

A. L. O. E.

THE RAMBLES
OF A RAT

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PREFACE

Let not my readers suppose that in writing *The Rambles of a Rat* I have simply been blowing bubbles of fancy for their amusement, to divert them during an idle hour. Like the hollow glass balls which children delight in, my bubbles of fancy have something solid within them, – facts are enclosed in my fiction. I have indeed made rats talk, feel, and reflect, as those little creatures certainly never did; but the courage, presence of mind, fidelity, and kindness, which I have attributed to my heroes, have been shown by real rats. Such adventures as I have described have actually happened to them, unless they be those recorded in the 19th chapter, for which I have no authority. For my anecdotes of this much-despised race I am principally indebted to an interesting article on the subject which appeared in the “Quarterly Review.”

I would suggest to my readers how wide and delightful a field of knowledge natural history must open to all, when there is so much to interest and admire even in those animals which we usually regard with contempt and disgust. The examination of the wondrous works of nature is a study elevating as well as delightful; for the more deeply we search into the wonders around us, the more clearly we discover the wisdom which is displayed even in the lowest forms of creation!

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CHAPTER I

THE FAMILY OF RATS

My very earliest recollection is of running about in a shed adjoining a large warehouse, somewhere in the neighbourhood of Poplar, and close to the River Thames, which thereabouts is certainly no silver stream.

A merry life we led of it in that shed, my seven brothers and I! It was a sort of palace of rubbish, a mansion of odds and ends, where rats might frolic and gambol, and play at hide-and-seek, to their hearts' content. We had nibbled a nice little way into the warehouse above mentioned; and there, every night, we feasted at our ease, growing as sleek and plump as any rats in the United Kingdom.

We were of an ancient race of British rats, my seven brothers and I. It is said that our ancestors came over with the Conqueror, William; and we are not a little proud of our Norman descent. Our smaller forms, sleek black coats, long tails, and fine large ears, make us altogether distinct from the Norwegian brown rat, on which we look with – I was going to say with contempt, but I rather think that it is quite another feeling, and one to which neither rats nor men generally like to plead guilty. I know that we do not usually choose to keep company with them; but whether it be because their forms are coarser, their manners less refined, and their pedigree not so long, or whether it be because they sometimes have a fancy to nibble off the ears of their neighbours, or, when their appetite is uncommonly sharp, make a meal of their Norman cousins, we need not particularly inquire.

I said that I and my seven brothers were black rats; but I ought to make one exception. The youngest of the family was piebald – a curious peculiarity, which I never noticed in any other of our race. Yes, he was piebald; and not only had he this misfortune, but he was the clumsiest and most ill-shaped rat that ever nibbled a candle-end! Now, this was no fault of his, and certainly was no reason why he should have been despised by his more fortunate brothers. Man, of course, as a superior creature, would only look with kindness and pity upon a companion so unhappy as to have personal defects. He would never ridicule a condition which might have been his own, nor find a subject for merriment in that which to another was a cause of annoyance; but we were only inconsiderate young rats, and there was no end to our jokes on our piebald comrade. “Oddity,” “Guinea-pig,” “Old Spotty,” and “Frightful” – such were the names which we gave him. The first was that by which he was best known, and the only one to which he chose to answer. But he was a good-humoured fellow, poor Oddity, and bore our rudeness with patience and temper. He pursued the plan which I would recommend to all rats in his position: he joined the mirth which his own appearance raised; and when we made merry at the awkward manner in which he waddled after his more light-footed companions, he never took it amiss, nor retired into a corner of the shed to sulk, amidst rope-ends and bits of rusty iron.

I have said that we had merry nights in the warehouse. Often has the moon looked in through the dull, many-paned windows, lighting our revels; though we cared little for light, our delicate feelers almost supplying the place of eyes. But one night above all nights I remember!

There had been a great deal of moving about in the warehouse during the day, running of trucks, and rolling of casks. Brisk, the liveliest of my brothers, had sat watching in a hole from noon until dusk, and now hurried through our little passage into the shed, where we were all nestling behind some old canvass. He brought us news of a coming feast.

“A ship has arrived from India,” said he, “and we’ll have a glance at the cargo. They’ve been busy stowing it away next door. There’s rice – ”

The brotherhood of rats whisked their tails for joy!

“Sugar – ”

There was a universal squeak of approbation.

“Indigo – ”

“That’s nothing but a blue dye obtained from a plant,” observed Furry, an old, blind rat, who in his days had travelled far, and seen much of the world, and had reflected upon what he had viewed far more than is common with a rat. Indeed, he passed amongst us for a philosopher, and I had learnt not a little from his experience; for he delighted in talking over his travels, and but for a little testiness of temper, would have been a very agreeable companion. He very frequently joined our party; indeed, his infirmities obliged him to do so, as he could not have lived without assistance. But I must now return to Brisk, and his catalogue of the cargo.

“Opium – ”

“The juice of the white poppy,” said our aged friend, who had a taste for general information. “I’ve seen it produce strange effects when eaten in large quantities by men.”

“What effects?” said I. I was a very inquisitive rat, and especially curious about all that related to the large creatures upon two legs, called Man, whom I believed to be as much wiser as they are stronger than the race of Mus, to which I belong.

“Why, opium makes men first wild and bold, so that they will rush into danger or run into folly, quarrel with their friends and fight their foes, laugh and dance, and be merry they know not why. Then they grow sleepy, and though their lives might depend on it, not a step would they stir. Then, when they awake from their unnatural sleep, their bodies are cold, their heads heavy; they feel sick, and faint, and sad! And if this should happen day after day, at last the strong grows weak and the healthy ill, the flesh goes from the bones and the life from the eyes, and the whole man becomes like some old, empty hulk, whose timbers will hardly hold together! And all this from eating opium!”

“Ugh!” exclaimed Brisk; “leave opium to man; it is a great deal too bad for rats!”

CHAPTER II

A CLAP-TRAP DISCOVERY

With eager haste we scrambled into the warehouse, Furry, as usual, remaining behind on account of his infirmities. We were almost too impatient to wait till the men within should have finished their work, till the doors should be shut and locked, and the place left in quiet for us.

I soon found out what was to me a singular curiosity – a tooth; I felt certain that it was a tooth; but it was twice as long as any rat, counting from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail! I could not help wondering in my mind to what huge animal it could ever have belonged.

“Isn’t that called ivory?” said Oddity, as he waddled past me.

I felt inexpressible pleasure in gnawing and nibbling at the huge tusk, and polishing my sharp teeth upon it. “How I should like to see the enormous rat that could have carried such a tusk!” I exclaimed. “Oh! how I should delight in travelling and seeing the world!”

“You’ve something to see worth the seeing, without travelling far!” cried Brisk. “Such a fragrance of cheese as there is yonder! Why, Ratto, its delicious scent reaches us even here!”

I was so busy with my tusk and my reflections, that I scarcely looked up; but Oddity turned his eyes eagerly towards the spot.

“Now, I propose that we have a race to the place!” cried Brisk; “and he who gets first shall have his pick of the feast! Leave Ratto to his old bone! Here are seven of us: now for it; once, twice, thrice, and away!”

Off they scampered helter-skelter, all my seven brothers, awkward heavy Oddity, as usual, in the rear. He had often been laughed at for his slowness, but this time it was well for him that he was slow! On rushed the six foremost, almost together, scrambling one over another in their haste; they disappeared into what looked like a dark hole, and then – alas! alas! what a terrible squeaking!

Poor unhappy brothers! all caught in a trap! All at the mercy of their cruel enemy, man! I ran to the spot in a terrible fright. Nothing of my six companions could I see; but Oddity, with a very disconsolate look, was staring at the drop of the trap. His had been a very narrow escape, – it had grazed his ugly nose as it fell!

This is a very melancholy part of my story, and I will hasten over it as fast as I can. In vain the poor captive rats tried to gnaw their way to freedom from within, while Oddity and I nibbled from without. There was something which defied even our sharp little teeth, and all our efforts were in vain. My poor brothers could not touch the fatal feast which had lured them to their ruin! They passed a miserable night, and were every one carried off in a bag to be worried by dogs in the morning!

“Cruel, wicked man!” I exclaimed, as with my piebald companion I sought my old shelter behind the canvass in our shed. My exclamation was overheard by old Furry.

“Cruel, wicked man!” he repeated, but in a different tone from mine; “well, I think that even when setting a trap to catch inexperienced rats, man may have something to say for himself. I have often noticed the big creatures at work, and much they labour, and hard they toil, and we can’t expect them to be willing to take so much trouble to collect dainties just to feast us! Those who live on the property of others, like rats, have no right to expect civil treatment!”

“Are there any creatures that lay traps for man?” said I, in the bitterness of my spirit almost hoping that there might be.

“As well as I can understand,” replied Furry, “man himself lays traps for man. I have seen several of these traps. They are large, and generally built of brick, with a board and gilt letters in front. They are baited with a certain drink, which has effects something like opium, which destroys slowly but surely those who give themselves up recklessly to its enjoyment.”

“Well,” cried Oddity, “having once seen what comes of running into a trap, I, for one, shall be always on my guard against them, and am never likely to be caught in that way. I suppose that it is the same with man. When he sees that one or two of his companions are lost by the big man-trap, he takes good care never to go near it himself.”

“Not a whit!” exclaimed Furry, with a scornful whisk of his tail. “They like the bait, though they know its effects quite well. They walk with open eyes into the great man-trap, they hasten merrily into the great man-trap, when the gas-lights are flaring, and the spirits flowing, and the sound of laughter and jesting is heard within! They know that they are going the straight, direct way to be worried by sickness, poverty, and shame, (what these are I never heard clearly explained, but I have gathered that they are great enemies of man, who are always waiting at the door of the great man-trap,) and yet they go gaily to their ruin!”

“So this is your account of the wise creature man!” I exclaimed; “he is a great deal more foolish than any rat!”

CHAPTER III

POORER THAN RATS

We had not our shed always to ourselves. One cold evening in autumn, when there was a sharp east wind, and a drizzling rain, two human creatures came into the place and cowered down in a corner of our shed. I call them human creatures, for they certainly were not men; they were so different from the tall powerful fellows whom I had occasionally seen at their work in the warehouse. These were much smaller, and so thin that their bones seemed almost ready to break through the skin. Their hair hung in long loose masses about their ears. They had nothing on their feet to protect them from the stones, and one of them had a hurt upon his heel, which looked red and inflamed.

I found that these were young human beings, neglected and uncared for, as young rats would not have been. We were at first afraid of them, and only peered out curiously upon them from our holes and hiding-places; but when, gathering courage, we ventured to come forward, we seemed to frighten them as much as they had frightened us.

“Look there – there, Bob!” screamed the younger child, clinging more closely to his brother.

“Them bees rats,” said the other one more quietly. His poor thin little face looked as if the life and spirit had been so starved out of it, that he could not be much astonished at anything.

“I don’t like staying here, Bob, amongst the rats!” cried the terrified little one, attempting to pull his brother towards the entrance by the sleeve of his jacket. The wretched rag gave way even under his weak pull, and another rent was added to the many by which the cold crept in through the poor boy’s tattered dress. “I won’t stay here; let us go, let us go!”

“We’ve no-wheres to go to,” replied Bob, in the same dull, lifeless tone. “Never you mind the rats, Billy, them won’t hurt you,” he added.

Hurt him! not we! If ever I felt pity it was for those ragged little urchins. We were well-fed, but they were hungry; Nature had given us sleek warm coats, but they trembled with cold. It was very clear that it was much harder to them to support life than if they had been rats. I wondered if in this great city there were many such helpless children, and if there were none to care for them!

“I say, Ratto,” observed Oddity, licking his soft coat till the beautiful polish upon it made one almost forget its ugly colour, “’tis a pity that these children are so dirty; but may be they are not so particular about such matters as we rats.”

In time a sort of acquaintance grew up between me and the ragged boys. We ceased to fear each other, and I would venture almost close to Billy’s thin little hand when he had a crust of bread to eat, for he always broke off a little bit for me. The poor little fellow was crippled and lame, so he rarely left the shed. Bob often went out in the morning, and returned when it was growing dark, sometimes with food, and sometimes without it; but whenever he had anything to eat, he always shared it with his little lame brother. I see them now, crouched close up together for the sake of warmth. Sometimes Billy cried from hunger and cold, and his tears made long lines down his grimy face. Bob never cried, he suffered quite quietly; he patted his little brother’s shaggy head, and spoke kindly to him, in his dull, cheerless way. I felt more sorry for him than for Billy.

The little one was the more talkative of the two. Perhaps he was more lively in his nature; or perhaps, from having been a shorter time in a world of sorrow, he had not learned its sad lessons so well. I certainly never heard him laugh but once, and then it was when Oddity, who was more shy than I, ventured for the first time since Billy’s coming to cross the shed.

“Oh! look – look, Bob! what a funny rat! what a beauty rat!” he cried, clapping his bony hands together with childish glee.

It was comical to see the expression on Oddity’s blunt face on hearing this unexpected compliment, perhaps the first that he had ever received in his life. It was enough to have turned the

head of a less sober rat; but he, honest fellow, only lifted up his snub nose with a sort of bull-dog look, which seemed to say, “Well, there’s no accounting for taste.”

“Bob,” said little Billy one evening, with more animation than usual, “I’ve been a-watching the rats, and I saw – only think what I saw!”

“Eh, what did ye see?” replied Bob, drowsily, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. He looked very hungry and tired.

“I was a-watching for the fat spotted one which ran across yesterday, when out came creeping, creeping, two others” – the child with his fingers on the floor suited his action to his words, – “and one had some white on its back; it looked old and weak; and Bob, I saw as how it was blind.”

“A blind rat!” cried Bob; “’twould soon starve, I take it.”

“But there was the other rat at its side, with such shining eyes, and such a sharp little nose!” I plead guilty to vanity; I could not hear such a description of myself with Oddity’s sober composure. “And the old blind rat had a little bit of stick in its mouth, just as the blind man in the lane has a stick in his hand, and the pretty black rat took the other end in his teeth, and so pulled the old un on his way.”

“I’ve never heard of rats doing that afore,” said Bob.

“That’s not all that I saw about ’em,” continued Billy. “Out comes the funny spotted rat from its hole; so I keeps very quiet, not to frighten it away. And it pattered up to the place where I put the little crumbs; and what do you think as it did?”

“Ate them,” was Bob’s quiet reply.

“No, but it didn’t though!” cried Billy, triumphantly; “it pushed them towards the old blind rat. Neither the black un nor the spotted un ate up one crumb; they left ’em all for the poor blind rat! Now wasn’t them famous little fellows!”

“So rats help one another,” said Bob. He did not speak more; but as he leant back his head, and looked straight up at the roof of the shed, (there was a great hole in it which the stars shone through, and now and then a big drop of water from the top came splash, splash, on the muddy floor below,) he looked up, I say, and I wonder whether he was thinking the same thing as I was at that moment: “Rats help one another; do none but human beings leave their fellow-creatures to perish!”

CHAPTER IV

HOW I MADE A FRIEND

I always ate my supper in the warehouse, but I need hardly say that Oddity and I carefully avoided the spot where the tragedy of our six brothers had occurred. We were by no means the only rats who found a living in the place at the expense of our enemy, man. There were a good many of the species of the large brown Norwegian rat; but as I have mentioned before, we usually kept out of their way, from a tender regard for our own ears.

There was one brown rat, however, whose fame had spread, not only in his own tribe, but in ours. For quickness of wit, readiness in danger, strength of teeth, and courage in using them, I have never yet met with his equal. Whiskerandos was a hero of a rat. Was it not he who in single combat had met and conquered a young ferret! an exploit in itself quite sufficient to establish his fame as a warrior. They had been opposed to each other in a room lighted by a single window. Whiskerandos, whose intelligence at once showed him the importance of position, took his station beneath this window, so that the light was in his enemy's eyes, and compelled him to fight at disadvantage. For two long hours the battle lasted, but at length the ferret lay dead upon the floor!

Several scars upon the neck of Whiskerandos bore witness to this terrible encounter, and many others in which he had been engaged. He had lost one ear, and the other had been grievously curtailed of its proportions, so that altogether he had paid for fame at the price of beauty; but he was strong and bold as ever, and his appearance one night in our warehouse created quite a sensation in the community of rats.

There was one brown rat, in particular, that seemed to wait upon him, and pay him court, as though, having no merit of his own, Shabby fancied that he could borrow a little from a distinguished companion. I have often seen this in life, (I am now an old and experienced rat,) I have seen a mean race following and flattering their superiors, ready to lick the dust from their feet, not from real admiration or attachment, but, like a mistletoe upon a forest tree, because they had no proper footing of their own, and liked to be raised on the credit of another. It is easier to them to fawn than to work, to flatter the great than to follow their example.

I own that I was afraid of Whiskerandos, and yet he passed without touching me, quite above the meanness of hurting a creature merely because it was weaker than himself. But Shabby gave such a savage snap at my ear that I retreated squeaking into a corner. I almost think that I should have returned the bite, had not his formidable companion been so near; and it was probably this circumstance which gave the mean rat courage thus to attack me without provocation. From what I have heard of boys tormenting cats, mice, birds, anything that they can easily master, while they pay proper respect to bulldogs and mastiffs, I have an idea that there are some Shabbys to be found even amongst "the lords of creation."

I was busy at my supper, when, chancing to look towards the fatal hole in which my six brothers had been caught, I saw Whiskerandos and his follower merrily advancing towards it, doubtless attracted, as the former victims had been, by a very enticing scent.

I do not know how man would have behaved in my position. These certainly were no friends of mine; but then they were rats; they were of the race of Mus. I could not see them perish without warning them of their danger.

"Stop! stop!" squeaked I, keeping, however, at a respectful distance; "you are running right into a trap!"

Whiskerandos turned sharp round and faced me. I retreated back several steps.

"Bite him, – fight him, – shake him by the neck!" cried Shabby; "he knows there is a dainty feast there, and he would keep it all for his ugly black rats!" Shabby was a great fighter with words;

those of his character usually are; nor was he in the least particular, when he gave his bad names, that they were in the least suitable and appropriate, or he would never have applied the term “ugly” to us.

“You’ll pay for your dainty feast if you go one foot farther!” I exclaimed; feeling, I confess it, very angry.

“Who’s afraid!” cried the boaster, flinging up his hind legs with a saucy flourish as he scampered on. Clap! he was caught in the trap!

Poor rat! had he possessed the courage and skill of Whiskerandos himself, they would have availed him nothing. His miserable squeaking was louder than that of all my six brothers put together. He would not take advice, and he found the consequences. He thought himself wiser than his neighbours, and only discovered his mistake when it had led him to destruction. Had he only listened to the counsels of a little black rat!

Whiskerandos remained for some moments quite still, looking towards the dismal prison of his companion. He knew too well that it was impossible to rescue him now. Then, with such bounds as few rats but himself could make, he sprang to where I was standing.

“Rat!” he exclaimed, “you have saved my life, and I shall never forget the obligation. Though you are black and I am brown, no difference between us shall ever be regarded. Let us be friends to the end of our days!”

“Agreed!” I cried; “let’s rub noses upon it!” and noses we accordingly rubbed.

He never flinched from his word, that bold Whiskerandos. I never feared him from that hour; no, not even when I knew that he was hungry, and had tasted no food from morning till night; I knew that no extremity would ever induce him to eat up his friend; and many a ramble have we had together, and through many strange paths has he led me. I ventured even into the haunts of the brown rats, for his presence was a sufficient protection. None would have dared to attack me while he was beside me, – I should hardly have been afraid of a cat!

I had naturally a fancy for roving, and a great desire to know more of the world; and what better guide could I have had than the heroic Whiskerandos? He had not, however, been so great a traveller as Furry, – he had never yet crossed the water; but he and I determined, on some favourable opportunity, to take our passage in a ship, and explore some foreign region together.

There was but one subject on which Whiskerandos and I were ever in danger of quarrelling. I had made up my mind – and Furry, who was a very learned rat, was quite of the same opinion – that the ancestors of the brown rats came over from Hanover to England with George I. We liked to call them Hanover rats, but this gave great offence to the race, as it made their antiquity so much less than that which we claimed for ourselves.

“You affirm,” Whiskerandos would exclaim, “that you came over from Normandy in 1066, and we from Hanover in 1714, and that nothing was ever heard of us before that time. I affirm that it is a calumny, a base calumny! We came from Persia, from the land of the East; an army of us swam across the Volga, driven by an earthquake from our own country. Depend upon it, we were known there in ancient times, and went over Xerxes’ great bridge of boats, and nibbled at his tent-ropes and gnawed his cheese while he fought with the Greeks at Thermopylæ.”

“After all,” thought I – I did not say it aloud, for the great weakness of Whiskerandos was his pride of birth, his anxiety to be thought of an ancient family – “the great matter is not whether our ancestors do honour to us, but whether by our conduct we do not disgrace our ancestors.”

CHAPTER V

HOW BOB MET WITH AN ADVENTURE

I was often puzzled by the conduct of Bob; that was to be expected, seeing that I was a young and ignorant rat, quite inexperienced in the doings of man. Once or twice Bob had brought to the shed things which he could not eat and did not wear. I could neither imagine where he had got them, what he intended to do with them, nor what possible use he could make of them. He seemed inclined to hide them; and once, when he was showing to Billy a red handkerchief covered with white spots (though the weather was bitterly cold, he never attempted to tie it round his neck), the little boy looked up gravely into his face and said, "Oh, Bob, arn't you afeard?"

"What am I to do; we can't starve, Billy." He looked so wan and so woe-begone, as he bent over the little lame child, that it seemed to me that never was a creature so wretched as that desolate boy. The next morning he took away the handkerchief, and in the evening he brought home bread.

Once when he returned, the snow was fast falling, drifting through the roof, and in at the door, till Billy could scarcely find a clear spot on which to rest his languid little frame. He was always on the look-out for his brother, as soon as the sky began to darken. Well might he watch on that day, for he had not broken his fast since the evening before; and his lips were blue with hunger and cold, and he was lonely, very lonely, in the shed.

Presently Bob came hastily in; we had not heard his step on the soft snow. The flakes were resting on his rags and whitening his hair, as he threw himself down by his brother.

"Oh! Billy!" he exclaimed, and burst into tears.

"What have you got?" cried the little one joyfully. "A big loaf!" and he tore it asunder in his eager haste, and ate like a famished creature.

"And see this!" said Bob; and he wrapped round the shivering child a warm cloak which he had carried on his arm.

Billy opened his eyes with an expression of astonishment, which brightened into joy as he felt the unwonted warmth. "Oh! Bob!" he exclaimed, with his mouth full of bread; "where did you get this? Did you steal it?"

"No; and I'll never steal no more; never, never!" and the boy sank his head down upon his chest, and sobbed. I had never seen him shed a tear till that day.

"Tell me all about it, tell me!" cried Billy, almost frightened by his brother's unwonted emotion; but it was a little time before Bob made reply.

"I followed he – a fine, tall gemman. I had my fingers in his pocket, and he clapped his hand on 'em, and catched me!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Billy, with eyes and mouth wide open, in alarm. "And did he not call the beaks, and have you up?"

"No; he spoke to me; he spoke so kind-like. He told me that I was about a sin – a great sin. Nobody never spoke so to me afore!" Again the boy's feelings seemed ready to burst forth. "And he took me to a baker's, and got me this; and to a shop, and bought me that; and says he, "Has no one taught you to know right from wrong?" And says I, "Nobody never taught me nothing!" Then he takes me a good way round, down a little lane, right into a Ragged School."

"What's that?" inquired Billy curiously.

"A place where a great many poor boys were together in a big room, where there were wooden benches, and pictures and other things hung on the walls. I should never have dared to go in; but that good gemman took me, and led me right up to a man who was standing with a row of little chaps afore him. And the gemman put his hand on my shoulder, and spoke for me, and said a many things that I can't remember; but one thing I remember quite well: "You come here every evening," says he,

“and you’ll be taught your duty, and how to do it. I am leaving London soon; but I will be back in a few weeks, and I’ll come and ask the master how you have been behaving; and if I find that you’ve been trying to become a better boy, I will not lose sight of you, my friend.”

“Did the gemman say all that?” exclaimed Billy.

“And a great deal more. Such beautiful talking! And to see how gentle and kind he looked, as if he didn’t think me such a bad un after all!”

“Did you tell him of me?” asked Billy anxiously.

“Yes; I told him that I had one little brother, and he was lame; and that mother was dead and father in jail, and that we had no one to care for us, and that we were often hungry, and always cold; and he looked quite sorry to hear it.”

“Did he though?” cried Billy, much surprised. “And will you go to the Ragged School, Bobby?”

“Won’t I!” cried the boy, with a little more energy than I had seen in him before; “why, if I don’t, I won’t see that good gemman again!”

“And won’t you take me with you too?” said little Billy.

CHAPTER VI

HOW I VISITED THE ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS

That night I set out with Whiskerandos on more extended travels than any which I had yet attempted. Oddity might have accompanied us, but he preferred, as he said, home comforts and a nibble in the warehouse. I knew that he would look after old Furry, whose infirmities were sadly increasing upon him, so that I had no fear of the blind rat being neglected.

I suspected that more than one reason induced my pie-bald brother to decline the tour. He had struck up an acquaintance with Bright-eyes, a lively little rat, and probably found his society more agreeable than that of Whiskerandos, of whom he always stood somewhat in awe. I shall not pause on the description of our underland journey through the wondrous labyrinth of passages which, like a net-work, spreads in every direction under the foundations of London. I saw more rats in these gloomy lanes than I had ever imagined existed in the world. I should have been afraid to have passed them, so fierce they looked, so ready to attack an intruder, had not Whiskerandos been at my side. He neither provoked contests, nor feared them – neither gave offence willingly, nor took it readily – but had withal so resolute an air, that few would have been disposed to have quarrelled with him. I was heartily glad, however, when again we emerged into the light of day; and I was full of astonishment at the sight of green grass and trees, such as I had never beheld before.

“Ah!” said Whiskerandos, smiling at my delight, “you should see this grass in the fresh spring, and those black bare trees when the bright young leaves are upon them. The branches of yonder row seem dropping their blossoms of gold; and how sweet is the scent of the hawthorn! But I would not have you pass through that iron paling to examine more closely the beauties of the garden; the square would be a charming place, no doubt, if it were not haunted by cats.”

I had never seen a cat in my life, but I started instinctively at the name. “Take me anywhere,” I exclaimed, “take me anywhere that you will, so that I never come in sight of one of those terrible creatures!”

“I am going,” said Whiskerandos, “to take you where there are cats so huge that one could take a man’s head in her mouth, or strike him dead by a blow of her paw!”

“Oh, for my shed! Oh, for my quiet hole! for Furry, and Oddity, and my peaceable companions!” thought I. “What folly it was to venture into the world with such a guide as this desperado, Whiskerandos!”

I suppose that the bold rat read my thoughts in my frightened face, for he hastened to reassure my mind. “The big cats,” said he, “some with long flowing manes, some spotted, some striped black and yellow, have no power to harm us. They are kept in barred cages by man, and spend their lives in wearisome captivity, denied even the solace of amusing themselves by catching a mouse for supper.”

It was the dawn of a winter’s morning, when with my comrade I merrily made my way across the park. The grass was whitened with hoar-frost, which also glittered on the leafless boughs of the rows of trees which lined the long straight avenue. We entered the gardens without paying toll, or in any way obtruding ourselves on the notice of man.

“See here!” exclaimed Whiskerandos, half pettishly, as we passed a pond with a curious wire-fence all round it. “What a dainty breakfast we should make of some of the delicate young water-fowl, but for the extraordinary care which has been taken to shut us out! We can look in, to be sure, and see our prey, but the ducks do not even flutter, or move a wing, so secure are they that we cannot reach them!”

The season being winter, we were unable to see many animals from tropical climes, whose health would have suffered from exposure to cold. I however regretted this but little. The white bear was shaking his shaggy coat, the wolf pacing uneasily up and down his den, birds pluming their

feathers in the dull red light, while the monkeys' ceaseless jabber sounded from the walls of their prison.

“Whiskerandos,” said I to my guide, “I care little for making acquaintance with cats, whether they be little or big; but if any foreigners of the race of *Mus* be kept here, might I request you to introduce me to them?”

Whiskerandos pointed with his nose towards a building. “You will find relations there,” he said, “some of the forty-six classes of our race, known by the family likeness in their teeth.¹ For me, I'm going to pay a visit to the monkeys' house; I'm sure there to find some provision, always a matter of importance to a rat. The door is shut, but I'll not trouble the keeper to open it for me!” So saying, with wonderful agility he began to climb the building, and soon vanished through a hole in the roof.

Food was to me a subject of at least as great importance as to Whiskerandos. Even my curiosity had to wait attendance on my appetite. I was fortunate, however, in discovering half a bun, which had probably been dropped by some child; and cheered and refreshed I proceeded to the building in which I was to make my affectionate search for distant relations. I carefully examined the walls, till I discovered a hole, probably made by some rat of the place, and through this I entered the house, and proceeded at once with eagerness to a small barred division, from whence a feeble squeak proceeded.

¹ I am not aware whether the Zoological Gardens at present contain specimens of the curious rats described in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VII

FINDING RELATIONS

“Well, this is at length such weather as a creature may live and breathe in! I’ve been half stifled all the autumn with the heat, but now the fresh keen air seems like a breeze from my own dear Lapland!”

“Lapland! oh! there is nothing like Lapland,” said a very dolorous voice in reply. I lifted up my eyes to get a glimpse of the speaker.

Within the cage were two beautiful little Lemmings, (I learnt their name afterwards as well as those of other inhabitants of the place.) They were not much more than half my size, had pointed heads, very short tails, and whiskers uncommonly long. Their coats were black and tawny, but yellowish-white beneath. I heard subsequently that their race inhabit Siberia, Norway, and other cold climes, moving in large bodies like locusts, and like locusts eating up every thing green. But this pair, as was evident from their conversation, had been natives of a country called Lapland.

“Oh for a sight of the icy lakes, the snow-covered plains and the reindeer moving lightly over them; while the rosy Aurora Borealis throws its bright streamers across the sky!”

“And the strange little huts,” rejoined the other, “made of briers, bark, felt, and reindeer skins, where, when we peeped under the curtains which made the door, we saw the tiny people, in their sheepskin doublets, sitting on their heels round the fire! I don’t wonder that the Lapps love their land; I don’t wonder that when long exiled from it, they die of intense longing to return. That will be my fate, oh! that will be mine!”

“Allow an English rat, gentle strangers,” said I, “to offer a little word of comfort. I grieve that you feel your captivity so much, that you so deeply mourn your absence from your dear native land. But is it not better to meet misfortune with courage, and bear it with patience? You are yet left the society of each other, you can yet talk over old days together, while the white bear growls in his prison alone, and the lofty camel has no companion near him.”

I was interrupted by some animal near dashing itself passionately against the bars of its cage, and, turning round, I beheld a very savage rat, which bore the name of the German Hamster. His head was thick, blunt, and garnished with plenty of whiskers; he had big eyes, and large, open, rounded ears. His back and head were of a reddish-brown colour, his cheeks red, his feet white, and he had three odd white spots on each side of his chest. But the funniest thing which I noticed about him, (I was always an observant rat,) was that he had a claw on his forefeet in addition to four toes, which I had never before seen in the tribes of Mus.

“Tis easy to talk of comfort!” he exclaimed angrily, “when a rat has freedom and everything else that he cares for! But here – why I have not even the comfort of going to sleep after the fashion of my country!”

“Not going to sleep!” I repeated in some surprise, thinking to myself that so peevish a creature must certainly be best in his sleep.

“No; who can sleep on bare boards, or a poor sprinkling of straw!” he exclaimed, striking contemptuously the floor of his cage. “I who used to burrow deep in the earth, and enjoy a long nap all during the winter, shut up in my snug little home, I know what comfort is! There is nothing like lying some feet under the earth, as quiet as if one were dead, and know that there is a good magazine collected of grain, beans, and pease, to feast on when one awakes in the spring.”

“But at any rate here you are well fed,” I suggested.

The words, however kindly intended, had only the effect of increasing the Hamster’s passion to a shocking extent. To my amazement and horror he blew out his cheeks till the size of his head

and neck exceeded that of his body. He raised himself on his hind legs, and but for the bars of his cage I believe that he would really have flown at me.

“Well fed!” he exclaimed, as soon as he could speak; “I should like to know what you call being well fed! Since I have come to this hateful country, not once have I had an opportunity of filling my cheeks with grain. Man, stingy man, thinks it enough to give me a wretched pittance from day to day, – to me who have had a hundred pounds of corn packed up in my own deep hole, – to me whose delight it was to carry three ounces weight of it at once in these bags with which Nature has provided my face!”

“Most curious and convenient bags they are,” said I, willing to appease him by a civil word, though I thought that thus puffed out with air, they anything but added to the beauty of his appearance.

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