you got me on the shin!' That sort of thing went on for some time, and then they emerged in triumph, carrying by the tail what had once been my friend Ben. Also they carried, apparently by the neck, two terrible ferrets. I hoped that they were going to choke them, but the monsters seemed to prefer that method of being carried, and did not even wriggle.

After a delay of a few moments, spent in gloating over the solitary victim of their prowess, they set themselves to work again, and this time only one of their number went inside into the stable, carrying in his hands the two ferrets. The others remained outside, because, as I heard them explain to one another, the rats were sure to bolt through one of the two drain-pipes which emerged through the wall, and they wanted a good run in the open. Nothing happened for some time, except that I saw the evil-looking head of one of the ferrets peep out of one of the drain-pipes, and I was beginning

to hope that none of my friends were at home in that particular portion of the buildings ; but presently there was the sound of a scuffle, and the biggest rat on the premises—Mr. Patrick, whose father had come over from Ireland in a pig-boat—made a bold rush for his life. He dodged the sticks cleverly for some time, but at last one of his doubles brought him within reach of that active little ruffian Billy, who struck him a back-handed blow fairly on the side of the head, and he gave up the contest without a struggle, and took no further interest in the proceedings. It was as clean a kill, as fair a stroke with a shillelagh, as a brave Irishman could wish for, and I hardly felt sorry for him ; also I knew that Master Billy would be sure to brag of his prowess, and that Betty would do her best to make things unpleasant for him. Unfortunately, the scoldings of sisters never seem to produce a very lasting effect upon brothers ; they only trickle off the thick masculine hide like water off a duck's back.

Of course, there was a scene of noisy triumph over the corpse, which was pronounced to be the remains of the biggest rat on record ; and meanwhile the other ferret came out and slipped away into the barn unnoticed, to do a little hunting on

his own account, which made me rather anxious, for how was I to get down as long as he remained at large on the premises? He might even find his way upstairs into the roof.

When the rejoicings were finished, the young villains told off one of their number, much to his disgust, to watch for the missing ferret, and the rest carried off the remaining one to my pigsty, where I am thankful to say that an evil destiny awaited him; for they foolishly put him in from the outside, and he came through into the midst of the pigs, one of whom snapped him up before ever he could get to my home behind the trough, to spoil it and make it uninhabitable with his horrid smell. That was the end of him, for the brave pig broke his back and began to eat him quite unconcernedly before his owners realized what was going on. I could have told them that this was liable to happen, for I had had one or two narrow escapes myself. They contrived to rescue his corpse for burial; but their ardour was sadly damped, and even the arrival of John with a handful of apples failed to cheer them up. They told him, almost with tears, that one ferret was lost and the other brutally murdered, and so took their departure, leaving Billy to capture the runaway when he should appear.

He did appear on the following day, and was found eating one of the chickens which he had killed, so that he made himself thoroughly unpopular with everybody, and his capture was hailed with universal satisfaction. Perhaps I was more pleased than anyone, for I was the only rat who knew that he was still about the premises, and the knowledge had altogether ruined my night's rest. Also, my memory is so very short, unless I really sit down and try to remember, that I was afraid that I should forget all about his hateful presence, and go blundering up against him unexpectedly.

After he was gone our life went on peaceably and happily enough. The boys were so upset by the loss of their ferret in the pigsty that they never came near the place again, and so we were left to enjoy ourselves in our own way. The pig who had slain our deadly enemy became a great hero among us, and when he was eventually taken away to be made into bacon we all attended the funeral; that is to say, we went by night to the place where he had been converted, and buried such scraps of him as we could find—in our own insides, for want of a better place. I never enjoyed quite so pleasant a winter again, as the sequel will show.

## VI

### UNREST AND REST

I DID not leave the farm until Spring was in the air. The swallows had not yet come, it is true, nor was the voice of the cuckoo to be heard, calling for its mate, and warning the little birds to look after their eggs; but the missel-thrush was sitting high up in the elm-tree, and shouting out his very heart for joy in spasmodic and fragmentary song. And the sparrows in the yard were picking up pieces of straw and playing with them, and fighting mimic battles for the possession of stray feathers, while the gay starlings chuckled on the roof, and popped in and out of holes in the thatch.

I find it rather difficult to explain subsequent events. Such an experience as I was now to undergo has never been repeated in my life, nor could the oldest rat in our company tell me anything about it, and he was so very old that he must have been able to explain if anyone could. The fact remains that we made a great journey, and

when I say 'we' I mean a very large army. I can only suppose that such fits of temporary insanity as then came upon us are a cause of shame among us, because I find no records of them in our histories. I cannot suppose that such a thing had never happened before among us; therefore, it must follow that the absence of all records proves that it is regarded as an unexpected and inexplicable attack of lunacy, and, as being such, a thing to be hushed up as much as possible.

But there is evidently some taint of it in the blood, for the *lemmings* of Norway, pretty little cousins of ours, whose coats are variegated with black, yellow, and white, are infected with the same disease, only in a worse form. When the spirit of unrest enters into them, they collect in a vast army, and march and march day after day, or rather night after night. Nothing stops them. If any impenetrable obstacle bars their way, they walk round it, and pick up the straight line of their journey on the other side; but if it is only a haystack, or anything that their teeth can make an impression upon, they carve for themselves a wide path through the middle of it. If they have to swim a river, and a boat happens to be moored in their direct line of march, they refuse to swim

round it, but either dive under it or climb over it, and so continue their undeviating journey on the farther side. Their annals record many such marches, and praise their unswerving determination. And so, finally, they reach the sea, and you would think that such a barrier must stop them. Not a bit of it. They all march in, and continue to swim until they either find land on the other side or are drowned.

We do nothing quite so foolish as that, but I very much doubt whether the peculiarity is confined to us rodents. The butterflies, at times, change their quarters in a vast flock, as I know from personal experience, because they once came dropping round me from the sky in hundreds. 'Painted ladies,' they called themselves, and I tasted one or two of them, but found them nasty, as you might expect from their name. Look at the birds, too, how they suffer from the same malady. The robins, for instance, go away, though they do not seem to vanish like the swallows and cuckoos, because others come from further north to take their place.

Even you men grow restless, and want to change your quarters, after staying for a long time in the same place ; but your life is altogether so artificial

that it can hardly be brought into the argument. The fact is, I think, that *we* do it so seldom that it has come to be regarded as an eccentricity. The other creatures, yourselves included, do it so regularly that it has become, in a manner, an everyday event with you. Personally, I take it to be a wise dispensation of Nature, worked out by her in order to keep up the proper supply of all animals throughout the world. I have even seen every ditch in the whole countryside filled with frogs—frogs in thousands—and all sprung apparently from nowhere. Lucky for you that the tigers and bears do not suffer from the same complaint!

And so it was with us. I had been feeling uneasy for several days, and it worried me a good deal, because I could not see any reason for it. I was in perfect health, no pains under my pinafore or anywhere else, and yet I did not care a bit for my dinner. And one night something called me out into the fields. I do not know what it was, but I felt that I *must* go; and I suddenly found myself one of many hundreds of rats, all travelling quietly and persistently towards the south, just as if we were cold, and wanted to make our way into a warmer climate. Perhaps we all ‘heard the East a-calling,’ and wanted to get back to India, the

home of our ancestors, whence we originally came forth to people the world.

I suppose that all the other rats from the farm were there too, but I was far too much occupied with my own feelings to notice whether they were present or not. Nothing stopped us, not even rivers. We were escorted on our way by a good many owls and hawks, but the country was carefully preserved, and so they did not attack us in very great numbers. In fact, unless they could pick off a straggler here and there, they did not venture to swoop down into the pack, because we should inevitably have pulled them to pieces claws or no claws, we were in such deadly earnest.

And so we gathered strength as we went on, for more rats joined us at every step, until we were a very vast army. And yet we attracted singularly little notice for a long time, for we retained enough of our traditional caution to keep a good deal under cover, in the hedgerows and the plantations, and also the bulk of our travelling was done at night, and more or less in Indian file; so that, if you had watched at a gap in the hedge, under the dim starlight, you would never have seen more than two or three rats at a time, but you would have

seen two or three popping quietly across the open space for the greater part of the night.

Luckily our appetites were very small, or we must have been detected. The fever in our blood seemed to take away the desire for food, and a few blades of the young grass, which was springing up fresh and green in all the hedgerows, or a few stray nibbles at a heap of turnips, seemed to be all that we required. On the other hand, we drank enormously, and sometimes, in our desire for water, we ventured so near a homestead that a chained dog would get a whiff of our scent and bark furiously, while anxious heads were thrust out of windows to see what was the matter. Otherwise we attracted very little attention. All other animals were either frightened at our numbers, or else regarded us as being engaged on a kind of pilgrimage, and therefore not to be molested. We animals are queer creatures in some ways. When *one* of us falls ill, and behaves in such a way as to attract attention, we generally kill him, because attention is as dangerous to attract as lightning; but if eccentricity seizes on a whole tribe, the rest look on with something like awe. And so it was that we went on our way quietly and unmolested. We never hurried, and we never stopped to rest.

And we helped one another in many strange ways. We had one fine old patriarch among us who was quite blind, and one of our number always led him—believe it or not as you like. He held a twig of stick in his mouth by one end, and we took it in turns to hold the other end, and guide him on his way.

And so we went on for many days, or rather nights. Here and there one or two members of the army dropped out of the ranks, as sanity returned to them; but the majority of us continued our strange march, until at last we paused, and the pilgrimage ended almost as suddenly as it had begun. How strange it all seemed! Hitherto we had been brothers and sisters, moved by one common impulse, united by one strange, half-felt desire, taking but small notice of our surroundings, and now we awoke from our dream, to find ourselves hungry and in a strange land, and we fell to marrying and giving in marriage, and to quarrelling over our food, for our appetites, owing to long abstention, were enormous, and clamoured to be satisfied. Then, indeed, the whole district knew that there was a plague of rats, for we stripped the country bare: nothing was too young and tender for us, nothing too old and tough; and men came

out with dogs and sticks, and worried and hammered at us, offering rewards even for our tails, until we were brought back to comparative sanity, and realized that it greatly behoved us to shift for ourselves, if we would save ourselves alive.

So we scattered to the four winds of heaven, as many of us as had escaped with whole skins, and we burrowed for ourselves new habitations wherever we seemed to find a safe place. But many of us had not yet wholly recovered our wits, and made feeble and futile dwelling-places in the middle of fields, whence we were easily dug out and destroyed; others crowded into farm-buildings in such numbers as were bound to kindle wrath in the hearts of even the kindest of farmers; while some in whom the taint of madness was still strong made their way up drain-pipes and through cellars into the very houses and cottages of men, where their presence was not tolerated for a moment, so great was the hostility which our strange invasion had evoked. Men even began to talk of the folly of destroying owls, who alone could prevent the repetition of such a plague, and to form societies for the preservation of the birds of prey. So you may well imagine how deeply our pilgrimage had moved the foundations of their doctrines.

More by good luck than good management, for I was still only half sane, I escaped from the general slaughter without even a bite or a scratch. There were such numbers to be killed that some of us were almost bound to escape, and Fortune, as usual, chose her own favourites in her haphazard manner, myself among the number, I am thankful to say; and, curiously enough, the old blind patriarch, whose feeble steps we had guided thus far, was also one of those who escaped. You would have thought that he must have been the first victim of all.

I felt it my duty to see him to a place of safety, and in so doing I probably saved my own life also, for if I had had only myself to look after I might easily have lost my head in a strange land, and taken up my dwelling in the very worst place that I could possibly have chosen. But I was bound to be very careful when it was a question of providing a safe home for an old blind companion, and so I set my brains to work while we lodged for a day or two in a cosy hedge-bottom. And it suddenly struck me that my cousins the water-rats lived almost unmolested by man; also I rather thirsted for the quiet seclusion of some sheltered stream, with a broad margin of cool reeds and grasses if

possible. I was like a man who has been very ill, who longs for the splash of waves on the seashore.

On the following day, therefore, we set off in search of the promised land, and luckily we had not far to go, for the joys of guiding the blind did not seem to appeal to me quite so much as formerly, a sure sign that my brain was beginning to recover from its malady. There was no wilderness to be crossed, no fiery serpents to bite us on the way, only a few cool meadows and hedges already turning green, and, after cautiously coasting along the ditches of two fields, I had much ado to save my blind old incubus from falling headlong into just such a stream as I had pictured to myself.

But before I try to describe to you my new abode of rest and peace, I must finish off the story of the blind companion of my wanderings as far as it is known to me. I told him exactly the kind of place to which I had brought him, and then I gently broke the news to him that I had no intention of continuing to live with him after I had once made him comfortable. He took it very nicely, for he was a gentlemanly old person, and assured me that he was quite capable of looking after himself, that his appetite and powers of digestion had been greatly weakened by age, and

that the green margin of the stream, with its luscious roots and grasses, would amply supply all his wants. One thing only he asked of me as a last favour, and that was to find for him some disused burrow—under a tree-root or other such protection for choice—some resting-place, however humble, which he might call his own, wherein to lay his aged head, with its sightless eyes, and to dream away what was still left to him of life.

Of course, I readily agreed, and we set off at once on the quest. The shades of evening were gathering in thickly, and darkness was beginning to brood over the face of the water, when at last we came upon what seemed to me to be an excellent situation. A thick hedge grew right down to the margin of the stream, showing great bare and twisted roots where the running water had eaten away the earth, and in among these roots was a hole, which even a man would have pronounced to be unoccupied, as there were no traces of wear about the entrance at all.

I described the situation to him carefully, and it received his heartiest approbation. Just to make quite sure, I begged him to remain outside for a moment while I went in and explored the dwelling-place. I had even kindly thoughts of collecting a

little dry grass to make a bed for the poor old fellow, for whom I was beginning to feel a renewal of affection now that I was on the point of leaving him.

I was not underground for many minutes, and the premises seemed to be roomy and convenient ; but when I returned to the cool air of evening my companion was gone : he had utterly vanished from the face of the earth, and to this day his fate is a mystery to me. Had Fortune, that capricious lady, after bringing him in safety to the end of his long wanderings, abandoned him at the very door of his last quiet home of rest, and handed him over to the remorseless grip of some evil bird or beast ? Or had some strange spirit of independence, such as often seems to awaken in the hearts of the aged and infirm, urged him to fly from me, his newly-found guardian and protector, and to arrange the little of his life that was left in his own way ? Who knows from what domestic tyranny he had escaped when he undertook the long pilgrimage, a return to which he may have dreaded ? I shall never know for certain, but I greatly fear that some sudden misfortune swept him away from his threshold and hurried him into his long rest. I have seen Fortune play so many strange tricks on

those who might have had reason to think that they were safe at last.

So uncanny was his sudden disappearance that I forebore to make any search. If he had fled, it was because he had wanted to rid himself of my unwelcome company ; if, on the other hand, he had fallen a prey to the enemy, surely that same enemy might well return for a second victim, for the poor old fellow had but a scanty covering of flesh upon his aged bones, and that second victim would be me. In either case I was better in the hole, so I went sadly in and slept the long sleep of utter weariness.

Whether I awoke on the following morning, or only after many days and nights, I cannot say. When you are a rat, time is of very small importance, and that is where we have the advantage of you, more than in any other matter. I am quite ready to grant that it must be a fine thing to be able to go out of doors, and feel that you are one of the lords of creation ; that if you choose to kill, and consider that you have the right to kill, you have only to pull the trigger and hold the gun steady, or to strike a straight blow with stick or stone, and a life is gone. It may be laid to your account hereafter, but the hereafter is always a long way off.

You have no fear of any stronger creature taking you unawares in an unguarded moment, and the position is one which I should greatly like to fill for a few days. Only I doubt whether I should be able to exercise quite so much self-restraint as you have learnt to observe in the matter of killing. I will readily say that much to your credit. I am afraid that I should sally forth and wage a war of extermination upon all foxes, weasels, owls, hawks, cats, and boys. I would drive you all into the outer wilderness, if there is such a place, and compel you to seek your food in a barren and dry land, where no water is. I would lay upon you the burden, which we bear so easily day after day, of never setting forth in gaiety and carelessness; of always keeping one eye and one ear open and on the watch for an enemy, so that the shadow of a wing or the rustle of a grass should make you tremble and leave the meal untouched; of never setting foot to ground until your nose had assured you that there was no hidden trap. And until it became to you a second nature, as it has become to us, I do not think that you would greatly enjoy the new manner of your life. All this I would gladly make you feel for a while; but, on the other hand, I cannot but realize that the burden of time presses more heavily upon

your head than upon mine. You have to get up at *one* time, to breakfast at another, to learn lessons at another, and if you are behind your time the result is a scolding or something worse in youth, and vexation and a scolding from yourself, or, again, something worse when you become your own master or slave; and it seems to me that I should enjoy that state of affairs just as little as you would enjoy the daily hazards of my existence if we were to change places. I, on the other hand, get up when I awake, or when I feel inclined to do so; I feed when I am hungry, or when I can find anything to eat, which is *not* always the same thing; and if I happen to sleep for three hours, or for three days even, beyond my usual time, no one is either the better or the worse for the accident.

And so it was on this occasion: I slept until I awoke, and when I awoke I was wide awake and ready to enjoy myself. One yawn and one stretch put all my faculties on the alert, and I realized that life was good, and that the last traces of my recent madness had left me. I forgot all about the loss of my late companion, and sallied forth to see into what new country my frenzied march had led me. I wonder what you would have done first if you had suddenly found yourself in quite a strange

place. Would you have sat down and squealed because you had lost your mammy, or because you did not know where in the world you were? I do not think so: you would have done pretty much what I did, and that was to poke my nose out of the hole and sniff in the fresh air of a sweet May morning, and then, after one look round to see that there were no enemies within reach, to take a rush and a jump into the clear stream, and swim across into the thick fringe of grass and young sedge on the further side. Then you would have taken a morning drink just to drive away the last fumes of a long sleep, if, like me, you cannot drink while you are swimming.

I wonder why one always wants to get to the other side. I must run away from my story for a moment: I have been so very good lately that you will forgive me just this once, won't you? I suppose that you always find that the nicest things grow just out of reach on the other side of something, even as I do, so you will perhaps be able to help me to discover why it is. Perhaps it matters less for me than for you, because I can generally get there somehow; I can swim a stream, and I can creep through a hole. When you want to gather some forget-me-nots or some marsh-marigolds, there

is generally a stream in the way, whereas when I see some delicious watercresses on the wrong side, I can just flop into the water and swim over to them. When you want some strawberry jam there is very often a locked cupboard-door in the way, and you are obliged to go without and make the best of plain bread-and-butter, while I, when I want to go into the larder, either creep under the door or find a hole somewhere. And if no other rat has ever made a hole, then I set to work and make one for the benefit of myself and of posterity.

There is no doubt, I think, of the truth of all that, but I do want to know why it should be so. I have tried walking on the other side of the stream, because I thought that perhaps someone else had been going just in front of me, and had got all the nice things on my side (that is another thing that I should like to ask you about, only I have not time—why there is nearly always someone else in front) but it made no difference at all. When I changed sides, all the nicest things had jumped across to the bank from which I had just come, and were cuddling up against one another there as happily as possible. I was not such a fool as to go on swimming across that stream backwards and forwards all day, only to find that what I wanted

had always taken a jump just as I did my swim, so I set to work and ate whatever I could find nicest on my own side : and that is the advice that I would give you.

At other times I wondered whether somebody had done it on purpose, and had put things just out of our reach, in order to teach us to try hard to get them for ourselves, and to contrive to grasp even what seemed to be out of reach, just as a bird teaches her young ones to fly by holding some nice insect in her beak on the next branch first, and then on the next tree. But I gave up that idea, because I think that I should learn to swim and to gnaw holes without any teaching, just as you would learn to jump and to climb walls, even if there were glass on the top, without the necessity of there being apples growing on the other side as a bribe. We both do it because we like the excitement and the exercise, even if there is nothing to gain by it. So that reason will not do.

My own idea is that we can neither of us see what is just under our feet, and that we have to retire to a certain distance in order to obtain a clear view. That would also explain why we are so discontented, why we are never satisfied with what we possess already, why we are always wishing

that we could have something over again, why we are always dreaming of what we are going to enjoy so greatly to-morrow, which is the wrong road to happiness.

Anyway, I believe that this was the reason why I at once swam over to the other side of the stream, because I wanted to get a good look at the position of the hole in which I had slept. I had thoughts of making it my home during my stay on the banks of that merry stream ; but when I had enjoyed my simple breakfast, I came to the conclusion that I did not like the look of it. It was so exactly the place in which one would expect to find a rat. I should make a splendid rat-catcher if I were a man : I seem to know so well the sort of places which a rat would choose for his home. Personally, I always try to select the most unlikely place possible—I hate to have people prying about my doors. The finish of a hedgerow is never a very advisable habitation : weasels come working along, and always expect to get their dinner at the end of their walk ; there are usually two or three strong branches sticking out, which are bound to attract hawks and owls, who will sit on them and watch for hours. And if a heron were to come to the stream for fish, I know that he would be sure to sit under

the shelter of that hedge, and herons are most dangerous birds; they can split a rat's skull with a tap of that great beak, and will split it, too, if you come anywhere near to them. Nor is it always easy to avoid them, with those great long legs of theirs, looking exactly like two pieces of stick, as you come swimming in to the bank, and their plumage, especially when you see it from under water, exactly the colour of a cloud in the sky; and all well-trained rats, whether they be water-rats or land-rats, approach a bank under water unless they see that the coast is quite clear. You may say good-bye to life if once you come within reach of a heron's beak.

Having thus condemned my temporary dwelling-place as unsuitable for a permanent residence, my next business was to find a really safe site for a home, as I intended to make rather a lengthy stay. What I had in my eye was a place where I could make myself thoroughly comfortable, and at the same time where no one would think of looking for a rat. The latter was the more important consideration of the two, for when you once get underground you can make yourself pretty comfortable anywhere, if only you will take the trouble to dig well and carry in plenty of bedding. The great thing is to

have a well-hidden entrance, and ground whereon you will leave as few traces of your presence in the way of footprints as possible. That is where my cousins the water-rats show themselves so wise, for they make their front-door under the water. The weak point of their arrangements is that they will insist on having a back-door as well on the upper part of the bank, which shows their enemies where to look for the front-door.

I saw a clever pair of dogs one day catch several of my cousins, and, though I was very sorry for my own relations, I could not help feeling that they had brought the trouble upon themselves by making that silly back-door; also it was impossible not to admire the way in which the two dogs set about their work. I trust that I can admire true genius, even in an enemy. When they had found that tell-tale back entrance, one of them stayed there while the other ran down the bank to the edge of the water. Then, when all was ready, the gentleman at the top knocked very hard at the back-door—that is to say, he put his nose into the hole and blew through his nostrils and snorted, and then began to scratch with all his might and to bite out great lumps of sod with his teeth.

This naturally frightened the inhabitant of the

house, who thought that robbers had come, so he tried to bolt out of the front-door and swim away out of danger; but before he could swim two strokes the other dog put his head under water and had him. It was a very clever bit of work, and, as I was not concerned in it, I could admire it from a distance.

To return to my search for a house. I wandered downstream for the greater part of the day—why I went down in preference to up stream I cannot exactly say, unless it was because the water was all going that way, and so it seemed the easier direction—and at last I came to a place where there was a sort of sluice-gate, which dammed the course of the stream, except where the water came through the cracks in big spurts and little spurts, for it was an old gate, and the folding-doors did not fit very well.

Below the gate the banks had been boarded in with strong planks, to prevent the stream from washing the earth away whenever the gates were opened. I never saw them opened all the time that I was there, but I suppose that it did happen sometimes, or else why take the trouble to make folding-doors? I rather wanted to see them open, so as to be able to tell how high the water would



I SAW AT ONCE THAT I HAD FOUND THE RIGHT PLACE.



rise when this took place, for I did not want to get my bed drenched through and through. I should have been obliged to pull it all out and to make a new one, as it would never have dried underground.

I saw at once that I had found the right place. For one thing I am fond of music, and the little jets of water that forced their way through the cracks and fell into the deep pool on the other side played a very pretty tune, which went on all day and all night, but was never somehow quite the same at any time, so that I never grew tired of it. I know good music when I hear it. There was a piper once whom all the rats followed, at a place called Hamelin—but you know that story already. Also I found that I could walk straight out of the water behind the boarding along a little pathway of pebbles, so that there was no fear of leaving footprints. I expected to find a colony of water-rats already established behind the woodwork, and to have to fight hard for the right of making my home there; and an old buck water-rat is no mean antagonist, though he is generally too fat to make a first-class fighter. But to my delight I found the whole place unoccupied; I suppose that it would not have been easy to make those silly back-doors. The earth had

fallen down a little way from the woodwork, so that there was a path leading upwards behind the boards as far as I cared to go. Luckily, I could see traces of water for a certain distance, and so I knew exactly how far to go, after all, so as to be safe from a flood, though, as I have said, it did not matter, because the gates were never opened. I only mention the circumstance to show you how easy it is to judge where to begin to build, or rather dig.

When I got as high up the slope as I cared to go, I burrowed inwards behind a tree-root, which came wriggling down through the earth and alongside of the boards, and I excavated a spacious dwelling-place, letting the earth fall down the slope behind the woodwork, so that I left no traces of digging to betray me. Then I enjoyed two whole days of real happiness in collecting a bed for myself. I have been carefully taught the proverb that, as you make your bed, so you lie upon it; and inasmuch as I was determined to lie soft for awhile after my long wanderings, I was very careful indeed in the selection of my materials.

I was always rather fond of bed-making, and it was just the right time of the year for such an occupation, as others besides myself seemed to realize. A

pair of kingfishers were hard at work on the opposite bank in a situation very similar to the one which I had chosen ; and a fine handsome pair of birds they were, with their steely-blue backs and their pinafores of dusky red, showing a white frock underneath at the throat. I admired their costume far more than their views as to what was comfortable material. Never once did I see them take what I should call comfortable stuff for bedding ; but a drowned cat had come to its last anchorage somewhere under their bank—many weeks before my arrival, I should say—and they were busy every day over its remains, fussing about backwards and forwards between it and their hole. It was a great deal too far gone to be of any use to me when I went to inspect it, and I could not think how they contrived to find anything to eat on it. So one day I asked them what on earth they were getting off it. ‘Nothing on earth,’ they replied, ‘but plenty on water.’ I implored them not to be so witty, and eventually made out from their very erratic conversation that they made the greater part of their nest out of the fish-bones which they themselves disgorged, but that the smaller bones, which they extracted out of what had once been pussy-cat, made an excellent foundation.

‘Nasty messy pigs!’ I called them, and they told me to mind my own business, so I took their advice, and set to work to make myself as happy and comfortable as possible. But how I did it, and what I did, will take a good deal of telling, so I had better bid you adieu for a few moments while I collect my wandering thoughts.

## VII

### 'BY STREAM AND RIVER'

I BELIEVE, unless my memory plays me false, that I left myself making my bed, and a very jolly occupation it was. Your beds are dull affairs—just a rummage of sheets and blankets, with a pillow and a bolster—and you get none of the fun of finding them nor of making them for yourselves; not many of you, at any rate, though I did once meet a thoroughly sensible human being, as you will find out in due time, if you continue to listen to what I have to say.

I was not going to hurry myself over so pleasant a task, you bet. Perhaps that is rather a rude expression; I learnt it from a chum of mine who took a trip over to America and back; but as he will want a whole chapter to himself, I must not talk about him now. At any rate, there is no need for you to add the expression, which I used quite by accident, I assure you, to the choice list which you already possess.

As I was saying—only I seem to be unable to get up steam just at first—*you bet* I did not mean to hurry myself. The nights were warm for May, and I did not want a very big bed. I made a big one in the end, it is true, but that was only because I did so enjoy the making of it; I very often never slept in it at all. All animals, birds especially, love to build houses just for the fun of the thing. I know a good deal about birds; I am very fond of watching them. They are all of them difficult to catch, but very good to eat when you do have the luck to capture one unexpectedly, and eggs are just delicious. I wish that you could see me carry an egg downstairs. I dare say that you can hardly believe me capable of taking a hen's egg downstairs, and of carrying it to my hole. But I assure you that I have done it, though perhaps 'carrying' is hardly the right word, because, of course, I can never catch hold of it with my mouth. There is no doubt that I can get it there eventually. This is the process in case you never have the luck to see the performance yourself. When I reach the top of the stairs, after having rolled the egg so far by pushing it with my nose, like a dog playing football, I clasp it close to my stomach with all my paws, and then come down the

first stair 'bump' on to my back. It hurts a little, but is well worth the pain. No really good game can be played without a certain amount of pain.

That is the way to get down one stair, and you can easily see for yourself that you have only to roll the egg to the edge of the next one, and repeat the 'bump,' in order to reach the bottom of the flight. After that it is merely a matter of pushing past or over various obstacles. Of course, one is bound to feel somewhat sore at the end of the journey, but, as I say, the pleasure is well worth the pain, and if you do happen to break the egg on the way, you can always set to work and eat it up at once, and so carry it inside you, all but the shell, which is of no use to anybody. If you wonder why one should take all that trouble—why not eat the egg at once and have done with it—I can only appeal to your own experience that one nice meal eaten comfortably at home is worth ten eaten elsewhere.

Dear, oh dear! I am dropping back into my old silly way of wandering from the point; I did think that I had cured myself, but one never knows: old habits will keep on cropping up. Would you kindly oblige a poor old rat by telling him what he was talking about? I know, without your help. Eggs

first, and birds behind that. Work backwards if you want to reach the beginning. Well, as I was saying, there is no doubt that birds do enjoy the labour of constructing a dwelling-place. I have seen Jenny Wren's husband very hard at work making a nest for himself—and a pretty difficult nest it is to build, too, I fancy—while his wife had chosen a different situation entirely. They had evidently had a bit of a quarrel, and, like wise little folks, had each gone their own way. But when it came to be a question of which nest was to be the real home, *I* know where the eggs were laid, because I happened to get the young ones for my dinner. I could not possibly have got them if they had been in *his* house, so I think that we may act as umpires—though it is a dangerous thing to interfere between husband and wife—and say that he chose the better place; but I very much doubt whether he knew that when he began to build. My own idea is that he only wanted something to do. He had quarrelled, and he was not going to confess himself in the wrong; but he found the time to hang very heavily on his hands without his little wife, so he set to work to collect dead leaves and moss, and made up his mind to build a really fine nest for himself, partly because he honestly

enjoyed it, and partly because he wanted to show her that he was just as good a builder as she was. There was a great deal of angry talk when I helped myself to the young ones, but their voices were so high and squeaky that I could not very well hear what was being said with my head and ears stuck right into a bag of moss lined with warm feathers. I gathered, however, that, among a good deal of very strong abuse of myself, various remarks were made about the position of the nest. I distinctly heard someone say, ‘I knew that my place was the best,’ and I could guess who said it.

I know very well that if I had had a wife at the time she could not possibly have made things more comfortable than I did. In the first place, she would have been far too full of hurry and bustle to please me; and, in the second place, the bed would have been far too stuffy and feathery. The whole summer was mine, and no one seemed disposed to hurt or annoy me, so I just took my time and put in a bit more every day, poking about to find the very best material hidden away at the roots of cool green rushes and sedge. Unless you have ever tried it, you have no idea how jolly it is to feel your bed growing a tiny bit bigger every day. When I felt too hot—and the

summer was a warm one—I took a swim in the beautiful clear water, and chased the little spotted trouties for the sake of exercise. Fine exercise it was, too, though they were a bit too quick for me, and I never actually contrived to catch one. I very nearly did one day, when a gay little sportsman thought that he could put me off the scent by plunging into a beautiful forest of wavy green weed. How I burrowed in after him until I was in the middle of a wilderness of emeralds! Unfortunately, I lost my wind just at the critical moment, and was compelled to come up to the surface for a breath of fresh air. I did not disentangle myself from the rather clinging embrace of those weeds any too soon, either, and when I went back to finish off my victim, with my poor lungs plentifully supplied with air, lo and behold! he was not a victim at all, for he had gone and bolted. ‘Not playing the game fair,’ I said to myself.

I had much better fun with the crayfish in the pool below the sluice-gates, and when I found that I had nice little fresh-water lobsters ready to be caught at my very doors, I congratulated myself more than ever on the skill with which I had chosen my new dwelling-place. They were not

hard to catch, and the pool was full of them when I first arrived. I cannot say conscientiously that it was quite so full when I went away, but I rather fancy that I left one or two to breed for the following year. There was one fat fellow, at any rate, who always retreated into a deep hole in the brickwork of the gate; I am not quite sure that I did not get him on the last day of my stay. It was a very juicy specimen, at any rate, and I trusted that it was my fat enemy just for the sake of old acquaintance; I could hardly bear the thought of leaving him behind: he was so stout and cosy, and always retreated so coyly into his hole.

Even if I did rather thin them down, no doubt plenty more would come, for the pool was an ideal one for them, full of big stones, with an old kettle or two, and other nice odds and ends thrown in to serve as hiding-places for them. I am afraid that their hiding-places were rather death-traps when I dived into the water to get my breakfast every morning. I could not quite make out at first what the queer creatures were crawling about the bottom, and taking snappy sort of backward swims from stone to stone; however, a rat is not the man to hesitate long when it is a question of something to eat, and I soon summoned up courage

to haul one out from under his stone, by what ought to have been the scruff of his neck, only he hardly had anything worth calling a neck. How he kicked and wriggled when I said, 'Come along with me, young fellow, behind those nice boards!' I soon stopped *that* when I got my big front teeth to work; his shell was not so very crackly, and I knew almost at once that I was going to like him. One good bite killed him, and then I ate him out of house and home, if you can call his shell his house. My word! he *was* good, and when I had finished off my meal with a few delicious water-cresses, I felt that I had much reason to be contented with my humble lot.

I never got tired of this item of my varied menu, but variety is always pleasing, as a cousin of mine once said when he married his seventeenth wife, and so I went searching about the banks pretty promiscuously day after day, and picked up many pleasing trifles. A pair of fat water-hens had built a great clumsy nest in a bed of rushes, and I soon clambered into that. There, to my joy, I found eight fine spotted eggs, all nice and warm, for the old lady had just begun to sit on them, and only left the nest over one side of it as I came climbing up the other side. She was wise, for I should

certainly have had a try at her if she had stayed. I have no doubt that she would have tasted quite nice if I could only have got my teeth into her neck. However, I did not, and she and her husband made a hideous noise in the rushes. I did not particularly mind their abuse, though they pitched it pretty strong—my skin is fairly tough ; but I object to noise on principle, as you never can tell who may come, like a policeman, to see what is the matter. There are too many policemen in the world to suit my taste, and they all seem to have their evil eye on me, from the stately game-keeper down to the meanest little weasel or small boy.

I judged it wise, therefore, not to stay too long, so I tipped one of the eggs over the edge of the nest, thinking that I could easily float it to the bank. And would you believe it ? the silly thing sank. I did not know then that eggs sink when they are fresh, and only float when they have been sat on for a long time. Now, I can never quite make up my mind whether it is better to take them when they are nice and fresh, in which condition I certainly prefer them, and to have all the trouble of pushing them along the bottom, or whether I prefer to wait and float them in easily,

and then to eat a thing which is half egg and half chicken. Which would you rather do ?

Anyway, I went after that one, and worried it along the bed of the stream, in and out of the stems of the rushes. Luckily, the bank was near at hand, and the bottom was pretty smooth. If there had been a lot of weeds, I should have had no end of a long job. Even as it was, I had to come up twice for breath before I got it to the bank ; but I was not going to give it up, when it looked so round and fat and full of good food. My troubles were not quite ended even then, for the bank was too steep, and I was compelled to work my prize along for some time before I could find a suitable place to land it. But at last I got it nicely located behind a big tuft of grass, to act as a screen. It was, unfortunately, quite cold by this time, which was a great pity, but I think that I enjoyed it all the more for my hard work.

I had another on the following day, and then the silly old bird deserted her nest, so that in the future there was no need, by reason of the noisy abuse, to take the eggs to the bank. I could just sit at my leisure in the nest and eat them in peace and quietness. I suppose that the pair of noisy birds made another nest somewhere, for after about three weeks they appeared with a brood of little fluffy black

chickens, one or two of which made a dainty addition to my larder, as did also some young wild ducks, who turned up one day among the rushes from somewhere inland. I was not allowed many out of either brood, for their fidgety parents made a great fuss when they began to disappear, and carried them off miles downstream. It was a great disappointment to me when they vanished; I was taking them so carefully and quietly that I did not think that they could possibly be missed, and they were very delicious.

One day I tried a frog, and he was not bad, though nothing to rave about—rather cold and insipid, but he reminded me a little of young chicken. A squirmy eel was much better—full of oil and flavour. He and I happened to take a walk on the same night. I wonder if he had any shadowy presentiment that it was to be his last! There was a small pond, lying just across one meadow, where I hoped that I might pick up something succulent, but I never expected to pick up such a delicacy as an eel. I had been fancying dainty trifles for several days, just as you fancy a jelly. I overtook him about halfway across the field, toiling laboriously over the grass. For one horrid moment I thought that he was a snake, but I saw the moon-

shine on his slimy trail, and then I knew that I was in for a good thing.

‘Good-evening, my friend,’ I said politely. I could afford to be polite under the circumstances. He heaved a sigh (his very voice was oily), and replied that he supposed that it was so, but that the way was very long and weary.

‘I shan’t be there for an hour or more,’ he groaned, ‘and they told me that it was only a step, and that there was blue mud, soft and squishy and wholly delicious.’

‘You will not,’ I hissed back at him; ‘you will never see that mud.’

He seemed to read my meaning in my voice, for he turned and faced me like a man. I was hungry, and I went for him straight, and—would you believe it?—the beggar had the cheek to bite me—to bite *me*, if you please, with his silly little teeth.

‘Drop it, you fool!’ I snarled, for he hurt me, and just for half a second it was a case of—

‘We’d both be blown  
If we’d be stowed  
In the other chap’s hold, you see.’

But he never really had a chance. I had him in half before he could wriggle round me and spoil my nice coat with his nasty slime. And half of him I

ate then and there, with the pale moon gleaming on his silver sides. I echoed the last words that he had spoken, ‘wholly delicious,’ as I munched his oily flesh. I declare that I felt almost poetical. The other half I carried off to my den, and on the following day I found him so good and satisfying that I quite forgot to harry the crayfish in the pool, for which I hope that they were duly thankful.

Other dwellers by the banks of that stream besides myself were fond of eels. I was pottering about cautiously in the still twilight of a June evening, when I heard a slight noise in the water behind me. Now, noises behind your back are never to be disregarded, so I whisked round pretty quickly, and I saw emerge cautiously from the water what I took at first glance to be the biggest and ugliest rat that I had ever beheld. His nose was blunt and his tail was hairy, and between his jaws wriggled as fine an eel as I ever want to see.

After one cautious look round, he squatted down among the long grass and began to devour his prey, and as his head was towards me I could see at a glance, from his teeth, that he was no member of my family. His *long* teeth were not at the front of his mouth like mine, but one on each side, like those of a weasel or a cat. So I knew that he was

no friend from whom I might beg, borrow, or steal a bit of food, but an enemy—perhaps even a deadly enemy—and that it behoved me to lie low. He made very short work of that eel, and I was not at all sorry to see him lick his lips and swim away downstream, rolling over and over two or three times in the water from sheer joy at having fed so well.

I know now that he was an otter, and a fine one too, and that I need not have been so very frightened, for as long as there are eels and other fish for him to catch he does not bother his ugly flat head about rats. Still, I should always distrust a beggar with such teeth as shone in his mouth. He must have been pretty hungry, because when I sneaked off to the place where he had been crouching to look for scraps there was nothing but a little slime and a very delicious smell of eel, mingled with a very disgusting smell of otter. He never came so far upstream again, but I saw him and his mate and others of his kind when I went away downstream myself.

The cause of my going was as follows: there came one day to the stream another wanderer, who, like myself, was a relic of the late migration, and who had drifted along the same current which

had brought me to my present haven of rest ; and a very good fellow he was, just the kind of rat to suit my taste—full of fun, ready for any adventure, clever and handy with his teeth, and possessed of a ready wit in time of danger. I took him to my heart at once, and helped him to excavate a dwelling alongside of mine—in fact, we joined the two by a passage in case of danger. And for many days all went well ; we were inseparable. Side by side we wandered about that grassy wilderness, where the nettles and water-plants now grew tall and rank, and stroke for stroke we clove our way through the transparent current, while the water-weeds swept our lean flanks. We were in fine training for lack of corn, as supple and sinewy as a pair of greyhounds.

And then discord came, not with a golden apple, but in the shape of a mean little, skinny slip of a girl—a girl-rat, I mean—with an evil eye. No beauty nor grace had she to boast of, and yet, just for the sake of her sickly little smile, and because she was what she was, and because the young summer was in their blood, too honest gentlemen must needs fall out and fight. And even as we fought, and as the lust for battle kindled in our hearts, we realized that one or other of us must die

by reason of the invincible courage that was in us, and I vowed that, rather than leave my friend to the doom of such a wife, I would see him stretched lifeless at my feet and marry her myself, knowing full well that the bitterness of the marriage would be ample atonement for the murder.

And so it fell out, for luck gave me the advantage of him, and a sudden shift of grip sent my teeth home in his wiry throat, and even as I clenched my jaws I saw the death-film steal over the lustrous black of his beady eye, and when I loosed my hold he fell away from me a corpse, and the river received him and carried him away among the other flotsam and jetsam that at times encumbered its rippling current, to make food for who knows what lowly and unseemly forms of life.

Well, he died in fair fight, and I, the survivor, endured for some days to share my home with my new bride, my home and his. But the crayfish were failing in the pool, and the memory of my lost friend seemed to hang about the little bays and headlands, so, with few adieus spoken and no tears shed, for she had but the heart of a slug, I left the wife who had cost me the price of a true friend, and set forth once more upon my travels downstream.

It was a very pleasant fairyland through which I passed, but I never felt more like an uprooted plant, so to speak, in my life. I had come to love my cosy retreat behind those boards as I had never loved any of my previous habitations, and a feeling of security had grown upon me, which is the real essence of a rat's happiness. Many a bold deed I performed during my wanderings, and one or two of which, alas! I am ashamed. Funny, isn't it? how a bold deed of your own doing makes you happy and comfortable as soon as ever you have done it, while a shady action only begins to make you feel cold and uncomfortable quite a long time afterwards. I can remember so well now how I killed and ate some young reed warblers, though I thought very little of it at the time. It was really a brutal deed, for I cannot plead any bitter pangs of hunger as an excuse. All I can say is that there was some temporary provocation.

I was passing quietly enough through a thick bed of reeds, with willow stumps growing among them at intervals. It was a jolly bit of country, and I was basking in the cool green sunlight, and listening to the warm wind as it rubbed the stems of the reeds one against the other, make a noise like 'ssh-ssh,' so that you felt as if you wanted to

go to sleep at once, when suddenly a squeaky little voice above my head began to call me the most hideous names that you can possibly imagine. I was more than shocked: I was angry. 'You sinful little heathen!' I began (I always measure my words very carefully when I am in a rage), but I had no chance of saying much more, because his wife joined in, and no man can hope to argue against a woman; but my temper went on simmering till it began to boil.

Then I made out that they had got a nest perched up among the reeds, and instead of realizing that they had some right to be fidgety and abusive, and instead of admiring the beautiful way in which they had taken four reed-stems and woven the nest round them, so as to make a beautiful swinging cradle for their family (rather like the nest of the field-mouse among the corn), I began to think of how I might answer their savage words by a savage deed. And so I set to work to gnaw through the four stems which supported the nest, while the abuse of the unhappy birds changed to sorrow and lamentation, as they realized that a great trouble was coming upon them.

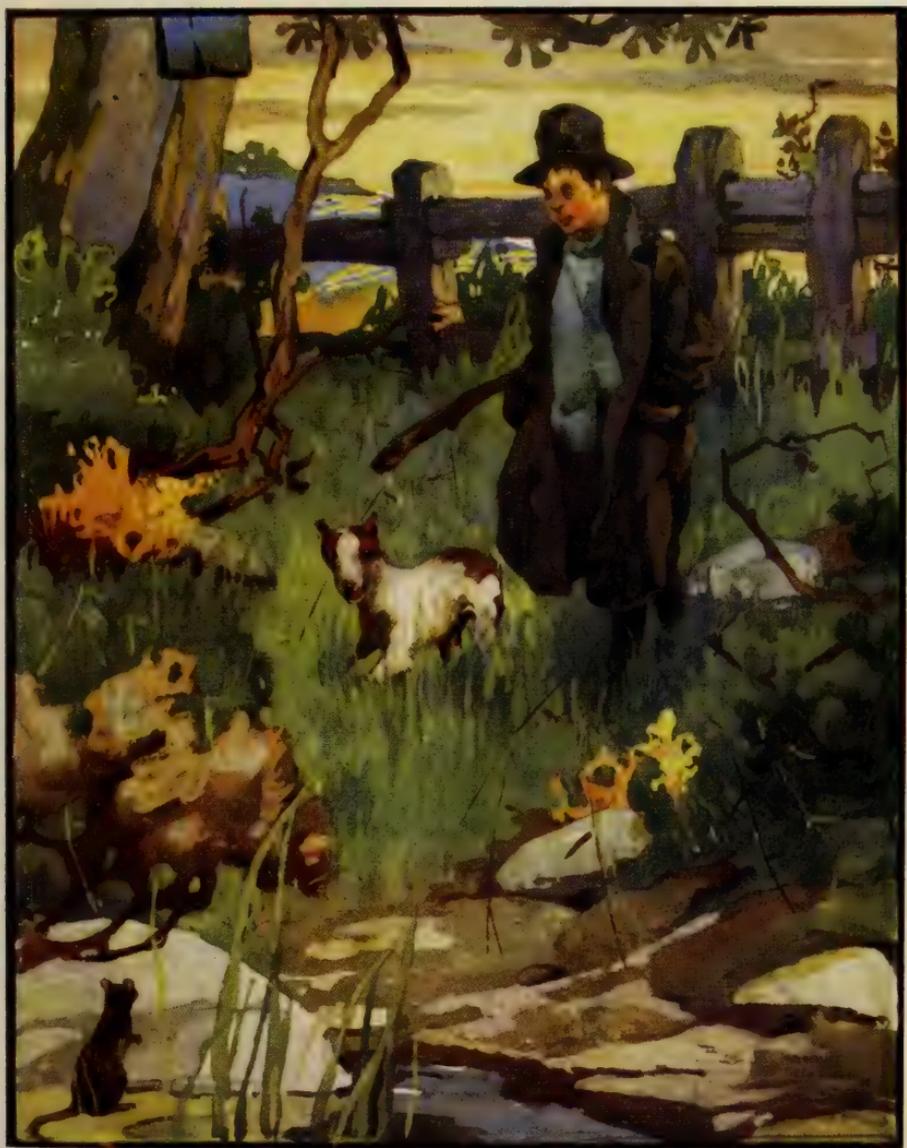
One stem went without making any difference; two stems went, and the nest began to heel over;

three stems went, and the remaining reed bowed its tall head beneath the weight of the nest and its young brood, and then one cut of my sharp teeth brought the whole thing down to the ground. ‘When the bough breaks the cradle will fall!’ I shouted, as I saw four young innocents at my mercy; and small enough mercy it was, though I ate them quick. But as I look back upon the deed I cannot help feeling that the provocation was insufficient, and that I might well have passed on my way and spared.

I passed on my way, at any rate, and retribution nearly overtook me in the form of a small boy and a white terrier dog—a breed which I have small cause to love. The latter dislodged me from the bank where I was resting, and pursued me right into the stream, while the latter yelled, ‘Good dawg! fetch him out!’ Luckily, I leave very little scent in the water, but after diving under my pursuer two or three times I became so exhausted that I could do little more than drift downstream. The stream, however, took me towards the further bank, the dog was a bit of a fool, the boy lacked the pluck to wade across and direct operations, so I made good my escape into an osier-bed, and much pleased I was to hear the dog get soundly

rated for his clumsiness, when he at last gave up the search and swam back to his young master.

And so I journeyed on for many days, doing both good and evil—ay, and suffering both—even as the best of us are liable to journey and to suffer, and if I got much enjoyment from the good and small sorrow from the evil—well, I am but a rat, and I have short enough time for joy, and all too short a time for sorrow. And at last I came to what I thought must be the sea, so wide it was and so majestic its waters, but soon I realized that it was only a great and splendid stream—my own stream (for so I called the pleasant waters which I had now left)—my own stream glorified and magnified tenfold. Boatload after boatload of gaily-decked men and women passed before my eyes, old men and maidens, young men and children, until I thought that I must have wandered even to the river of life, which rises in the unknown and empties its waters into the unknowable. And at intervals came strange engines, which snorted and throbbed, and sent the wash of their wake rippling along the banks, while the dwellers in the boats expressed their disapproval with greater or with less directness. It was indeed a merry sight and merry hearing.



RETRIBUTION NEARLY OVERTOOK ME.



And at a cable's length from the bank, whereon I had stood amazed at the sight, was anchored a floating house gaily decked out with flowers and paint of many colours, and from the open windows thereof came the strains of light music and the savour of much good food. And as my stomach fell a-craving for the taste once more of the food of man, I resolved that there I would stay and pitch my camp, in the hope that when night should fall I might be able to make my way by some means into the storehouse of dainties which lay floating so gaily within smelling distance. What I can smell I can generally contrive to reach somehow, if it seems to me safe and profitable to do so.

I was a trifle disconcerted, when I descended the bank, to find that many rats had already taken up their abode there. It was now a long time since I had enjoyed the society of my fellows in any considerable number, and I began to wonder whether my manners would pass muster, or whether the rust of solitude had gathered upon them. How would my sudden appearance be received? Should I be rent in pieces as an intruder, or welcomed as a friend? I was not left for long in doubt, as two or three members of the colony soon put in an

appearance, and their welcome was, on the whole, satisfactory. I do not say that I was at once embraced and invited underground—that would have been too much to expect—but I was given to understand, with reasonable civility, that I might dig a hole for myself, and become a new member of the community, with full rights and privileges.

I wagged my tail, and said ‘Thank you’ in my politest manner, and was lucky enough to find a hole which had been commenced and then abandoned, so that I could get out of sight at once. Such a hole generally means that an accident has befallen the original prospector, and some rats consider it unlucky to continue the work, preferring to begin in a new place. But these foolish superstitions were never in my line, and I accepted my predecessor’s work with gratitude, and soon made myself pretty comfortable.

Night fell very slowly—all too slowly for my growing appetite. Gradually the glow of sunset faded off the face of the waters, and the shadows gathered thicker and thicker under the branches of the willows, which lined the bank with a broad fringe of green, while the big fish came and sucked down the white moths which hovered and flickered from bank to bank and from branch to branch.

And as I watched the fat fishes revelling in their evening meal my stomach pinched me more and more, till waiting was an actual and physical pain. Such an appetite as I had was well worth keeping unspoiled, but when a large moth blundered almost into my mouth I could not help utilizing him as a modest quencher, so to speak. He was not very nice, and I hoped that Providence would not send me any more.

Slowly the hours passed by ; I could hear them sounding along the river, above the sleepy whisper of the water, from some distant church, and still I sat and waited. The rest of the colony had vanished along the banks this way and that—all but one gray-nosed veteran, who sat at the mouth of his hole and made an elaborate toilet, licking and nibbling at his grizzly coat. Of him I learnt that some had gone in quest of scraps left on the bank by such of the revellers as had landed to eat their lunch or tea, while others had crossed the water to a small island in mid-stream, whereon a couple of gay young fellows had pitched their tent, and were living for a while the life of their savage ancestors.

When I ventured to hint that there might be better stuff nearer at hand, to be had without the dangers of a long journey, he looked rather sur-

prised to find such wisdom in one so young, and, after a moment's hesitation—I wondered whether he was saying to himself, 'Enough for one, enough for two,' or whether he was making up his mind to murder me then and there—he came over to me, not to devour me on the spot, as I feared at first, but to whisper that the house-boat was moored to the bank by two taut ropes, and that he preferred the one nearer to the stern.

It was a brilliant idea and worthy of his aged brain, and when at last a boatload of visitors rowed leisurely away up the path of the moonlight on the waters, leaving patches of inky blackness where their oars broke the silvery surface, and when one by one the lights went out, and at last silence settled down thick and heavy upon the slumbering boat, we slipped over those straining cables and leapt lightly on deck. Tom Tiddler must have been the owner's name, for, indeed, there was much to be had for the picking up, and I overate myself, like a schoolboy home for the holidays, till, when the time came to depart, I could scarcely crawl back to my new home under the willows.

You might well fancy that the rest of my life would have been spent in this land of plenty; but, alas! there is very little rest in my life, and it was

not so very long before I was once more on the move. The other members of the colony began to find their way along the ropes in such numbers that the inhabitants of the house-boat were driven to undertake a crusade, and those of us who survived became wanderers upon the face of the earth once more. We haunted the merry banks of the river till the approach of autumn began to gild the fields, and then we gradually worked our way inland, and betook ourselves again to the harvest-fields and the stacks. My old gray-nosed friend never left the river. A unique fate befell him, for he was snapped up one evening by a monstrous trout as he swam across a quiet backwater. It was no pike that took him, for I saw the spots. I could not help getting all too good a view of them, as we were swimming side by side, he and I, when the evil giant chose the bigger and the tougher victim. From the earliest days Fate seems to have determined that solitude should be my lot, and I am not ungrateful, for in this, as in other cases, the death of a friend has meant the life of me. We cannot all be solitary survivors, and I am quite content when the lot falls upon me to remain.

## VIII

### ‘ A TRAVELLER’S TALES ’

I BELIEVE that I promised to tell you some of the stories which my friend of the riverside told me. He tried, of course, to make out that everything had happened to himself, but I knew better than to believe him implicitly. I dare say that you think that *I* have gone through a good deal in the way of adventures, and so I have, and I can guarantee, in case you may think that I also am fitting the experiences of others on to my own shoulders, that every word of the preceding narrative is true, as I have told it. But as for this shameless and unblushing friend of mine—well, considering that our lives are limited to a small number of years, and that he was not by any manner of means an old rat, all I can say is that, even if he could have survived the perils through which he must have passed, he could not possibly have seen all the sights or done all the deeds to which he laid claim in the time. I do not think that he was

naturally an untruthful rat, but I suppose that he thought that the story of adventure would be more interesting if he told it all as having happened to himself. Personally, I dare say that I did enjoy it more when told in this way ; but I cannot quite bring myself to try to make *you* believe that the adventures which I am about to relate are my own : you would only laugh at me, and it is nonsense to pretend, when there is no chance of your pretence being believed.

He was a clever rat, and he told his stories well, and I can only wish that you had heard them from his own lips. But, as you did not happen to be there, I must do the best I can. What I do wish you quite to understand is that, though probably not true of him, they may well be absolutely true of some other rat or rats, however strange they may seem to you. He was not an untruthful rat in that kind of way.

He told me that he began life in a London sewer. The whole of London, and Paris as well, according to his account, is undermined by enormous sewers, so big that even men can walk about in them. He declared that he was quite familiar with the underground life of both cities. I asked him whether he had swum the Channel,

and he looked for a moment as if he were going to declare that he had, but he thought better of it, and only professed to have crossed from London in a ship. I did not know enough of French geography to question him as to how he made his way from the sewers of London to the sewers of Paris, much as I should like to have done so ; but I did ask him why in the world he had gone messing about in sewers, when he might have lived a clean and healthy life in the country, and he was rather angry, and told me that I need not swagger about being a country gentleman : somebody had to be born in the slums, and honest rats were as common in one place as in the other. I professed myself quite willing to accept his statement, and implored him to keep calm, and to describe to me the life which he had lived. Were there traps, and did the men carry sticks and bring their dogs underground with them ?

‘Yes, there were traps,’ he replied—‘cage-traps to catch the rats alive, because they were so big and savage that people were willing to pay a high price for them in order to test the courage of their dogs.’ Young gentlemen in London, it appeared, turned the rats loose in their rooms, after rolling up the curtains for fear that they should run up

these and escape their pursuers for a while, and then set a dog to hunt them. The only objection to them was that their teeth were very liable to be poisonous, like the teeth of the kennel-rats, about whom I told you in a previous chapter.

Apart from the inevitable accident of getting trapped, the life of the sewers seems to be a merry one. Needless to say, there are no owls about or hawks or weasels to bother you. You have a whole underground world to yourselves—a world of dark and gloomy tunnels, it is true, but, still, a merry one, where races may be run, and where an agile climber can take his fill of that fascinating amusement. My friend tried hard to persuade me to make trial of it, and assured me that I should never abandon it when once I had fallen a victim to its mysterious fascination. He even painted for my benefit pictures of grim battles fought out underground for the possession of some especially charming wife, and for a moment I confess that I was tempted ; I always hanker after a good fight, and I had not then so deep an experience of the trials and troubles of married life as have since fallen to my lot. But when I began to think it over I came to the conclusion that no pleasures of town society could compensate me for the loss of

the blue sky overhead, for the absence of the wind whistling through the branches of the trees, or sighing and whispering in the summer leaves, for the humming of the bees, and the joys of riverside and cornfield or well-stocked barn, all of which I should have to forego—and for what, after all? Just for the wild life of the slums, for the mysteries of dark and endless tunnels, for mazes and labyrinths of brickwork, for roosting *camaraderie* and good fellowship. No! never would I turn my back on the fields which I loved so well, and I thrust the gaudy fancies from my mind. If the whole truth must out, I believe that the very absence of danger weighed not a little in the opposite scale. When you have lived for a long time in the presence of enemies, you come to look forward with something akin to eager interest to what the day or night may bring forth. When you have once baffled the hungry hunters by superior cunning, or speed of foot, or quickness of eye, or keenness of scent, or even grip of savage tooth in soft flesh, you come to take an honest pride in your achievements, and the quick moment of death, when it comes, as come it must one day, I suppose, only gives you time for a flash of wonder as to how it has come to pass, after all, that your

swiftness and cunning have failed you at the last.

That is the only excuse which I have to offer for not being able to describe to you at first-hand the underground life which some rats lead so gaily. There are many ‘might have beens’ in my life, upon which I look back with more or less regret, but this is not one of them. At any rate, as far as I know, I have up to the present time kept clear of what a great writer calls the sadder words, ‘It is, but hadn’t ought to be.’

Even my Bohemian friend had failed to find his life in the slums quite sufficient for his enjoyment, as his presence on the banks of my stream testified, and I tried to score a point off him by calling his attention to the fact; but he was quite ready with an explanation, and, as his explanation took several days—for we were frequently interrupted by one thing or another—I may, perhaps, be allowed to give you a shortened account of his further adventures in his own words, as nearly as I can reproduce them. You will understand that I am not trying to persuade you that I am the hero of what follows, if I do not put in all the ‘he saids.’ It is such a nuisance to be always writing ‘so he told me’ and ‘I replied.’

He began rudely, for he was not a very polite rat, though he could talk a little French, if he cared to make himself agreeable. ‘Blimy!’ he said—‘blimy! if you think that you are going to make fun of me, you will find yourself in the wrong box.’ I did not particularly wish to find myself in any box, and I ventured to say so. ‘Funny fellow!’ he snarled, and I was afraid that there was going to be a row; but the timely appearance of a young trout in the pool below us made a seasonable diversion. By the time that we had thoroughly failed in our efforts to catch him peace was restored, and I was very careful not to interrupt him any more.

‘I always ran about the sewers a great deal,’ he continued, ‘and one day in the course of my wanderings I made my way along a disused pipe, and found myself on the banks of the Thames. Being naturally of an inquisitive turn of mind, I continued to poke about the muddy banks, picking up plenty of scraps of garbage—not the silly vegetables which you seem to like so much, but a good tasty London dish—and I determined to see the adventure through, and went further and further down the banks of the river. At last I began to feel a desire to explore the shipping, and a rope made an easy gangway for me; so I went on board

early one evening, and stowed myself away below in what is called “the hold.” I dare say you know the poem “We’d both be blowed if we’d be stowed in the other chap’s *hold*, you see,” so that you can easily picture to yourself what the hold of a ship is like.

‘Towards morning there was a great trampling of feet, so I determined to lie low ; but I was rather alarmed, as I could hear the water rippling along the sides of the ship, and I wondered if we were sinking. As you may have guessed, it was only the beginning of my first voyage, for the trampling of feet meant that the ship was getting under way, and the ripple of water was an audible sign that we were slipping down the mighty river.

‘I cannot describe to you the sights which might have been seen, as I never came on deck at all. For one thing, I was in mortal fear at finding myself afloat for the first time, and I had also read that sailors were extraordinary straight-eyed shots with a “belaying-pin”—whatever that missile may be. I had better confess at once that, when I use nautical terms, I have not the very remotest idea of their meaning. I have been afloat many times since this first voyage, but I have never been able to make sure of the names. It is not very easy to

learn, you must grant, when you are stowed away below the whole time, and only hear scraps of nautical conversation. Of course, I know what a mast is, and a rudder, but if you were to ask me in which direction "starboard" would take me, or which is, the "mizzen mast," or whereabouts in the ship the fo'csle (if that is the right way to spell it) is situated, I should at once reply, "Ask me another."

' Luckily for me, I found that there were several other rats on board. I know that you consider that there is danger in numbers, but it does not matter on board a ship. Sailors are fond of company, and seldom have time to think of setting traps. Therefore it was with unfeigned joy that I rubbed whiskers with others of my kind when I ventured to explore my new quarters. This happy meeting, however, did not take place for several days, because, when the good ship to which I had entrusted my precious person began to feel the swell of the open sea, and to dance about after the manner of ships, I honestly thought that I must give up the ghost. Lucky beggars men are in being able to relieve their feelings by honest sickness! Being a land rat and unacquainted with such matters, you may not know that Nature has

denied this luxury to us rats, and that if we keep on wanting to be sick for a long time we eventually die. London poisoners know it well, and so they put down a slow poison, which a dog or cat can throw up, if they chance to get hold of it, but which will certainly kill a rat, just because he cannot vomit. It is a very cunning device, and all the more so because a rat’s instinct, when he feels that he is seriously ill, is to seek some quite out-of-the-way place wherein to die. If he died too quickly, he would leave his body about under the floor or in the wall, and make things unpleasant for everybody.

‘ Lordy, how ill I was for two days ! but at the end of the second day my stomach regained its equilibrium, and I could feel the ship rise and fall on the waves without any answering agony inside me. At once I realized that I was very hungry, and I started off in quest of food, and not very far off the food, naturally enough, I found others of my own kind. At first they were inclined to be a trifle stand-offish, but I was in no mood for trifling, and at once demanded my share of the victuals. I must have looked very gaunt and savage after my bout of illness, for they gave in at once, and I was formally admitted to the brotherhood of the ship ;

and a gay brotherhood we were, full of fun and ready for all kinds of mischief. They taught me to dance a hornpipe, and to say "Shiver my timbers," and I am afraid that I learnt also to be very fond of a drop of rum. Fortunately, I never got more than a drop, for sailors are economical of that valuable liquor, and drain the cup pretty well to the dregs; but even as it was I was several times on the near side of intoxication, which is more than you can say, you old milk-and-water drinker!

‘Details of the voyage would not interest you; in fact, I do not think that there were any. Let it suffice to say that in due time we put into Southampton, where, like all good sailors, I went ashore for a spree, and, as other good sailors have done before me and will do after me, I enjoyed myself so well that I missed my ship. But having once acquired a liking for the sea, I could not rest on land, though life in the docks was pleasant enough, and after a few days I climbed along another hawser, and found myself once more afloat on that most seaworthy craft the *Betsy Jane*. She took me to Jersey, but I soon tired of that sunny isle, and made my way to the shores of France on board another vessel, and there, to my amazement and indignation, I was called a *joli*

*garçon* and other strange names. I wanted to fight at once; I was not going to be abused by any Frenchman. But a very trifling amount of bloodshed soon convinced me that they were good fellows, and that what I had taken for abuse was only their welcome in a strange language, so we became great friends, talking at first by signs.

‘I found myself eventually once more underground in the fashionable sewers of Paris, where the life was as gay and sparkling as any rat could wish to enjoy. The manners of the upper world soon filter downwards, so you must not blame me, old sober-sides, if we cast care to the winds. So effectually did we eat the candle at both ends, and even in the middle as well, that in a couple of months I was a wreck, and felt that a breath of sea-air was the only thing that could save me. I managed to crawl to the water’s edge, and stowed myself away on a barge or some such ungainly craft—I was far too ill to notice very carefully the nature of the vessel—and after drifting for some time in a leisurely way down the waters of the Seine, I changed ship once more, and found myself again in England, cured indeed in health, but a vagabond and a wanderer at heart, and utterly unable to settle down to a quiet life at home.

‘ But I must curtail my wanderings, and state briefly that I went on a pig-boat to the fair city of Cork, all down Southampton Water and past the Needles, where a fog kept us at anchor for the better part of a day and a night, with bells ringing and whistles bellowing at intervals all round us from invisible steamers that dare not move. So shallow was the curtain which enveloped us that the sun shone brightly on our deck out of a blue sky, and we lay there and basked in a dead calm, not able to see a yard in front of the nose of our boat, so thick lay the blanket of mist upon the waters, which lapped like a sea of oil against our sides.

‘ In Cork I spent a happy week, and had half a mind to stay there for good and all, but I found the Irish very excitable—too excitable to suit my convenience. The very sight of a rat was enough to bring the greater part of the population of the town to join in the hue and cry. I do not greatly mind being hunted by a reasonable number of men and dogs, but an army does flurry me a little, and so I allowed my wandering instincts to get the better of me again. I am not grumbling, I hope. After the placid life on board ship, with nothing more dangerous than a “ marlin-spike ” to fear, a bit

of a chase was in its way a treat, if only the crowd had not been *quite* so noisy.

‘ I travelled in fair weather and I travelled in foul, and while I greatly enjoyed the former I do not think that you can have any idea of the vast unpleasantness of the latter. I am not referring now to my constitution ; that was sound enough after so many voyages, and I looked back now with scorn to those first two days of misery when I emerged from the mouth of the Thames. But when the great winds of heaven are blowing, and when the great billows of ocean are making a plaything of the ship, then the ship, feeling bound, I suppose, to take her change out of somebody, makes a plaything of the rats and other loose objects stowed away inside her. I wonder whether this is a ship’s way of feeling sick ; if so, I can only say that it is a very unpleasant way. I tell you honestly that I have spent a whole day and a night on board ship, holding on with my teeth to one thing and with my tail clasped tight round something else, and even so I was *so* battered about that I could hardly move when I crawled out at last to seek for a little nourishment to support my exhausted strength.

‘ And then people talk of the charms of a seafaring

life, of the eternal splash of the waves singing "Hush-a-bye, baby," of the white sheets of bellying canvas, of the milky wake which follows the speeding ship, and of the effortless wings of the gulls which keep pace astern ; and, after all, don't you know, I rather believe that they are right. Storms are very unpleasant things, whether they take place on sea or elsewhere, but when the fine day comes at last, and the sopping clothes are hung out to dry, they remember no more the sorrow for joy that a smile has once more spread itself over the broad face of ocean. I tell you, old pal, and I believe that you will agree with me, that my humble opinion is that if it were not for the rough places in life—and sure enough *we* find plenty of them—we should not enjoy the smooth patches one little bit. That is why a rat is so full of fun and mischief, because every man's hand is against him, and troubles come thick and frequent. The result naturally is that when he *does* steer his storm-tossed craft into a bit of calm water he goes on the bust at once, so to speak, and flicks his tail about, and stands on his hind legs, and eats something that he was never meant to eat—something probably that selfish man was storing up for himself, and selfish man at once picks up half a brick and heaves it about, and says,

“Drat those rats! Can’t think what Providence was doing to create them!”

‘That’s about the tune of it, my old landlubber, isn’t it? Shiver my timbers! but I would dearly like to have you on board ship for a day or two, just to see you turn green in the face, because you wanted to be sick and couldn’t. But avast hauling! Belay! Down with your helm and snatch her round, or we shall lose our bearings! I did not open my jaws to preach to you, but to tell you of my doings.

‘My next voyage took me to America, but I can tell you at once that I did not enjoy it *any*. My tastes are all towards short cruises, and a merry two days in port at the end of them. Those liners are a bit too almighty spick and span for an ordinary rat, a state-room is rather beyond my figure, and I feel somewhat out of place in a floating drawing-room. Give me a rough tub of a ship and the manners of the kitchen for real enjoyment. I hardly stayed ashore for a single day, and that was one day too many. America has moved on a trifle too fast for me; her buildings were not designed to accommodate rats: we do not care to go up in an elevator. What we much prefer is plenty of room, plenty of rubbish, and plenty of dark corners, and America has banished all these into the limbo

of the past. Take my advice and don't cross the herring-pond ; but if you are compelled to do so take the next liner back, as I did, and return to the roomy and placid comfort of your own country.

‘ I must now tell you about my last voyage, which will also explain to you my presence here so far inland, to which you were rude enough to allude in a joking way. The fact is that I have had about enough of the sea ; its ways are a little too playful for me, much as I still love it. One has to draw the line somewhere, and I draw it at the events which I am now about to relate.

‘ She was an old tub of a boat, and she just swarmed with rats ; we occupied every available nook and corner. Some people think that rats never embark on a ship that is going to sink. There ! I have let the cat out of the bag at the very beginning ! You need not jump in that way just because I mentioned the word “ cat.” I apologize ; I meant her to stay in the bag till the very end of the story, but, now that she is fairly out, I may as well confess at once that it is a tale of shipwreck upon which I am embarked. But the rats were very far from “ leaving the sinking ship ” when she made ready to sail away on her last voyage, so those people must be wrong who talk of sailors

refusing to sail in a ship because the rats are leaving it, as if they had some kind of foreknowledge that she would never come back to port again. Some of us—most of us, in fact—would have been very glad to know beforehand what was going to happen to her, and then we could have chosen another ship. But she looked such a lovely old tub that we just flocked into her, and we found that she might have been built many years ago exactly to suit our convenience. She had not too much cargo on board, so that we had plenty of room, and what cargo there was proved to be reasonably edible, when we contrived to sample certain portions of it.

‘ And so we all started off in high spirits on a comparatively short coasting voyage, with a good prospect of a merry spree on shore when we reached our destination, little recking, many of us, of the fate which was in store for us. I hate the word “recking” now, however you may choose to spell it.

‘ All went well for a couple of days ; we had a fair wind and a calm sea, and we congratulated ourselves on having chosen so seaworthy and comfortable a ship. We slept for a good part of the day and made merry by night, helping the sailors to do their duty by licking out the pots and pans, the cleaning of which they had wisely put off to the

next morning, on the principle of "never do anything to-day when to-morrow will do as well." I rather fancy that they must have left them about on purpose, knowing that certain good fairies would come in the night and clear away the greater part of the nasty sticky grease. We were too numerous, however, for all to have a taste of these dainties ; they went to the best and fiercest fighters, and I had learnt the art of using my teeth pretty thoroughly, among other accomplishments, on board ship, so that I was always there or thereabouts, as the saying is. Some of the others had to be content with what they could get out of the cargo, and they were very useful in opening the way for us when we happened to want anything extra. It is a great thing to be one of the strong ones in this world : you get a much better time. Nature knows this, too, for she makes all her arrangements with a view to killing off the weaklings : it improves the breed. Some people call her cruel, but I think that she is only wise. Perhaps, however, I am not a very fair judge, being so strong myself.

‘ Well, on the third night a great wind came swooping in from the Atlantic, and it blew fiercer and fiercer towards morning. Then it dropped quite suddenly, just as the day ought to have

broken and shown us where we were, and a thick mist settled down upon everything, a blinding mist that eddied round us in great swirling wreaths and curtains. I had been holding on with teeth and tail all night and was glad of a rest, but I confess that I felt a little anxious. Doom seemed to be hanging over us. My foresight is there all right, but it would be more useful to me if I could move it a bit further forward ; it always seems to come just a little too late to be of any real use.

‘ However, I took the precaution of sneaking up on deck and of hiding myself in a secluded corner behind some tarpaulin. Lucky it was for me that I did so, or I might have been drowned below, even as many of my companions were, literally like “rats in a hole” ; for the wind, after leaving us enveloped in our shroud of mist for half a day, suddenly roused itself again from slumber, and sent many of us to seek another shroud among the seaweed at the bottom of the ocean.

‘ With a rush and a sweep the gale was upon us once more, tearing away the mist like a rent veil, and showing us jagged teeth of rock right under our very bows. One awful glimpse we got of their black fangs, and then, with a sickening crash and a grinding of savage teeth upon our rotten

timbers, we plunged upon our doom. The whole ship staggered and shivered like a creature which has just received a mortal wound.

‘I wonder whether Nature is merciful to ships, even as she is to the rest of her children in their hour of sorrow; whether she sends to them also that blessed relief of numbing torpor which prevents us from realizing the agony of our pain. I think myself that she must do so, for just as a creature which has received a mortal hurt crawls away to some quiet place in order that no eye may witness the drooping head, and the failing limbs, and the light fading out of the eye, and the fur, once so carefully tended, but now bedraggled with the sweat of death, so did our stricken ship, as the backward wash of the water released her from the cruel fangs, stagger away blindly round a towering headland and into a quiet bay, where the storm passed roaring overhead, and left the waters comparatively unvexed.

‘There she settled herself down to die quietly, and no efforts of ours could save her. Higher and higher rose the water in the hold, as it poured in through a great rent in her wounded bows, and a terrified stream of rats came rushing up on deck. They were leaving the sinking ship now with a

vengeance ; but not all, for some were left behind in that blinding wash of waters, unable to gain any foothold that would lead them to a place of safety. We, the survivors, stood huddled together in a trembling crowd as the ship settled down lower and lower : gray old veterans and gay young sparks in the prime of youth, withered matrons and comely maidens, all trembling, and all, or nearly all, doomed. We were too busy with our own concerns to give a thought to the men, and to this day I cannot say what became of them.

‘ Finally, we began to move restlessly to and fro, to and fro, first along the decks and then along the bulwarks, until at the last I realized that the time had come to dive into the terrible ocean off the rapidly-tilting stern ; and, when I led the way, the rest followed, and the surface of the water was thickly dotted with whiskered heads swimming for dear life towards the shore. I am a good swimmer, as you know, but the waters, though relatively calm, were very different to the surface of the river, and a glad and thankful rat was I when I contrived to clamber ashore and make my way up among rocks and stones into a place of safety. A glance over the water showed me that the ship was gone all but the tip of a mast, and also that

luck and my own good judgment had taken me to pretty nearly the only landing-place. But I did not wait long on the chance of meeting with other survivors. A great dread of the treacherous sea was upon me, and I fled inland as if it had been a hungry dog that would leave its bed and pursue me.

‘Strangely enough, the one detail that stands out plainer than any of the others is that, when I ventured at last to stop and clean my fur, the nasty taste of the sea-water gave me quite a strong desire for sickness. I am very fond of a little salt now and then, like most other animals, but the taste of my coat was so nasty that I was obliged to go dirty and sticky for several days. If I could only have found some more rats about I might have made a small fortune, I believe, by letting out the right of cleaning my fur at so much a lick. But, of course, just when I particularly wanted to meet with others of my kind, I could not find a single one, and I dare not trust anyone else, so I had to be content with rolling in the grass and rubbing myself against anything that came handy, until the memory of my recent escape had so far faded from my mind as to allow me to clean myself in the proper way with my tongue for about an hour a day. And now, if you please, I am done with

the sea, and with all its evil and enticing ways, and I intend to live as a landlubber for the future.’

That was the end of my friend’s yarn. I have had to tone his language down a little, and I am afraid that he was also a bit of a braggart, though I dare say that the greater part of his story was true. For one thing, if I remember right, he boasted somewhere in the course of his narrative that his life at sea had made him very handy with his teeth, but when the time came for me to try conclusions with him I cannot honestly say that he fought very scientifically. I should be sorry to think—being a very patriotic rat myself—that they have a low standard of fighting in the navy, and therefore I can only conclude that my friend had been drawing the long-bow. Peace to his ashes—if he has got any ashes! I rather doubt it. He was a bit scattered about when I had done with him, and I fancy that the beetles must have found it rather a difficult job to give his remains decent burial. Fresh meat was selling cheap on that day beside the river, and the various scavengers of earth and air must have had a rare treat. But as for ashes—well, what do *you* think? He had vowed to be a landlubber for the rest of his days, and so Fate took him by the hind leg, and

saw to it that he had no time to change his mind ; and of Fate I was the humble instrument. I cannot think that I robbed the world of any 'bright particular star' when I 'dowsed his glim,' as he would have expressed it. He was, I take it, one of the world's waifs, born in a sewer, living the life of a gutter-snipe, dignified for a while by contact with the restless and immemorial ocean that cleanses all things, and more than dignified—I might almost say exalted—by meeting his end bravely—comparatively bravely—at the hands of an honest country squire.

## IX.

### 'A CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS'

THE time has now arrived, I think, for me to tell you how I came to deserve the honour of the letters which adorn my name; they mean a good deal to me, more than you might at first suppose. It is not that I wish to swagger about them, though comparatively few rats are allowed to use them. I hope that you know me well enough by this time to put such an idea out of your head at once. The possession of them is mainly a matter of luck, though not entirely so, as you will see in time. When I say that they mean a good deal to me, I wish you to understand that they mean that I am still in the land of the living, and if that is not 'a good deal' I should like to ask you what is. Plenty of rats have earned them on their merits, but have never lived to wear them, so to speak.

You will have to imagine many adventures in between; I have not time to tell you about everything that has happened to me, and a rat's

adventures are all rather alike. Put in lots of hawks and owls, and sticks and traps and catapults, and boys and dogs—put them in almost every day, and several times on some days, and then fill up the intervals with corn and cheese, and scraps of meat and vegetables, and butter and milk, and you will not be far wrong. Don't put in much sorrow or lamentation, for we are never sorry for very long, either for what we have done to others, or for what others have done to us. We are nearly always happy and cheerful; we enjoy poking about at night on a rubbish heap, or digging with our paws in order to get at some luxurious dainty; we enjoy burrowing into stacks and under walls and doors; we enjoy a real good fight, and we enjoy a race, even if the race be with a dog, so long as we can just manage to win by a short tail. Most people win by heads, but we win by tails; it is one of our peculiarities. I am not sure that we do not even enjoy it, for a while, when we lose, but I cannot be sure of that, for none of the rats who have lost their race have ever breath enough to tell the tale. At any rate, it is nicer to suppose that they enjoyed it. Most of all, perhaps, do we enjoy stealing, which sounds wicked, but is not so really, because, you see, we have no laws and prisons and policemen,

such as you have ; and nothing is wicked unless you can be punished for it, according to our views. We do not count your punishments, because you so often inflict them upon us for nothing at all. You beat us when we are good, and you beat us when we are what you call naughty ; therefore it follows that you may just as well be naughty, if naughtiness means getting into a larder and eating something nice. That is quite a reasonable view to take, is it not ?

Now for my poor tail—it is not a nice tail to look at, is it ? Rather naked and scaly, and oh ! so short and blunt. And yet there was a time when I took a great deal of trouble over it, when I licked it and cleaned it all the way to its beautiful and graceful tip. I never could quite make out why Nature had made me a present of it until I began to climb ropes and run along narrow ledges, and then I realized that it was meant to help me to keep my balance, and I still find it very useful for that purpose, short though it undoubtedly is ; in fact, I do not know what I should do without it. We are always in such a hurry that we are perpetually tumbling down, even with our tails to help us to preserve our equilibrium. You must have heard us at night come down flop on the ceiling. It was only last night

that I came down with an awful bump somewhere just over your head ; my ribs are still sore. Luckily, you young folk are very sound sleepers, or you would certainly be frightened at the noise which we make. I was climbing along a beam and lost my foothold ; my poor old claws are getting very blunt. I shall break my back one of these days, and that will indeed be a disgrace. You would think that a broken back was the same old broken back anywhere, but the way in which it is broken makes a lot of difference in our estimation. *Dog breaks* rank highest, and then *stick breaks* ; *boot breaks* are mean, because they ought never to happen ; *shot breaks* are bad, because you call it ‘waste of good powder’ ; also, for some inexplicable reason, they kill us dead and take away our year of ghost-life. But to break your own back—ugh ! I have never heard that it robs you of your ghost-year, but I am quite sure that none of the other rat ghosts would take the smallest notice of you if you came among them as the result of such an accident, and that would be dull, because ghosts like notice just as much as living creatures. Some people go so far as to say that if a ghost attracts no notice for a year it pines away and dies. I suppose that this is the reason why they do such funny things, as, for

instance, putting their heads under their arms and smelling mouldy and clanking chains. No reasonable ghost would act like that if it were not very necessary for them to attract attention.

I am afraid that I am rather like a kitten or a puppy-dog, chasing my own tail; I might almost say, ‘chasing my own *tale*,’ but I am never quite sure whether it is right to make jokes in a serious story, such as I wish this to be. I never seem to be able to come to the point; but then, you see, my tail has not got a point, so how *can* I be expected to come to it?

My troubles, as usual, came upon me owing to my own foolishness, and if the result was only a letter to my name—well, all I can say is that things might have turned out very differently. I might very easily have been ‘a mute, inglorious Milton, born to blush unseen,’ as I think I read in one of the many books which I have devoured. However, I escaped that fate, and the result suited me to a T, if I may venture to hint at another joke, which shall be the *very* last.

It was not so long after my departure from the river—during the latter part of the autumn, to be quite accurate—that I married another wife, quite a nice one this time, or she would never have

persuaded me to come and live in a corn-stack. I told her that it was very dangerous, and strongly advised her to come away and dig a hole deep under a bramble-bush, which overhung a cosy little bank well covered with long grass. But she was as obstinate as the rest of her sex, and nothing would suit her but the stack. According to her view, all the aristocracy of the district were in the stack, and holes under bramble-bushes were only for outsiders. No one would call on her, and the thorns would spoil her jacket. She wanted an upstairs drawing-room and a boudoir. ‘Bother the aristocracy—drat boudoirs—give me comfort and safety!’ I protested. But she was very firm, and said that I must choose between her and my nasty bramble-bush, so, like a fool, I chose her, which fact speaks volumes for her charms, but only waste-paper baskets for my sense and wisdom.

However, all went well for a month, and I was becoming almost reconciled to the manners of the aristocracy, which were free and easy in the extreme. I could never call my house my own. Harum-scarum young rascals of either sex trotted in and out as they pleased, though I left the marks of my teeth on one or two of the gentlemen, and tried to provoke my wife by making violent love

to one of the ladies, which caused her to leave the marks of *her* teeth on *me*. I did not mean to provoke her quite so much as that.

And then one day, without a word of warning, half a dozen smelling ferrets were thrown up on to the top of the stack, where we were all assembled, just under the thatch, to enjoy the fine warm weather. What a commotion then arose among the aristocracy, when they found their sacred dwellings invaded by these odoriferous aliens! My wife—to her credit be it said—fled screaming to the nursery, where I expect that she died, for she would face anything in defence of her children. ‘ Why did not I go too?’ Why should I? The passage would only hold one, and I should have been in the way; besides, I did not care for the brats so much as she did, and gentlemen are out of place in the nursery. I maintain, therefore, that I was justified in making a bolt for my own safety. But I very nearly missed it, for I rushed along the top of the stack in a blind hurry, narrowly escaping a stone which was hurled at me from below, and tried to push my way into another hole, which happened to be blocked by a ferret. Luckily, he had his tail-end turned towards me, for I was so anxious to get in that I did not recognise him for a minute.

When I did, I gave him what I believe to have been a very nasty bite for himself, and hurriedly backed out again ; but I was in a terrible dilemma, if you know what that is, and I very much wished that I was anywhere else. I might find a ferret in any of the upstairs holes, and the stack was more or less surrounded by three or four ugly boys with sticks, so that it was no easy matter to reach the holes at the bottom.

Luckily, my small adventure with the ferret had cooled my excited brain, and I dodged another flint by a very narrow margin—those boys were wickedly straight shots—and hid myself for a moment in the crest of straw at the top of the stack, where the thatch of one side meets the thatch of the other. Then, when one of the aristocracy made a bolt down one side, creating thereby a small diversion, I plucked up courage to jump out and bustle down the opposite slope. The young rascal who was on guard thereabouts saw me out of the corner of his evil eye, and though he could not get up in time to have a shot at me as I took my flying leap for safety, he managed to bang his stick down on to the last inch of my tail just as I was wriggling into a hole.

‘Leggo, will you?’ I squealed in agony; ‘you’re



HE MANAGED TO BRING HIS STICK DOWN ON TO  
THE LAST INCH OF MY TAIL.



hurting my tail!’ I can only suppose that he did not understand my language, for he pressed the stick down tighter. But fortunately his blow had broken the skin, and the skin slipped off the tip, and I contrived to wriggle away into the safe darkness of a deep hole. I knew that it was only a breathing space, as the ferrets would soon be brought down to work the bottom of the stack, so I ran right through to the entrance or exit of another hole, and watched for an opportunity. This soon came, for all the little ruffians gathered to one corner, where the remnants of the aristocracy were making their last heroic stand, and I slipped across into the hedgerow, and did not stop until I had put a good half-mile between myself and that deadly stack, and had buried myself deep in the recesses of a small plantation. Even then I had another shock, for the band of marauders came back that way, utterly scorning a notice-board about trespassers. They passed close to where I was lurking, so close that I could hear them chuckling over their sport. ‘Jolly good afternoon! Thirty-two head!’ and a squeaky voice added, ‘Wish I had got that beggar whose tail I trapped.’ Luckily, they had no dog, so I lay very low until their voices died away, and then made an inspection

of my damaged member, which was rather painful, and felt very cold without its covering of skin. I cannot say that it looked any nicer than it felt, and I came to the conclusion that the bone was smashed. I may add that my conclusion was correct, for the broken tip gradually dropped off, and after the first day caused me very little pain. I was glad when it went, for I was quite tired of the silly old thing, and the thought that I was now a Tailer was ample consolation for the slight damage to my personal appearance. I never can manage to take any interest in what has once been spoilt. Even if I were to make a little blot on this page I should tear it up and begin again. I don't say that it is a good thing, but I believe that I was born that way.

So much for the minor accident. Before I go on to describe the greater calamity, which was a *much* more serious affair, I must tell you in a few words something of what happened to me in the meanwhile, because there was a longish interval. I had plenty of time to recover from one blow before the other fell, or, if you like, I had plenty of time to get used to one honour before the other was thrust upon me.

I have good cause to remember the winter which followed, for it was a very terrible one for all the

wild creatures, and I sometimes think that it was only the knowledge that a tailer always sits tight that sustained me.

I dug for myself a nice hole in the plantation, where we left me inspecting my poor tail, under a bramble-bush (I had no wife now to raise objections, thank goodness!), and when the winter came on I had much cause to be thankful, for the thick hedge and the trees kept off the snow; and the plantation belonged to an unscrupulous person, as I gathered from what I heard, who was anxious to entice his neighbour's pheasants to come and be shot, and so he was at pains to keep a good supply of corn and raisins littered about, and also a nice trough of water to drink, which was always refilled after a night's frost. He naturally did not bother his head much about a solitary rat. I do not suppose that he even suspected my presence, though he might have noticed my dainty chain of foot-prints on the thin carpet of snow which the wind blew into the cover in spite of the hedge and the trees. I doubt whether he did see them, because he always came along the same path to the little clearing where he sprinkled the food, and when he wanted to shoot, which was pretty nearly every day, he stood outside at the end where the pheasants

came out to fly to their proper home, and sent his boy to the other end with a big black dog, and the boy never went in himself, only the dog came rummaging about, and his ideas were entirely set on the pheasants, so that he did not trouble his head about me.

Therefore my lines were cast in pleasant places, in spite of the horrid cold, which brought the birds tumbling off the branches at night, stone-dead and frozen stiff. I might have eaten them if it had not been for the corn and raisins; but I fancy that I should still have starved, for the poor little beggars had precious little on their bones—just skin and a puffy bunch of feathers. Even the owls had gone away to better hunting-grounds, so that, for once in my life, I had nothing to fear, for the weasels had been pretty well exterminated.

My bad time, however, came in February, for the old man saw fit to leave off shooting, and consequently there was no more corn. An old cock pheasant, with whom I had words, told me scornfully that it was the close season for him, and that it was beneath his dignity to bandy words with any animal who could lawfully be killed all the year round. I could not think of the proper retort at the time, and had to content myself with turning

away in dignified silence, which some people, I know, consider to be the very haughtiest form of repartee. Being myself somewhat of a child of the streets, I prefer something with rather more sting in it, such as 'You're another.' 'Your hair is coming down.' But, as I say, I could not think of anything at the time. I can generally think of something when it is too late, and now I know that I ought to have said, 'Put your head a little nearer, old cock, and I'll show you whether it is a close season or not.' Or else, 'Close seasons were invented to save the worthless lives of silly old dotards, who would be better in the stew-pot.' 'Stew-pot' would have been a nasty one for him, as it is a great disgrace to a pheasant that he should be too tough to be roasted. It means that he has been afraid to fly, and has skulked in the cover and let the hens go out to be shot. Perhaps both of my imaginary answers are too long, and 'stew-pot' alone would have been sufficient.

I think that the best repartee which I ever made—and it came out pat at the right moment, too—was when my wife said to me one day, 'You are very silent this morning,' and I answered, 'I wish to goodness that you were, too!' But it does not pay to practise the art of repartee on your wife.

She was so angry that she bit me through the leg, and then sulked for days. The latter part of her retort I did not mind, for she was a big, unpleasant female; but the bite was very painful for some time, and turned me temporarily into a 'hopper.' I believe that I might have had a little *h* printed on my card, but it was hardly worth the expense, as we were not calling much just then. The rule also is that you must have been disabled in fair fight, and I could hardly call the fight a fair one, because she happened to be bigger than I was, and I knew that I should get the worst of it if I prolonged the quarrel. Also, it is necessary to produce evidence, and I hardly liked to try to claim my little *h* on the grounds of a wife-bite. Now that I have got a well-earned capital letter, I am sure that I acted wisely; but I was tempted for a moment to try to pose before the world as 'half a hero.'

My bad time, as I was remarking, came in February, and I was compelled to eat many strange things to keep the wolf of starvation at bay. The snow lay so thick outside the plantation for several weeks that I dare not venture out, and I had to keep myself alive by gnawing the bark off the little saplings, just like a silly rabbit. It was tasteless stuff, but I contrived to keep a certain

amount of flesh on my bones—no superfluous fat, mind you, but just a modest covering ; and I spent long hours dozing in my nest and dreaming of farmyards and well-stocked barns.

Things soon began to mend when the snow melted, for a farmer sowed some spring wheat in a field near at hand, and I grubbed up a certain amount of that, but eventually I changed my abode, and took up my quarters in the far end of a long pile of mangel-wurzels, which had been stored up for the winter and covered over with earth. They were beginning to uncover and use them at the opposite end to mine ; but I kept a careful eye on their progress, and by the time that it became advisable to go elsewhere spring was in the air, and food no longer scarce.

Before I come to the great final scene, there is one little adventure in my life which ought to find a place in any chapter of accidents. It ended in comedy, though it promised at one time to be tragic enough. I forget the exact date, but the time was summer, and I was living in an old cowshed in the fields, not far off a comfortable house with a fine lawn. In that house there lived a big black cat, with a couple of tiny kittens, which fact was the cause of the trouble, and was also my

salvation. Cats with young kittens are terrible huntresses, but they bring home their prey unharmed, in order to teach their kittens how to hunt and kill. They also like to display themselves to their masters and mistresses with a mouse or a bird alive in their mouths—hence the comedy.

This wary old cat was one too many for me, for she pounced upon me one hot afternoon as I foolishly looked out for a breath of fresh air; my hole was growing stuffy with the heat. I did not dare to struggle between her sharp teeth, and the terror of my position soon brought on a feeling of torpor, which is Nature's way of administering chloroform to her children when they are in distress. I was dimly conscious of being carried reasonably tenderly over two or three fields and through a garden; I remember that I smelt the carnations. Then a sudden jump on the part of my captor caused her teeth to prick me, and awoke me again to vivid consciousness. I was on the ledge of an open window, and beyond me was a room full of ladies in holiday attire. I heard a voice exclaim, 'Look at pussy! Whatever has she got?' and the words had hardly left some fair lips when down leapt pussy into their midst.

There arose an awful scream, and then a stam-

pede began, as pussy set me down on the floor and commenced to play with me after the manner of her kind. That stampede saved me. One active damsel reached a precarious resting-place on the top of the piano; others sought safety upon chairs and tables; and one stout matron, whose years and girth forbad her to climb, staggered towards the door. I saw my chance, as pussy was a trifle distracted by the uproar, and with a bound I passed under her voluminous skirts. 'Oh, Mrs. Tucker,' shrieked someone, 'he's under your dress!' That was too much for my involuntary protectress, and with a groan of agony she collapsed heavily in the very doorway. As luck would have it, I was not crushed into a pancake, and I emerged on the further side of the stately wreckage, and fled down a passage through an open door, and out into the comparative safety of the shrubberies. That stranded hulk effectually blocked the mouth of the harbour, and my clever captor was unable even to pursue, much less to overtake me. I fear that the kittens missed their lesson, but I blessed a kindly Providence which had planted timidity in the female breast, and weakness in the knees of elderly dowagers when under the stress of a great emotion. But I was careful to put a great many fields

between myself and the abode of that great black cat. I had no desire to feel again the prick of her teeth.

I must now pass over many months of my chequered career, and tell you how I learnt to hop. I had taken up my abode for the winter months in the outbuildings of a small house kept by two old maids. They were not ordinary old maids, because they kept no cats; I made certain of that fact before I engaged lodgings. I was also the only rat on the premises, which fact promised well for my safety. I thought at one time of settling in the roof of the house itself, but I rejected the idea ultimately for fear of alarming the two timid old ladies, and found very nice quarters behind a pile of old boxes, and such rubbish as old maids love to accumulate, in one of the sheds. I did not bother to dig a hole, but made a fine nest of straw and paper torn up into shreds right in the far corner, feeling pretty sure that, even if any unforeseen circumstances did cause the lumber to be removed, I could make a bolt with impunity amid the screams of terrified females.

I was rather dependent on the larder of the house for my nicest food, though odd scraps that were not unsavoury found their way on to the

rubbish-heap from time to time. Old maids gnaw their bones very clean, and do not seem to leave many scraps, but they evidently draw the line at bacon-rind and herrings' heads, of which I am particularly fond, as I think that I have mentioned already. Still, I was driven to play the burglar pretty frequently, and my method of entrance was to climb up the pile of rubbish out of the window of the shed, which did not boast of any glass, because the old ladies were too poor to spend money on useless luxuries, along the side of an iron tank full of rain-water, which was used on washing-day, and through the window of the boot-hole, where one pane of glass was also missing. From there I had an easy jump on to a dirty shelf, where there was always an old saucer with the remains of blacking still clinging to it. I generally had a lick at this on my way, as blacking tastes sweet and sugary. Another small jump took me on to a block of wood, and a third landed me on the floor. The door of the boothole had disappeared, and that of the larder had lost a hinge, so that it was difficult to shut it quite close. I nearly always found room to squeeze through, and when I was once fairly inside I helped myself to the best that I could find, without leaving too

many traces of my depredations. It is dangerous to leave marks of your teeth on a piece of butter, so I always chose a solitary pat and devoured it entirely. The milk I was obliged to get at by dangling the stump of my tail into the jug, and then I licked that unornamental but useful member of my anatomy clean. I doubt whether Dame Nature thought of that possibility when she gave me a tail.

How horrified the old ladies would have been if they had known that a rat had dipped his ugly tail into the milk which they put into their tea at breakfast-time, and had dipped it not once but many times! I had to be very careful not to overbalance the jug when I sat on the top of it. I ventured once or twice to take a look round the house, but found nothing except their poor old boots outside their doors, and I was not hungry enough to get myself into needless trouble by gnawing at them. I was too old then to love mischief for its own sake, though I was very tempted just to nibble the laces in half for fun. I wonder whether the dear old innocents would have known that a rat had been outside their doors!

Life was very secure in that quiet retreat, but somehow I felt rather dull and out of spirits in the absence of all danger, and I almost wished that



I HAD TO BE VERY CAREFUL NOT TO OVERBALANCE THE JUG.



there had been a dog to tease. I need not have worried my head about it ; trouble is sure to come if only you give it time. Unfortunately it so often comes in a much more formidable shape than you ever expect. If anyone had told me that it was in this peaceful abode that the great crisis of my life was to come upon me I should have smiled ; I might even have said ' Rats ! ' for I often find myself using your slang expressions by mistake.

It came about in this way : something—some spirit of reckless extravagance—prompted the old ladies to engage a boy to clean their boots and do odd jobs in the morning, and when a boy comes mischief is not far behind. Why, oh why, could they not have hired a nice timid girl ? Being old maids, I suppose that they wanted something like a man about the place. At any rate he came, and his evil name was Billy. Somehow I seem to notice that a touch of extra wickedness goes with the name Billy. Georges are always good, and I have never heard any breath of scandal touch the name of Johnny. Sam is very mischievous, like me, but never bad all through. If you ask me about the names of girls, I have not much to say, but I distrust Jane and Emily and Sarah, and am inclined to be friendly with Mary and Bess and Nell.

*He* came, as I was saying, and his evil name was Billy, and he had not been about the place for a week before he surprised me one morning in the boothole. I must have dallied with the milk-jug overlong, for I feel very sure that *he* did not get up any earlier than he could help. Take the advice of an old rat, and never dally with the liquor, whether it be contained in a jug or a bottle. I bolted out of the window before he could find anything to throw, and along the side of the tank. I had the sense not to betray my home by going through the window of the lumber-shed; I jumped off the tank to the ground, and ran out of the yard door, and hid myself in the garden, but I had not the sense to quit the premises at once and take up my abode elsewhere. When night fell I returned to my home behind the boxes, and must needs enter the house once more for a drink of milk.

I got in safely enough by the usual way, and I licked out the saucer of blacking, and made my way into the larder. I ought to mention that the window of the larder also looked out on to the yard. It was a still, moonless night, and I somehow had a feeling of impending evil, but I meant to beat an early retreat, and I could not see from what quarter immediate harm was to come. Alas!

I underestimated the evil cunning of the boy Billy, for hardly had I dipped my tail three times into the seductive jug, and licked it clean again, when there was a sudden tap at the window. My heart leapt into my mouth, and I fled for dear life—through the larder door in safety, across the passage in safety, though I expected every moment to feel a stick across my back ; in safety I crossed the dreaded boothole and sprang on to the shelf and through the empty pane in the window, and even as I rushed along the tank, I knew that destiny had got me at last, for I planted my forepaw on something which gave way beneath it. I snatched it away in haste, but far too slowly to prevent a pair of cruel iron jaws from closing like a vice upon my leg just above the ankle.

With a scream of agony I flung myself towards the ground, and my luck stood by me there, for, had I fallen the other way, I must inevitably have been drowned, and this story would never have been written. There was a hideous clang of iron against the side of the tank, and I found myself suspended in mid-air by a forepaw, which hurt me more than a little, as you may well believe. However, I managed to retain my wits in the midst of my trouble, and there was no small need of them,

for I heard footsteps rush across the yard, and guessed that Billy had gone for a match and a stick to complete his evil work. He *must* have heard the trap rattle against the iron of the tank. If anything was to be done it must be done quickly, so I writhed my head upwards and gnawed off my own foot with two or three savage cuts of my front teeth. The bone was already broken, and so it was only the work of a moment, and even as I fell to the ground, I saw the flash of a light and heard footsteps approaching. I had just time and strength to hobble to my home behind the boxes, and there I fell to licking my stump. Two thoughts only were in my head—how nasty the taste of my own blood was, and, would Billy have the sense to come and move the boxes? I could not have escaped by any possibility, for my leg was now quite numb; I was not even sure whether I wanted to live. However, Billy settled the question; for, after growling to himself over the paw which I had left in the trap, and expressing various rude wishes about the rest of my person, he took himself off to enjoy a little slumber, and left me still licking in a dazed sort of way and wondering what would become of me.

A great crisis is a queer thing; it is on you in a

moment, and in a moment it is over. Here was I, a strong healthy rat ten minutes ago, and now a cripple ; ready at one moment to face anything, and then helpless and resigned, and not caring very greatly whether I lived or died. Billy supplied the necessary tonic, for, on his return some hours later, I heard him ask leave to tidy out the lumber-shed. That boy had an evil mind, and he guessed by instinct that I was there, if anywhere. How I trembled as I waited for the answer ! I trembled, and I learnt thereby that life was still worth having. His mistresses seemed rather surprised at such unwonted industry, for Billy was not the boy to go out of his way to look for work, as a rule ; but, to my intense relief, they told him that they had some errands for him to run, and that he must wait until the following day.

I made the best use of my time, and licked my wounded leg, first back to life and pain, and then into comparative comfort, and when evening fell, I hobbled away on three legs out into the wilds, ready once more to face the dangers of existence with something of my former spirit, and feeling that I had well earned my rank of Hopper.

## X

### GROWING OLD

I AM afraid that I am drawing near to the end of my talk. I have run myself dry—very dry ; and, as I have had occasion to observe before, a drink is always welcome. To tell you the truth, I feel a bit sorry at the thought of laying down my pen. I cannot quite make up my mind whether it is that I have grown to be rather fond of you in a sort of way, or whether it is that everyone enjoys a little talk about himself. The great advantage of being allowed to talk about yourself is that you can turn yourself inside out, so to speak. The outside of everybody is very liable to get worn and frayed and dirty, while the inside may still be quite neat and smart and clean. When people talk about *you*, they generally talk about the outside ; but when *you* talk about yourself, you naturally see the inside of the jacket, and imagine yourself to be quite a decent and presentable person.

I am rather afraid, from casual remarks which

come to my ears, that the outside of my jacket is a trifle the worse for wear. I hear men allude to me as 'a mischievous brute, an unclean swine, a plaguey nuisance, a misbegotten scoundrel, a low-class bounder'; and when men begin to use comparatively reasonable names, such as these are, you may be pretty sure that there is worse to follow. I do not wish to be unreasonable. I am quite willing to accept such names as these as a fairly accurate description of the outside of my character, but I confess that I should be rather inclined to draw the line, if I found that they were beginning to use any stronger terms of abuse. I suppose that, from your point of view, I do seem to be always in the way. I eat the heart out of your corn-stacks; I devastate your barns; I burgle your houses; I gnaw holes even in lead pipes, when they get in my way; I kill your young pheasants and chickens now and then; and I make a general nuisance of myself in *your* eyes, but I really do not see how I can help it. I *must* eat in order to live, and I *do* like to make myself thoroughly at home, wherever I go—that is only natural, surely! And if I have large families several times a year, well, I do my best—at least, very many of my brother rats do—to lessen the evil by eating up a great many of the

unnecessary kids. You *cannot* expect a rat to do more than that ; it would be unreasonable.

You ask what I have to show as a counterpoise to the mischief which is laid at my doors. Let me see. It requires careful consideration. I suppose that I provide food in my own carcass to a great many starving folk—hawks, owls and weasels—who would otherwise be driven to eat up your sacred chickens. That is something, at any rate. Also, I provide very pretty sport for men and boys and dogs—not for girls ; if you love me, spare me that indignity—and sport can be enjoyed in many ways : sticks, half-bricks, catapults, worryings after a good race for life, traps of wire, of string, of iron, of stones, sly poisons, subtle pit-falls—I have tried them all, and so far I have escaped them all ; I might almost say I have enjoyed them all. And over and above all this, I am one of the scavengers of the world. I devour and otherwise clear out of the way a lot of refuse and filth which, but for my efforts, would cause you a great deal of trouble and you cannot have your refuse cleared away without paying for it, can you ?

But I do not think that I wish to base my claims for leave to exist altogether on these points. I cannot help feeling that I am a good fellow and

a keen sportsman. I enjoy it all and take the persecution cheerfully, and when the end comes, I meet it without flinching more than is absolutely necessary for mere comfort. At least, I have a kind of inner conviction that when *my* time comes I shall not be found wanting. I believe that, if the truth were known, I am more than a little proud of the fact that I do not require man's protection, like the pigs, and cows, and pheasants, and dogs, and horses, and foxes. I am one of the few animals that continue to exist, and to do more than exist—to thrive and multiply and flourish in spite of man's best efforts to exterminate me. Why, bless me! I am not at all sure that, if I took half the trouble to exterminate *you* which you take to wipe *me* off the face of the earth, you would not shortly cease to adorn this planet with your aggressive presence. Therefore, in a way, I am your master. Just swallow and digest that fact, and surely I may claim a good deal of credit for allowing you to go on ruling the earth in the boastful and high-handed way that seems to come so natural to you and to all of your breed.

That seems to be my defence in a nutshell, and I do not consider it to be a very bad one either. I wonder whether you could put as good a one on

paper if, by any chance, it was demanded of you? Perhaps it is just as well that we neither of us absolutely need one. Boys will be boys, I suppose, to the end of the chapter, and I am quite sure that rats will always be rats. You will not succeed in clearing the world of us, so you had better direct your efforts towards getting rid of some of the more crying evils. I may be an evil, but it shall never be said of me that I am a *crying* evil. No idle tears for me; what I have done, I have done, and what I have to suffer, I will suffer it in silence.

All that I seriously wish to ask you is to play the game fairly. I know that I should find life a dull affair if there were to be no risks and excitement in it. Therefore set all your traps, pursue me with dogs and ferrets, and with sticks and stones; put some brain-work into it, and catch me if you can, for I am not afraid of you. *But*—and I want to make it a very large ‘but’—kill me quickly when you do kill. I feel sure that I should hate to be kept waiting; visions of my many misdeeds in the past would come floating across my brain, and I might turn coward at the last. Nobody’s courage can be kept screwed up to the sticking place for ever. Therefore, strike hard and straight,

and aim a bit in front, so that the merciful blow may fall upon my head. I die easily, thank goodness, and waste no time in squirming and wriggling—no hugging of the last remnants of breath for me in order to make a few appropriate remarks before I quit the stage.

When you set traps, visit them often. I have known rats left to linger in those hopeless wire cages for two days, just because the man who set them was too careless to come and see whether he had caught anything. I have told you that kindly Nature is always at hand to administer a drop of chloroform to her creatures in distress, but do not venture to presume on the fact. The power of the medicine may fade away and the pain come back if the time of agony is too greatly prolonged, and, whoever it be that keeps a record of these things, rest assured that the blame thereof is entered to your account, for no man may inflict needless suffering on any creature and yet be held blameless.

I believe that I have one or two scraps of information to offer to you before we part. I always did like scraps myself much better than gnawing at a big joint, and I hope that you will agree with me, for if you do not, I am afraid that you will not find a great deal of information in this chapter—

not of a solid kind, at any rate. What I really wish most of all is to leave a pleasant taste in your mouth before I make you my final bow. I am well aware that, after reading some of my previous chapters, you will have come to the perfectly legitimate conclusion that I am a godless old ruffian, who ought to have been trapped long ago. I quite grant that the outside of my coat is somewhat patchy and shabby, but I really have one or two very nice clean pieces hidden away on the inside which I should like to show to you, if only you can contrive to look round the corner just a little. I do not wish to imply that you squint; but, unless you can see a little off the straight line, Nature will never grant to you any near and familiar view of her more intimate secrets. She is the kind of person who always plays her prettiest dramas just round the corner, and if she has no audience to play to that is the time at which she plays her best. I do not exactly mean that you must crawl about and peep through a screen of green bushes or tufts of grass, though you will never have cause to regret the cultivation of this habit. You need not be afraid of the proverb 'Listeners hear no good of themselves.' Not one of the stories which you will see enacted in dumb show is about you.

We wild creatures see so much of you that, when you are out of sight, it is our greatest pleasure that you should also be out of mind. It is such an enormous relief to us to get rid of the dark and baleful presence of your shadow, if only for one brief hour, that we make the most of our rare moments of respite, when they *do* occur, and enjoy ourselves in our own way, utterly oblivious of your very existence.

But, as I was going to say, it is necessary, if you wish to appreciate the sights and sounds of the country, that you should be able to see round the corner in another way than by peeping round the bushes. How shall I explain it to you? You will look out of the window, and you will see a thrush on the lawn, peering into the grass with his head bent down and turned to one side. Then he will give a start forward and grab a great worm by the head, and there will be a very severe bout of pulling, very unpleasant for the worm, and in the end the bird will win, and will leave the worm wriggling for a moment on the grass with a very sore head. After the thrush has recovered his wind—for a tug-of-war is hard work—he will deliberately proceed to smash the worm up into small pieces in a way which will make you cry

out, if you are at all fond of worms. It is not a fair argument to say that you are not fond of worms; I wish to suppose that you might be.

At any rate, I have described pretty fairly what a person with only a straight eye would see, and it is quite possible that he might say very unkind things about thrushes. I know very well that if a rat did such a thing there would be a pretty outcry, and it does not seem to me to be fair that, just because a thrush has a pretty spotty stomach and can sing a good song, he should never have unkind things said about him.

Now, I do not wish to argue that *something* must kill worms, in order to moderate the increase of them, though that would be true enough; nor, again, do I wish to argue that it is the worms' own fault for not having learnt to die quickly and to come to pieces with less bother, though there would be some truth in that also. What I wish to urge upon you is that, instead of seeing only the cruelty of the process, you should rather be able to read the tender anxiety in the old bird's mind that his nest full of clamorous children should have plenty of good food, and food that is well broken up and is easy to digest. I do not suppose that the thrush enjoys bashing the worm about and torturing it:

nothing would please him better than that it should die at once when he pinches its head, and come to pieces quietly of its own accord. But it refuses to meet him even half-way in either of these matters, and so the thrush is compelled to disregard the feelings of the worm, in order to obey Nature's peremptory orders that every animal should be ready to do anything for the sake of its young. May I say again that I wonder whether you have as good a defence to make, if anyone were to put you seriously at the bar of judgment ?

I hope that this illustration will help you to understand what I mean by 'looking round the corner.' I think that I might advise you to cultivate the habit of seeing crooked, not only with your eyes, but also with your mind; or perhaps we might put it in this way: 'never mind the outside of an animal's coat, but try to peep inside,' and then it may be that you will judge us more fairly. If you learn to look at us in this way, I feel sure that you will find that we possess a very reasonable share of human nature, which is *our* test of merit.

I gather that there are a great many men who go about the world trying to prove that men are very near of kin to the beasts, and they rake up all

of your worst qualities in support of this view. Now, if they had only been thoroughly taught my method of 'crooked sight' in their infancy, I cannot help thinking that, instead of spending so much time in trying to degrade man, they would have devoted their energies to showing rather how the various animals possess a great many of the better characteristics of men. If it does make them happier to find connecting-links between men and animals—and I am proud to believe that it does—surely it is better to level the animals up rather than to push man down.

If you, then, adopt this method, you will find, as I was saying, that we rats have a very reasonable share of your better qualities—a greater share, I dare say, than many of the animals whom you honour with your patronage. I have alluded already to our courage and cleverness, to our ready acceptance of death, to our hardy independence and sobriety of life, and these are supposed to be qualities on which you set some value; but I should also like you to know that I have seen a mother-rat come voluntarily out of her hiding-place in order to carry back into safety one of her half-grown children, who was lying dead in the open, having been slain in the usual way—

'stick-break' was his special complaint. She took him up tenderly in her strong teeth, and had covered half of the return journey in safety with her lifeless burden when she was observed, and her maternal love was rewarded with a speedy death. Perhaps it was all for the best; she would have wasted a lot of valuable time in trying to lick the kid back to life, but I think that you will allow her a word of praise. She knew what she was risking well enough—I feel sure that she did not waste any money on a return ticket when she started on *that* journey, as you would say—but she meant to bring back little Johnny at all costs, and so she did—half-way.

Did you ever try the experiment of keeping us as pets? I cannot guarantee that it would be altogether a success; you might see the worse side of us, or you might see the best. A good deal would depend upon yourself, and a certain amount upon the class of rat which you happened to get. We vary, of course, in character, just as you differ from one another. It is quite possible that, if you put four or five rats into a big, comfortable cage, you would only find one or two left in the morning, with a few fragments of animal wreckage strewed about to show you what had become of the others,

and that might give you a bad impression at the very start. On the other hand, you might get hold of a few easy-going, cheerful spirits, who would be perfectly willing to sacrifice their liberty for a comfortable home and plenty of food, and then you would reap endless amusement from the experiment, especially if you could contrive to let your captives out for a run in the room now and then, when they had sufficiently learnt that their cage was their home.

If you cared to see some good rope-climbing you might keep the cage on a shelf, and give them a rope, stretched tight from the shelf to the floor, as their only way of going up and down, and they would very soon learn to use it as their ladder. Then you would see why Nature has given us tails, or, at any rate, how we use them as balancing-poles when we do a bit of a climb. Of course, I do not say that there would not be trouble; relations would be severely strained now and then. When a rat wants to build a nest—and that is pretty nearly always—he takes what he fancies without asking you, whether it is the stuffing of your best cushion, or part of your Sunday hat, or a letter from your sweetheart, or a page or two of a valuable book, or your very last bootlace—or,

in fact, any of the things on which you set such a very exaggerated value, from our point of view. But, taking the bad with the good, I think that I may fairly advise you, if you are fond of pets, to give some of my family a trial.

If, however, you do not care to go so far as this in the matter of making yourself better acquainted with us, and yet would like to see for yourself what sort of creatures we really are when seen face to face, you may go to a place called the Zoo, if you can manage to find out the way. Personally, I have never been at all anxious to discover whereabouts it is, if all the stories which I hear about it are true. I am told that it is a place where there is a home for snakes which have lost their way and have come over to England. I suppose that really they have been arrested and imprisoned as troublesome aliens, because I feel pretty sure that you do not want any *more* in England. At any rate, they are there, so I am told, whatever may be the reason of their coming—they are there, and they are hungry, and the kindly keepers of the house, after casting about for a cheap and yet savoury food with which to satisfy the appetites of their prisoners, or guests (call them which you will), have come to the inevitable conclusion that there is nothing like

a good rat. Very complimentary for rats in general, I dare say, but most unsatisfactory, I should imagine, for the actual rats on whom the honour is to be conferred.

The general consequence is that you will find in this Zoo a large number of captive rats, whose function in life is to go down the gullet of a more or less ravenous snake. I have no doubt that the keeper will show them to you if you ask him nicely, and such is the careless happiness of our nature that I dare say that you will find them all gaily disporting themselves and playing about in captivity—behaving, in fact, more or less in the same way as they would if they were in their native wilds. Whether they are conscious or not of the fate which is in store for them I cannot say. I suppose that they are in blissful ignorance, and imagine that they are being kept as pets. Poor beggars! I would rather be shot!

Talking of shooting reminds me that I had a very narrow escape once. I suppose that an adventure is out of place in this chapter. Still, I gave you fair warning that it was going to be a chapter of scraps, and if you should happen to find one plum in a mountain of rather solid pastry, I do not see that you have any right to make a fuss,

so I shall put it in, and you can eat it or leave it, as you like.

This was the manner of it : I had pegged out a very nice little claim for myself. My outer hall, so to speak, was a little woodshed, where faggots were kept in piles for lighting fires. Nice, clean-smelling stuff firewood is. Under the floor I had made for myself a cosy nest, and I had discovered a way along a hollow wall, down a small precipice, and through a convenient opening, where a great piece of brick had fallen out. This opening brought me on to the shelf of an underground larder, where dainties of all kinds were kept ; and for a long time I was unmolested, and lived in something considerably sweeter and softer than clover.

Eventually some accident—I forget exactly what—led to the discovery of my presence, which was distinctly hard lines, as I had been particularly careful not to help myself clumsily or too freely, and then traps of all kinds were the order of the day. But in vain were all the cages and other devices spread in the sight of their intended victim. I was not quite a fool, even in those days, and I sternly refused to meddle with anything which could possibly prove to be a trap. And then I met a man who was cleverer than myself, and it was

purely a matter of accident that he did not get the better of me.

He based his nefarious scheme on the fact that if you tie a bit of thread or fine string across a rat's hole, he will carefully nibble it in half; and his trap was composed of string, an indiarubber band, one or two pieces of crooked wood, turning easily upon a loose screw, and an old pistol. I cannot, of course, tell you exactly what happened, but, after thinking it over carefully, I conclude that his scheme was somewhat as follows:

The pistol was loaded and lashed tightly to a beam, so that it pointed straight into my doorway above the shelf. One end of the indiarubber band was nailed to the wall, six inches or so on one side of my hole, and two threads were run through the other end of it. One of these threads was used to pull the band to its full stretch, passing across the middle of my hole, and being securely fastened to a nail on the opposite side; the other, by being attached to the crooked pieces of wood and other threads, made a connection with the trigger of the pistol. I cannot describe it very clearly, but I can see it all in my mind, and I feel pretty confident that you will be able to work it all out for yourself, if you care to try. Only be careful not to let the

pistol shoot *you* through the hand or anywhere else.

Mark now what would happen. Poor Mr. Samuel would come sneaking along the passage for his dinner, and would find a thread stretched tight across his doorway. 'Oho,' he would say, 'they think that a bit of thread will be enough to keep me out, do they? And what were my teeth given me for, I should like to know?' And so he would nip the thread in half with one snap of his long tusks. That would set free the band, which would pull the other string, and the rest would be just like ringing a bell or saying 'The house that Jack built.' The string would pull a piece of wood, which would pull another string, which would pull another piece of wood, which would pull another string (are you dizzy yet?), which would pull the trigger of the pistol, and poor Mr. Samuel ought to have a bullet through his brain.

As it happens he didn't, because the pistol was not pointed quite straight, or else was not lashed quite tight, and the bullet came smashing into the side of the passage, but I tell you that I never want to feel more frightened than I did at that moment, and as soon as my senses recovered themselves from the noise of the general scatteration, I did a bolt

which would have done credit to an express train and went somewhere else.

I cannot think that so clever an accident as that would have counted as being shot, and I might perhaps have become a new kind of ghost.

But it is time for me to say a word or two on the question of the year of ghost-life, to which I have alluded more than once. I had better say plainly that I have no very positive proof to offer you of the truth of my statements; if you are inclined to be sceptical, you will find rats here and there who refuse to accept the idea as even probable, but they are rather held in contempt as reprobates and runagates, and renegades, and you will find a pretty general belief among the more respectable members of our family that we shall enjoy one full year of a sort of shadowy existence as ghosts, provided always that we have kept the rules during our lifetime, and have made a decent exit from the stage at the finish. More than that you can hardly expect me to tell you except that we go back to the names of our infancy, and I shall once more become Sammy. Whether I shall regain the tip of my tail and my lost paw I really cannot say.

Drat it all! I wish that I were Sammy again, you know, instead of Mr. Samuel. I would gladly

go back and face all the dangers once more ; I would gladly become a sleek little, callow little, bumptious little, ignorant little weed of a rat such as I once was, with a tail untouched by calamity or honour, going securely though ingloriously on four very sound paws, if you would only give me back the supple muscles, and the sharp teeth and claws, and the light and careless heart, all of which things I took so much for granted in those early days.

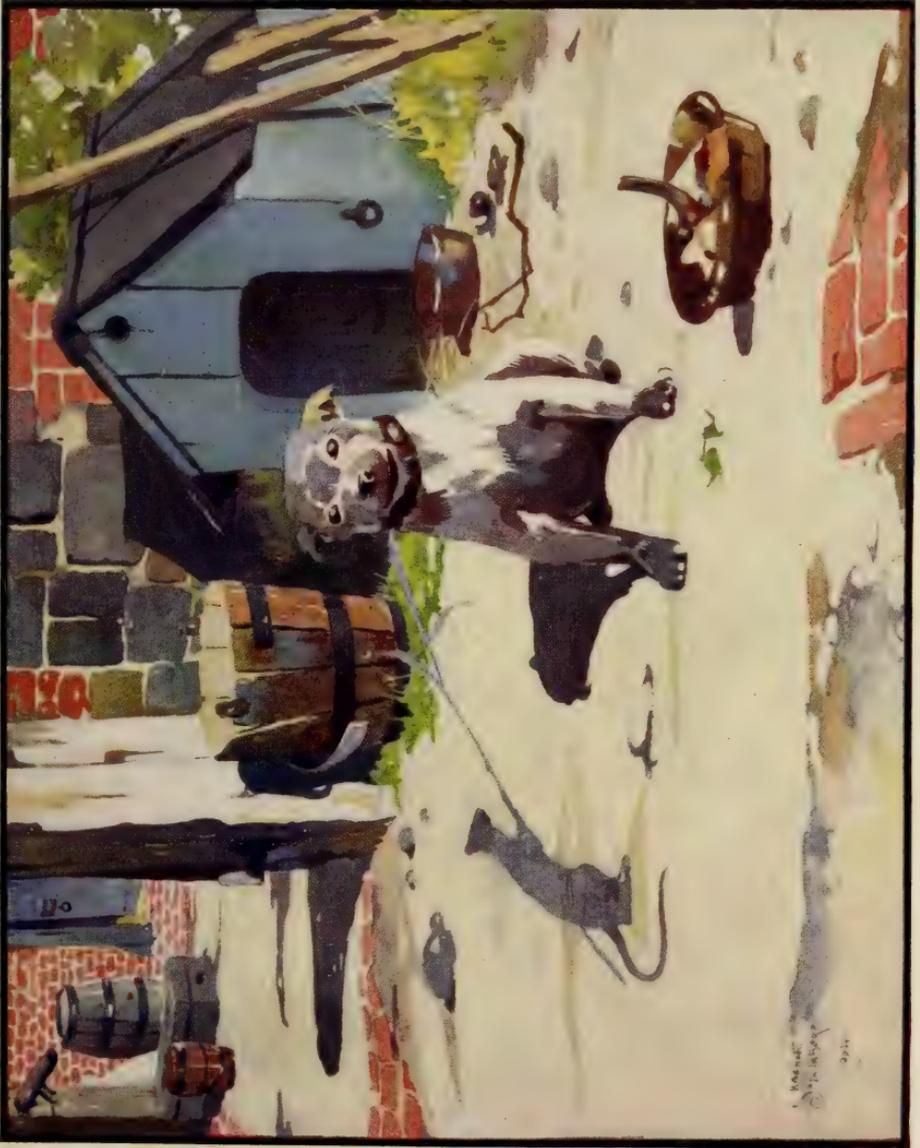
I cannot think as I now look back that I made *quite* as much use of Nature's best gifts as I might have made. I might have risked a little more and yet have come through safely to the same dignified but somewhat stuffy old age. I might have married more wives, fought more battles, killed more crayfish by the river, and done more joyous and light-hearted mischief generally in field and hedgerow, in barn and stack, in hovel and palace, than I contrived to squeeze into those ecstatic years. I do not exactly wish to say that I have not lived and drained the cup pretty dry, but one cannot look back out of the days of stiffness, and out of the nights of uneasy and broken slumber without thinking that perhaps—just *perhaps*—one might have contrived to do a *little* more.

However, little Sammy has gone, and he will

never return until I find him on the other side, and then little Sammy will have a good time for one more year, scampering about the banks and making fun of the owls, who will think that they see a rat, and will swoop down and catch nothing. I hope that they will hurt their nasty claws against a stone. Also he will tickle the noses of the sleeping dogs until they twitch their legs and utter little squeaky barks in the excitement of the dream chase; he will rustle mysteriously about the rooms at night until he frightens people into declaring that the house is haunted. All these things and more will little Sammy do, and I almost wish that the time had come.

I wonder if you would like to take a stout stick and settle the question for me. I believe that I will sit quite still and take it as it comes. It is all rather a bore now, and yet, at times, I believe that I enjoy it. There is a certain amount of pleasure to be got out of sitting still, though you may not believe it, and out of thinking over all the fun that one has enjoyed.

I cannot venture to hope that it has been as great a pleasure to you to read as it has been to me to write; all that I ask is that you should look with some slight touch of toleration on our many



L. KASABEK  
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HE WILL TICKLE THE NOSES OF THE SLEEPING DOGS.



misdeeds, now that you know how greatly we enjoy the doing of them, and how little conscious we are of any mischievous intent.

I must say 'good-bye.' I dislike the word so greatly that I feel that I am going to burst—not into tears, but into poetry. I wonder whether you will read it—probably not. I still must write it as a relief to my own feelings; but in case you would rather be excused, let us plant on the way a large 'full-stop,' to grow into the Tree of Silence. Have you any idea what the Tree of Silence looks like? I think that I can tell you. It is like a great spreading Scotch fir, only the leaves, instead of being pine-needles, are all soft and fluffy like owls' feathers, and from the branches hang great festoons of drooping lichen as soft as down, so that you can hardly see the stem, and the whole tree is full of soft green darkness inside, lying in great pools and hollows.

When my ghost-year comes to an end, I shall creep very very slowly and quietly up the stem, and hide myself away somewhere snugly among the feathers, and then little Sammy will go to sleep and never be disturbed again. It is a lovely tree, and it all grows out of a little 'full-stop' like this.

You, who have listened to a creature's tale,  
With here a smile and there perchance a sigh,  
Go forth and wander over hill and dale,  
And tune your ear to Nature's melody.

For many men are deaf and many blind—  
No mystery rustles in the grass for them ;  
No joy to these, if haply they may find  
Some hidden stone in Nature's diadem.

Oh ! mighty mistress, mystery divine,  
To whom all creatures when they worship pray,  
Dip thy last shaft in potent anodyne,  
Then gently take thy gift of life away.

Thy gift has been a joyous gift to me,  
And I have used it well and used it ill ;  
Nor praise I claim, nor blame, if such there be ;  
I have done all things at thy sovereign will.

And, child of man, the days are long, you think :  
So write that you may never have to blot,  
For, drop by drop, Time steals away the ink,  
And no man comes to fill again the pot.

You rule the world : it lies between your hands ;  
'Tis yours to keep alive ; 'tis yours to kill ;  
But at your side a mighty presence stands,  
Who keeps the tale of good deeds and of ill.

So fare you well ; I may have writ in vain.  
We shall know all things when we creep to bed,  
Where, at the end of pleasure and of pain,  
The Tree of Silence rears its solemn head.



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### PUBLISHERS' NOTE

ONE of the most noticeable signs of the times is the newly-awakened interest in nature, especially as exemplified in animals and their ways. Animal books, if they are fresh and written by those who possess intimate knowledge of their subject, are eagerly asked for at the libraries and from the booksellers. In view of this Messrs. Adam and Charles Black have projected a series of Animal Auto-biographies. The general title speaks for itself; the books will deal entirely with

PUBLISHERS' NOTE—*continued.*

the life-stories of animals, and each will be written out of the fulness of first-hand knowledge by an author who has made the particular animal of his choice a familiar friend, and has earned the right to be its spokesman. Thus, though the series is designed for boys, it is probable that many adults will be attracted by the freshness of the books, and will find in them much that they did not know before. Children who have outgrown fairy-tales undoubtedly prefer this form of story to any other, and a more wholesome way of stimulating their interest in the living things around them could hardly be found. The autobiographical form was chosen after careful consideration in preference to the newer method of regarding an animal subjectively, because it is the first aim of the series to depict the world as it is seen through animals' eyes, and it is not possible to do this realistically unless the animal himself tells the story. Who but friend Samuel, for instance, the rat of Mr. Hewett's story, could describe his sensations in his home beneath the waving corn? Who but Kahwa the bear could account for that insatiable curiosity which so often led him into danger? The books will be splendidly illustrated with a series of illustrations in colour drawn by artists of repute and reproduced by a process that Messrs. Black have done much to make popular. The first Autobiography of the series will be "The Rat," by G. M. A. Hewett, the well-known author of "The Open-Air Boy." Mr. Hewett speaks of the Rat as "my *most* intimate friend." "The Rat" will, as in nature, be followed by "The Dog," whose story will be told by G. E. Mitton, the General Editor of the series, and author of "The Children's Book of London." The Bear, the Fox, and the Squirrel are now being interviewed by their spokesmen, and their autobiographies will follow in due course.

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