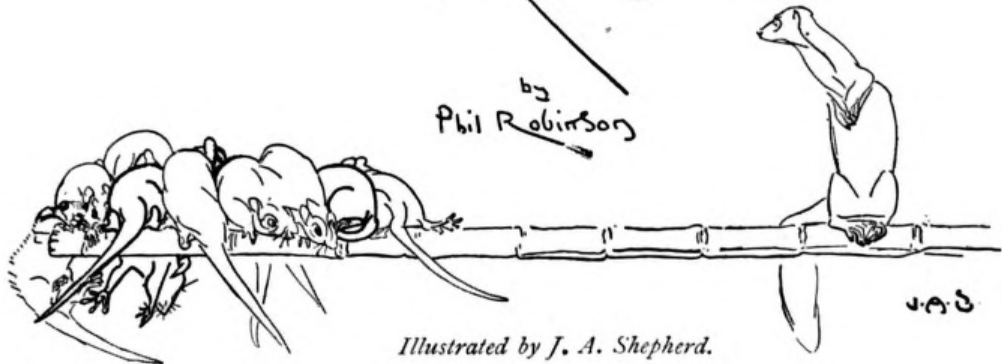


The Planters and The RATS.

by
Phil Robinson



Illustrated by J. A. Shepherd.



ONCE upon a time every planter in Jamaica grew sugar-cane, and the thoughts and the talk of the island were about sugar and the molasses that come from sugar and the rum that comes from molasses—except when they thought and talked about rats: the rat that ate the canes that gave the sugar that gave the molasses that gave them the rum. It ate from morning till night, and not, like many other thieves, from night till morning. For it slept all night and ate sugar all day.

A cocksure, do-as-you-please sort of rat that went about, as it were, whistling with its hands in its pockets and a general Bank Holiday kind of air. Ashamed of itself? Not in the least. On the contrary, it went scrambling about ostentatiously among the

canes, and the waving of the great feathery seed-plumes marked its track as it went plunging across the crops.

Little negro boys with long sticks were paid to chase the rats, and terriers were sent in to worry them. But the terriers preferred to chivvy the little negro boys; so that the rats put "the thumb of scorn to the nose of derision" and watched the fun.

The planters also tried cats.

Now, cats have not got a very lofty sense of moral responsibility. So that when they were expected to catch rats (and of a particularly nimble sort, too) as a daily duty they decided it was "not good enough." Besides, rats are not first-rate eating. And it very soon came to pass that these idle apprentices scorned the task they were set to



"A COCKSURE, DO-AS-YOU-PLEASE SORT OF RAT."

do and came to a friendly understanding with the rats, and lived in comfort and without exertion upon the fat little chickens that, in those days, used to go maundering about among the sugar-canes, and that snoozed for hours together in the bush. And the rats, so to speak, whistled louder than ever, and went about with their thumbs in their waistcoat arm-holes as who should say, "We and our friends the cats."

Then the sugar planters were greatly perplexed, till one day a man who had lived in Yucatan, and had often had brain fever there, got up and said: "In the country I came from there are enormous bull-frogs which eat the young of rats and eke of mice. Let us get some." So they got some bull-frogs from Yucatan; and they were so big and bellowed so loudly that the owners of the ship they



J.A.S

"THE RATS WHISTLED LOUDER THAN EVER."

came over in wanted to charge freight for the bull-frogs as cattle. Then the planters turned them into the sugar-cane fields to eat the young of the rats and eke of mice, as the man who used to have brain-fever in Yucatan had promised they should do.

But matters had evidently not been properly explained to the bull-frogs, for all that they did was to go very slowly over the ground like land-surveyors, measuring it with long strides, and stopping every now and again, and looking as if they were totting something up in their heads. And the cats moved out of their way respectfully as they came sprawling along in such a solemn, business-like way, and the rats looked down at them with surprise and scratched their heads. They would have liked to be saucy, but the bull-frogs had too impressive an appearance, and they felt



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"ALL THE BULL-FROGS DID WAS TO GO VERY SLOWLY OVER THE GROUND LIKE LAND-SURVEYORS."

as little boys in the parish church do when the beadle walks about amongst them.

At last the new-comers got to the other edge of the field, and then the biggest of them, after clearing his throat as if he were

in it. Let this be as it may be, the bull-frogs would not stop in the dry cane-fields, and a long time afterwards the man from Yucatan remembered that it was young

water-rats that the bull-frogs ate, and he advised them to get over some water-rats so that the bull-frogs might be made useful; but they put it all down to the brain fever he had had so much in the country which he came from. And to this day there are great bull-frogs in the ditches and pools in Jamaica, who grumble and shout for rum all night and eat ducklings all day.

So the rats were left alone for awhile, until one day a man who had lived many years in India, and had suffered repeatedly from



"THIS IS NO PLACE FOR ME."

going to make a speech, said gravely, in a voice that seemed to come from his trouser-pockets: "This is no place for me."

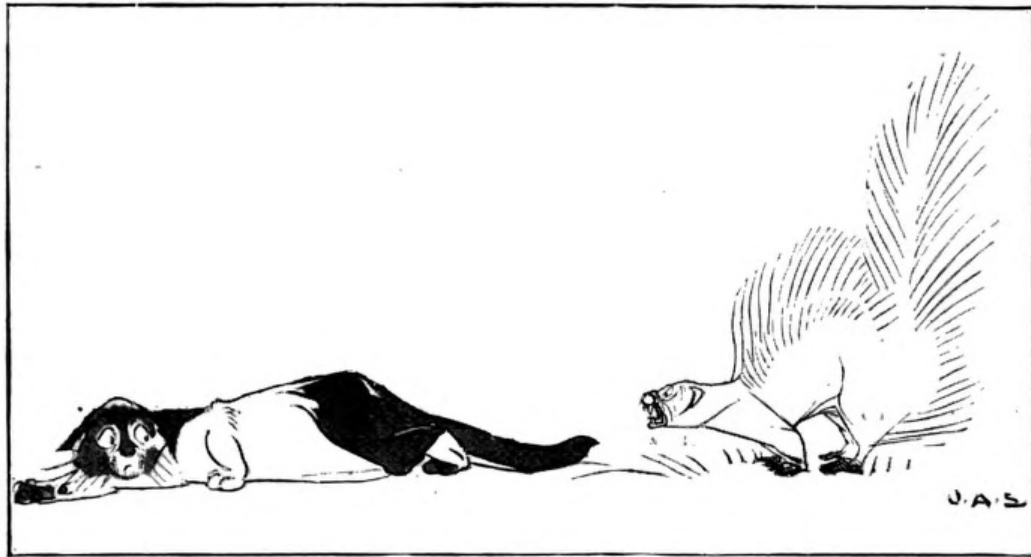
Then they all went sprawling out of the field into the irrigation ditches and the swampy bits of waste land and, sitting up to their chins in the mud, began bellowing with all their might, "Take me 'ome," "Take me 'ome," and answering one another, "No, they won't," "No, they won't." But some people think that they say, "Jug-o'-rum," "Jug-o'-rum," which is very likely, for bull-frogs are thirsty old souls, and rum is the best thing you can drink when you are in Jamaica, especially out of a jug that has lime-juice and sugar and iced water

sunstrokes there, said that in India there was "an animal like a very large ferret with a bushy tail which was kept half tame about the houses in order to rid them of rats and snakes and other vermin, and it was called a mongoose." "Let us get some mongooses at once," said the other planters.

So they sent to India and got some and turned them loose among the sugar-canes. And the cats saw them and did not like them, for when they spat at a mongoose and said rude things and tried



"THE CATS SAW THEM AND DID NOT LIKE THEM."



"THE CATS SLUNK AWAY."

to look big by putting up their fur, the mongoose would spit back at them and fluff out its fur and look big too. So the cats slunk away.

As for the rats, they were completely upset. If they had had time to do it, they might have affected airs of innocence and addressed the mongooses, as boys caught by

ing the rat was dead. The rats thought it shocking, for these pink-nosed wretches in grey coats wasted no time in argument but, like irresponsible special constables, knocked them on the head right and left. And apparently, too, all for the fun of the thing, for they couldn't eat half the rats they killed. And as there was no pleasing them, so there



"THE RATS BEGAN TO FEEL THAT A GREAT CHANGE HAD TAKEN PLACE."

Bobbies do, with "Please, sir," "Yes, sir," "No, sir," "It wasn't me, sir," "It was the other rat, sir." But there was no time for anything of the sort. "Halloa," said the mongoose, "there's a rat," and in a twinkl-

was no escaping them, for they hunted by night as well as by day, as stealthy as shadows and swift as lightning.

So the rats began to feel that a great change had taken place.

As for the little negro boys with sticks, and the terriers and the cats and the bull-frogs, they thoroughly understood them, just as pick-pockets understand the ordinary constable, but the "slimness" of the mongoose was a novel experience, and at first, flurried as they were and, so to speak, metagrobolized, they played into the hands of the enemy at every point. But in time the rats adapted their own tactics to those of the mongoose, and instead of trying to hide in holes or to run away over the flat from their swift-footed foes they abandoned the level ground altogether and took to the trees, intending to wait for the clouds to roll by. Now, the mongoose cannot climb up a tree, so a remnant of the host of rats survived. But they were not as they had been. They didn't go along whistling now with a jaunty, cigarette-in-the-mouth air, but kept out of sight and hearing as much as possible, and with the best grace they could pretended that "high life" suited them — well, not exactly "down to the ground"—but sufficiently.

The planters were delighted, patted each other on the back, and, metaphorically, patted the mongooses, too.

As for the mongooses, they thought themselves "no small potatoes," as the saying is, and went about with the confident familiarity of old valued servants, and basked openly in the sun in groups, like Greenwich pensioners. But even a mongoose cannot keep a family alive upon compliments alone, nor pay its rent and live respectably upon public applause. So it found out almost immediately. It was hungry. In fact, he, she, it, and they were all hungry. There was no use in going round the banana trees and the cocoanut palms and looking up at the rats washing

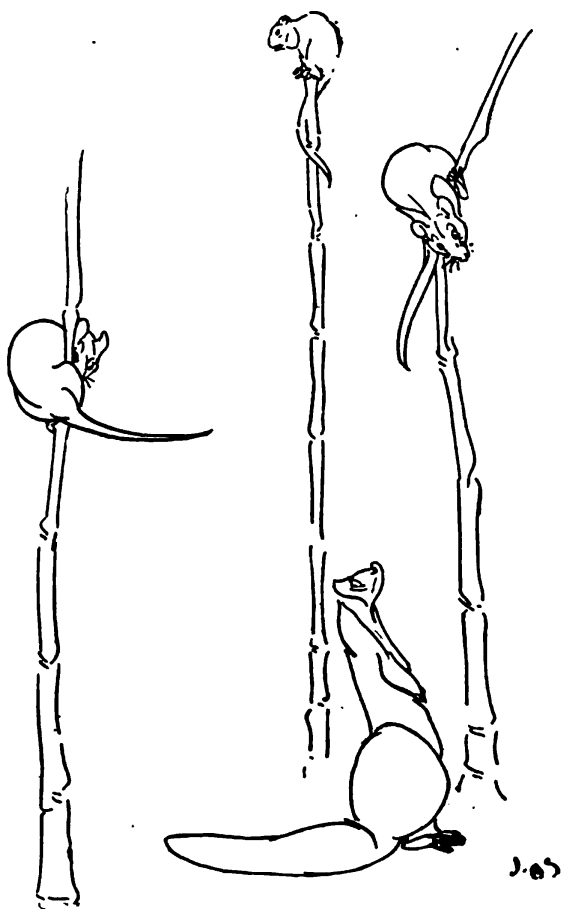
their faces on their towers of refuge, so they gave that up. Nor was anything to be gained now by searching rat-holes. And meanwhile everybody was getting hungrier and hungrier.

So they fastened their belts a hole tighter and went to other places to look for something else to eat. And they had not far to go. For in the bush, that is to say among the crops of cocoa and coffee and guinea-grass and the groves of orange and pimento, they found a multitude of harmless snakes and lizards who did good work by eating harmful insects. But the mongooses had to live, and so they began to eat them all up. Great was the dismay of these genteel garden snakes when they found out what was happening, for the mongoose munched them all up as if they were sticks of celery and never seemed to have had enough, though they got as fat as the old gentlemen in white waistcoats whom you see coming out of restaurants and strolling down Piccadilly on summer evenings.

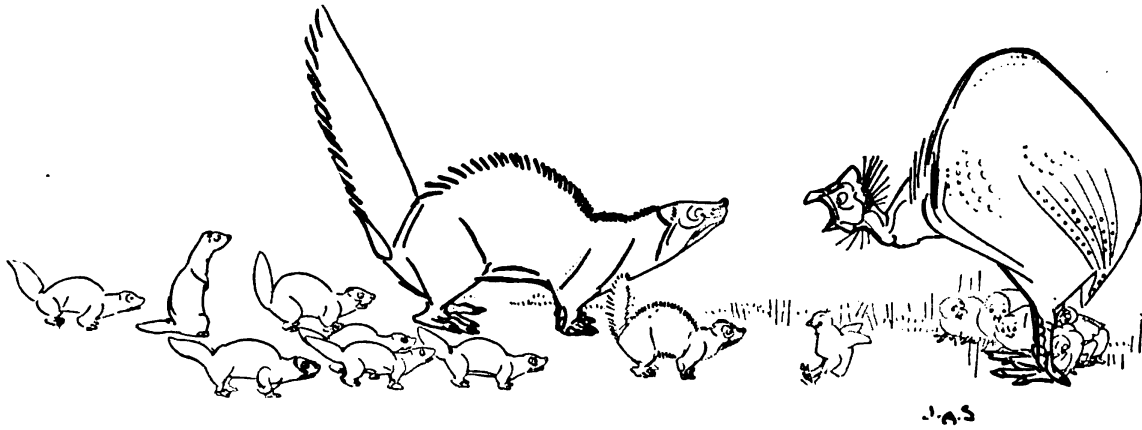
Very dismal, too, were the reflections of the lizards, as dismal as those of the oysters when they saw the carpenter begin to cut thin bread and butter for himself and the walrus. For the

mongoose made no more of them than you would of salted almonds during dinner, ate them by the half-dozen as hors d'œuvres and, tooth-pick in mouth, leaned back comfortably to wait for the next course that happened to come past.

Very often this would be a bird—a quail or a guinea-fowl or a ground-dove. But the mongoose did not mind a bit which it was. It took them as they came, and the more the merrier. But it was woe for the poor mother birds with their nurseries of little downy chicks when, creeping about among the



"THEY TOOK TO THE TREES."



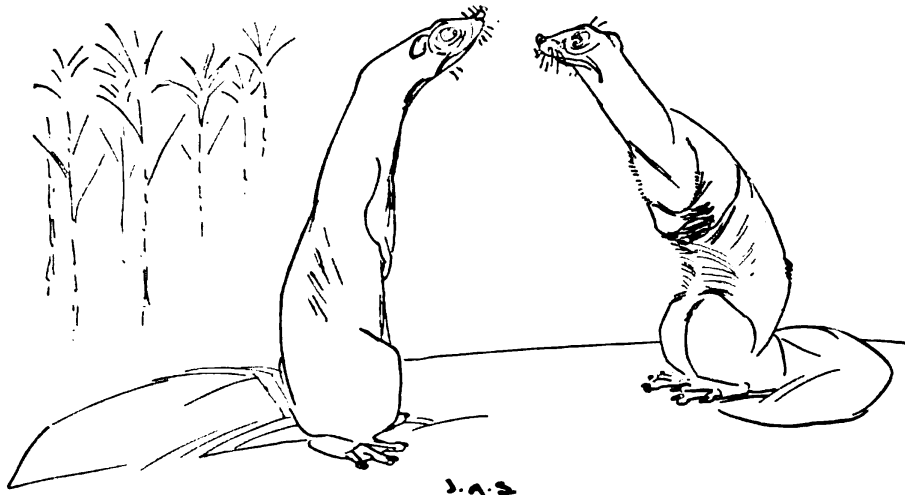
"THEY FOUND THEMSELVES FACE TO FACE WITH A MOTHER MONGOOSE."

shrubs, picking up their food of seed and insect, they found themselves face to face with a mother mongoose with her family of eight hungry, bloodthirsty, red-eyed little ones around her. Sunday-school children out with their teacher suddenly confronted in their harmless necessary walk by a party of ravenous cannibals in search of a meal could not have been more horrified, nor with better reason. For the mongoose is a pitiless creature.

But, after all, such fun (for the mongoose) could not go on for ever. Some day it *must* come to the last snake, the ultimate lizard, the concluding quail, and the final dove. And so the end arrived. "All gone!" as children say of the finished porridge. There

rest. All friendships were dissolved. Neighbours, or those that used to be neighbours, now eyed one another hungrily, askance, from opposite sides of the road. Mongoose saw in mongoose only a possible meal. When two came in sight each, as it were, tucked his napkin under his chin and shook up the sauce bottle.

And how will it end? Who can tell? Perhaps some day there will be left only two mongooses in Jamaica—the toughest two of all the mongooses — and next day there will be only one, in another week none, then the rats will all come down again out of the palm trees and the bananas, and whistle and romp in the sugar-canes as of old. And the



"NEIGHBOURS EYED ONE ANOTHER HUNGRILY, ASKANCE."

was nothing left for the mongooses to eat; nothing—but each other.

Then set in a miserable time. With knife and fork in one pocket and the cruets in another they crept about, dodging one another, careworn and haggard, like criminals under constant pursuit. Perpetually suspicious of each other's appetites, they got no

little negro boys will come back with their long sticks, and all will go on as before, and to the fowls and the doves the memory of the mongoose will be only as the memory of a bad dream.

And the planters and wise men of Jamaica will then have to think of some other plan for keeping the rats from the sugar-canes.