

RODDY, THE RAT.

By *Ulyss Rogers.*

A KIND-HEARTED, bald-headed, old gentleman came into the office a few days ago, and was so delighted with the smart office boy, Lobbs, that he gave him a shilling to go to the theatre.

That evening there was a great preparation in the Lobbses' household, the result of which was that the literary idol of the hearth eventually sallied forth, radiant in his best suit, and with all the available home-made pomade rendering iridescent his black and waving locks. On his way out he passed the cage containing his pet tame rat.

"It seems a shame to leave you, doesn't it, Roddy, old man?" he said, and he took the animal from his cage and fondled it in his hands.

Roddy's reply was to run up his master's sleeve and nestle snugly somewhere in the recesses of Lobbs's waistcoat.

An hour and a half later Lobbs's raven-coated cranium adorned the front row of the gallery, and Roddy peeped out from behind the boy's glowing necktie, as expectant of what was to follow as was his master.

The play commenced, and Lobbs, his chin resting upon the iron rail, was enthralled. Suddenly a piercing shriek from the boxes beneath rent the heated atmosphere.

In a moment consternation reigned supreme.

"Joe the Bruiser," who was just about to murder the hero of the piece, paused half way and looked round to see what was the matter; the manager rushed out from the wings, and the orchestra ceased their weird music, without which no stage murder could be satisfactorily accomplished. To a man the pit rose, and the gods mounted each other's shoulders and peered forth to see "what bloomin' fight was on now." A lady in evening dress had fainted, and two gentlemen in the same box were slashing away with stick and umbrella, apparently at invisibility. They hit it every time, and nothing else, but still weren't satisfied, and invisibility didn't seem to mind.

Their game was a mystery to all the audience, save one—our genius Lobbs. At the first glimpse of the battle in the box he had suspected what was afoot, and instinctively his hand went to his waistcoat. Roddy was gone.

With a yell, Lobbs scaled the iron bar and prepared to descend one of the supports leading to the circle below.

"Don't hurt him," he cried; "he won't bite. I'll soon catch him."

But the sight of Lobbs's unceremonious performance only created a wilder panic. The impression went abroad that some dangerous animal had got loose, and that the keeper was in chase. People rushed for the doors; a man yelled "Ware, lion," another shrieked "Fire," and pandemonium was loose.

Meantime, Roddy, all unconscious of the commotion he had caused, yet wondering greatly at the hostile reception accorded him, left the first box he had visited, and, clinging to the curtains, rounded into the adjacent one. The result was to send a fat lady into hysterics, whilst her husband,

emitting oaths of sulphuric hue, hurriedly dragged his spouse from the place.

Roddy appropriated the box, took up a position on the cushioned ledge in front, and settled down to enjoy the play. His meditations were interrupted by a walking-stick that whizzed past his nose. Roddy tapped his whisker reflectively.

"Seems a strange place, this," he remarked to himself.

Immediately afterwards a sixpenny book of words skimmed past on the other side.

"Highly dangerous, too," he added, glancing round to follow the course of the book with his eye.

Then an avalanche of missiles descended, and Roddy became really frightened. He skimmed along the fronts of all the boxes, and everywhere he went was met with shrieks from the women and unkind epithets from the men. He clambered up the curtains and got among the upper circlites, and in his fright he dodged between the legs of a big man who was trying to stamp on him, scampered up the back of a lady in evening dress, and ran across her bare shoulders.

Then over the balcony he went in hot haste, and down in double quick time to the pit. A dozen lads took up the chase and chivied him in and out among the stalls. His only refuge was to make for the orchestra. As he climbed the parapet the conductor received him by fiercely jabbing at him with his *bâton*; the bass fiddler slashed wildly with his bow; the flautist slung his flute madly among the players, chipping a piece out of the cornet player's nose, and embedding the whistle in the recesses of the big drum; the euphonium player endeavoured to imprison the intruder in the broad tube of his instrument; but Roddy escaped all, and made for the viola player, a pale-faced nervous youth, who, forgetting everything but the peril of the moment, banged away at the fugitive with his fiddle, smashing the bridge and strings with a loud report like a pistol shot, and impaling the instrument on a gas jet. Panic seized the musicians, and in a body they scaled the barrier and tumbled pell-mell over the footlights on to the stage.

Thither followed Roddy, now blind with excitement, and in a trice the boards were cleared. Then, mad with fright, the rat ran up a canvas tree and disappeared into the flies.

There he remained for some minutes, perched on a piece of scenery, his little heart thumping in a wild tumult against his ribs, and his bright pink eyes rapidly glancing right and left, and up and down, in mortal bewilderment and terror.

Suddenly he was startled by a voice behind him. "Roddy, old fellow; poor old chap! What did they do to him?"

Roddy knew the voice, and turning, saw the beaming face of Lobbs, who had been following his pet in the wild race round the theatre, and who had now, at the risk of his life, climbed his way up to his pet's refuge.

The rodent knew his master, and ran along the ledge to him. A moment more, and a tender hand was stroking his ruffled fur, and then Roddy slipped from the embrace and snuggled down in Lobbs's breast. Roddy has renounced theatre-going.