

RAT STORIES.



THE rat, now so universally known, and generally looked upon as a pest by all, is commonly supposed to have come from Norway, and is, therefore, called (but wrongly) the Norway Rat. This is a strange mistake, for it would imply that this animal was aboriginal in that country; whereas, in fact, at the time when the name was first applied to it, it was not even known to exist there. It is now agreed by most naturalists that it is a native of India and Persia; that it spread onwards into European Russia, and was thence transferred by ships to England and elsewhere.

What has happened in England has happened elsewhere, viz.: the Norway rat has destroyed the aboriginal rat of the country. A gentleman whose family had property in Jamaica, informs me that several rats were imported to that island to keep down the plantation rats. This was not a wise plan, for no sooner had the Norway rats arrived in their new quarters, than they multiplied so exceedingly that they became a greater pest than the original rat.

Such is the amazing fecundity of this animal, that they would soon overrun the whole country, and render all our attempts to destroy them fruitless, had they no enemies to lessen their numbers. But this baneful increase is happily counteracted, not only by numerous foes among other animals, but by their destroying and eating each other. The same insatiable appetite that impels them to indiscriminate carnage, also incites the strongest to devour the weakest, even of their own kind; and a large male rat is as much dreaded by its own species as the most formidable enemy.

"I once" (says a writer in the *Field* newspaper) "had three rats brought to me in a cage; in removing one it got hurt. I fed them, and put them into a stable. The next morning there were only two rats in the cage, the injured rat having been set upon and slain by his fellow-prisoners. They had not only slain him, but had actually begun to eat him, choosing the head to begin upon. Wishing to see the result, I left him, and in the course of the day, although well supplied with bread and milk, these cannibals had nearly devoured their friend. I have preserved the bones as proof of the fact. I afterwards ascertained that it was one only of these rats that was murderously inclined, for he killed and ate every rat put in to him. In the course of about a month, this brute killed five rats that were put into his cage. He always began at the neck, just behind the ear.

During summer the rat resides chiefly in holes on the banks of rivers, ponds, and ditches; but on the approach of winter they visit the farm-houses, and enter the corn-ricks and barns, where they devour much of the corn, and damage more than they consume. They are very fond of pig-sties, running about among the pigs, picking up the leavings of the oatmeal out of the troughs, and even nestling down near to the warm body of the fat unwieldy porkers, whose obese sides make not bad pillows for his impudence, the rat.

A hungry rat will sometimes attack and kill an infant; a case occurred in 1853, at Bristol. "The mother was woke by the cries of her child, and she found that the poor little thing had been bitten by a rat under the right eye, and it was bleeding profusely." It ultimately died of hæmorrhage, the rat's sharp tooth

having probably cut across an artery or a vein.

I have frequently had rats brought to me in iron cages. On arrival they have shown themselves exceedingly fierce, biting at everything and uttering their peculiar cry of alarm when I went near them. In the course of a few hours they became pretty tame, even eating bread and milk out of a spoon introduced between the bars. In a day or two they take no notice of me whatever, except to beg for food with their noses through the bars when I go near; and here, be it observed, a rat invariably washes himself all over after eating, no matter what. The operation is performed just as a cat does it, viz., by licking the paws. They are naturally exceedingly clean animals: I never yet saw a parasite of any kind on one. When a rat eats, he, by means of his sharp front teeth, gnaws away a *mouthful*, which he deposits in a sort of pouch formed between his grinding teeth and his cheeks; then he ceases gnawing and masticates his food, by moving his jaws incessantly and without pausing. They move ten times faster than the jaws of a rabbit. When a rat drinks, he laps up the fluid like a dog, and does not suck it up like sheep. A rat generally tastes his food with his tongue previous to eating it.

It is curious to see a rat asleep. I never saw it but once, and that in a case where the animal was ill. It is as difficult to catch a rat asleep as it is a weasel. The rat coils himself into a ball, and places his nose down between his hind legs: his tail is curled up round the outside of his body: he then looks like a mass of hair. No part of his body projects but his two delicate ears, which are beautifully adapted for catching the least sound, and which seem to be placed there as sentries; and pretty sharp sentries they are. It is certainly not the case, as has been stated elsewhere, "that the garbage on which rats live poisons their teeth and renders the wounds they make

deadly." A rat, though living in and among garbage, is always clean in its person, and his teeth are always beautifully clean: the yellow-looking substance on the front part of the tooth is its natural colour, and not the result of the accumulation of tartar.

Some time ago the driver of a Bow and Stratford omnibus was moving some trusses of hay in his hayloft, when snugly coiled up in a corner, he found a little miserable-looking rat, whose mamma, having carefully tucked him up in bed, had gone out on a foraging expedition to find something for her darling's supper. The little fellow being of a remarkably piebald colour, excited the pity of the omnibus man, who took him up, and brought him home to his family. The little children soon took to their new pet, and named him Ikey, after their eldest brother, whose name was Isaac. The little creature soon grew up, and reciprocated the kindness he had received, by excessive tameness towards every member of the family. He was therefore allowed to roam about the house at perfect liberty. His favourite seat was inside the fender, or on the clean white hearth, but, strange to say, he would never get on it unless it was perfectly clean. On one occasion, when the good wife was cleaning the hearth, she gave Master Rat a push; up he jumped on the hob, and, finding it an agreeable resting-place, there he stayed. As the fire grew brighter and brighter, so the hob became warmer and warmer, till at last it became unpleasantly hot; but he would not move from his perch till the hair on his legs and body became quite singed with the heat.

His master had perfect control over him, and made, for his special benefit, a little whip, with which he taught him to sit upon his hind legs in a begging posture, jump through a whale-bone hoop, drag a small cart to which he was harnessed, carry sticks, money, etc., in his mouth, and perform many other amusing tricks.

The rat perfectly understood the meaning of the whip, for whenever it was produced, and his master's countenance betrayed coming wrath, in fear and trembling he would scamper up the sides of the room or up the curtains, and perch himself on the cornice; waiting there till a kind word from his master brought him down again, hopping about and squeaking with delight. In these gambols of mirth he would run so fast round after his tail, that it was almost impossible to distinguish what the whirling object was. At night he would exhibit another cat-like habit, for he would stretch himself out at full length before the fire on the rug, seeming to enjoy this luxurious way of warming himself. This love of warmth made him sometimes a troublesome creature, for when he found the fire going out and the room becoming cold, he would creep up into his master's bed, and try to insert his little body under the clothes. He was never allowed to remain here long, but was made to decamp as soon as his presence was discovered. He then took up his refuge in the folds of his master's clothes, which were placed on a chair, and of these he was allowed to retain quiet possession till the morning. The master became so fond of his rat that he taught him at the word of command, "Come along, Ikey," to jump into his greatcoat pocket in the morning, when he went out to his daily occupation of driving the omnibus.

He did not, however, carry him all day in his pocket, but put him in the boot of his omnibus to act as guard to his dinner. But why did not the rat eat up his master's dinner? because, as said the man, "I always give him his own breakfast before starting." The dinner was never touched, except when it happened to consist of plum-pudding. This Ikey could not resist; his greediness overcame his sense of right, and he invariably devoured the plums, leaving the less dainty parts of the repast for his

master. The rat acted as a famous guard to the provisions, for whenever any of the idle fellows who are always seen lounging about the public-houses where the omnibuses bait, attempted to commit a theft, and run off with the bundle out of the boot, Ikey would fly out at them from under the straw, and effectually put to flight the robbers.

At night he was taken home in his master's pocket, and partook of the family supper; but if any strangers happened to be present, he was taken with a shy fit, and, in spite of his hunger, secreted himself till they had gone.

His teeth, after a time, became bad and worn out, and the children finding this out, delighted to give him a sort of hard cake, made of treacle, called, in infant parlance, jumbles, or brandy-snacks. Of these Ikey, in his younger days, was very fond; but now, on the contrary, they gave him much trouble to masticate, and his perseverance and rage when attacking the said brandy-snacks caused the young folks many a hearty laugh. This rat is, I believe, still alive, and enjoys good health, though, the weight of age pressing on his hoary head, he requires many little attentions from his kind and tender-hearted protectors.

On the bleak and bare downs, near Isley, in Berkshire, not very far from the Didcot station of the Great Western Railway, are situated lone barns, in which the corn gathered from the neighbouring fields is stacked. Rats have been frequently met in colonies by shepherds at early morning, marching in long lines direct from one barn to another. They have been watched and seen to go direct across the country in a straight line. They generally leave one barn for another, when the wheat has been threshed out and their food thus taken from them. But the curious point is how they know where to go; how do they find out where there is a barn containing food for them? do they send out

scouts, or does their instinct guide them? I believe it is the same marvellous instinct that guides the hungry rats, as that which guides the swallow in her long and wearisome journey to warmer climates, or impels the shoals of herrings and sprats to visit our shores.

Poor Dr. Kane was seriously troubled with rats in his North Pole expedition, but afterwards they served him a good turn. He writes: "We have been terribly annoyed by rats; some days ago we made a brave effort to smoke them out with the vilest imaginable compound of vapours—brimstone, burnt leather, and arsenic; and we spent a cold night on deck in consequence, and to give the experiment fair play, but they recovered the fumigation. We now determined to dose them with carbonic acid gas: Dr. Hayes burnt a quantity of charcoal, and we shut down the hatches, after pasting up every fissure that communicated aft. They nearly set the ship on fire during this operation; but, however, the next day upon inspecting the scene of our operations, we found twenty-eight well fed rats of all varieties of age." Afterwards, when the crew were starving, the rats came in as an article of food, and Dr. Kane himself says:—

"We had failed to exterminate the animal by our varied and perilous efforts of the year before, and a well-justified fear forbade our renewing the crusade. It was marvellous, in a region apparently so unfavourable to reproduction, what a perfect warren we soon had on board. Their impudence and address increased with their numbers; it became impossible to stow anything below decks. Furs, woollens, shoes, specimens of natural history, everything we dislike to lose, however little valuable to them, was gnawed into and destroyed. They harboured among the men's bedding in the fore-castle, and showed such boldness and dexterity in dodging missiles that they were tolerated at last as inevitable nuisances. Before the winter ended I

avenged our griefs, by decimating them for my private table.

Before I pass from these intrepid and pertinacious visitors, let me add that, on the whole, I am personally much their debtor. Through the long winter night, Hans used to beguile his lonely hours of watch by shooting them with the bow and arrow. The repugnance of my associates to share with me the table luxury of 'such small deer' gave me the frequent advantage of a fresh meat soup, which contributed no doubt to my comparative immunity from scurvy." Again he writes: "Our diet will be only a stock of meat biscuit, to which I shall add for myself a few rats chopped up, and frozen into tallow balls."

The rat is one of the most despised and tormented of created animals; he has many enemies, and very few friends; wherever he appears, his life is in danger from men, dogs, cats, owls, etc., who will have no mercy on him. These perpetual persecutions oblige him to be wary in his movements, and call for a large amount of cunning and sagacity on his part, which give his little sharp face a peculiarly knowing and wide-awake appearance, which the most superficial observer must have noticed. Though, poor creature, he is hated and killed by man, his sworn foe, yet he is to that same ungrateful race a most useful servant, in the humble capacity of scavenger; for wherever man settles his habitation, even in the most remote parts of the earth, there, as if by magic, appear our friends the rats. There were thousands of rats in the camp before Sevastopol; and a rat hunt in the trenches was not an uncommon occurrence. Again, they swarm at the camp at Aldershot: the sentries see them at night going to the nearest water to drink. The rat quietly takes possession of the out-houses, drains, etc., and occupies himself by devouring the refuse and filth thrown away from the dwelling of his master (under whose floor as well as

roof he lives). This refuse, if left to decay, would engender malaria, and all kinds of smells, to the annoyance of the family, were it not for the unremitting exertions of the rats to get rid of it, in a way, no doubt, agreeable to themselves, namely, by eating it.

The best way, I believe, to get rid of rats is, as an old rat-catcher said to me, to "make the place too hot to hold them." As we have seen, they will migrate in bodies. To catch single individuals is of no use, unless there be an outlying rat about the premises; our efforts must therefore be directed to call their habit of migration into play, and make them go off in a body. To produce this effect,

it is a good plan to tar their holes well, or to do as Mr. Waterton did, tar a single rat and let him run: he will cover the sides of the runs with tar. Rats cannot bear tar; it sticks to their fur, and they cannot get it off again; nor, indeed, do they like the smell. Another way is to catch two or three, or if you cannot catch them, buy them; cover them well with horse turpentine and let them go. They will scent the runs well with it, and the suspicious inhabitants thereof will be off forthwith, thinking there is treachery about, and their quarters are becoming dangerous. The smell, too, is probably unpleasant to them.

