Of Men and Mice

by Neil Fraser



I was sitting in this room of a Bookseller's under the capacity of employee, just the other day in fact, when a face popped up and asked, 'Was that the tea?' What does she mean, I thought. I got up and walked over to the counter. She asked again, 'Was that the tea?' Her face was pressed against the window. I opened it to find out what was going on. There was a notice stuck on the window which I'd only previously seen from the back. 'The Trade Counter is Closed For Ever'. I think you could grow old. I didn't go back. Actually I had a couple of setbacks and forgot. I phoned and said I had left. I was pretty sure they would be wondering. 'No you're not', they said, 'You're sacked'. I laughed. I didn't see how they worked that one out as I had already left. They were just being childish, I guess.

What's happening now is I'm waiting for the postman who is, I hope, coming with some money for me and it's exhausting I can tell you. I and my two flatmates P and the notorious R decided we had had enough of the mice in the kitchen. It was getting ridiculous. They came about a month ago. We agreed on getting mousetraps. But they don't sell them anymore. Actually, I went to the Civil Service stores, the Sales were on and I asked this deaf man in the Hardware store if there were any moustraps. He said they only made metal ones these days [he meant decimalisation] and they cost about 30 p, each, whereas in the old days they were made of wood and cost only threepence and everybody could lay their hands on them but not now. Anyone would think that mice too would automatically go out of fashion. What kind of a stupid arrangement is that? So how do you kill the mice. You strangle them or you call in the Rat and Mouse Officer.

Fear strikes greatest when you're in the dark. We lit a candle and crept Indian file to the bookcase. We felt around hurriedly and after a few moments P let out a long sigh. Here we are. It was a thick casebook with a dark paper jacket. We couldn't wait for the Officer. We thumbed slowly through the pages and read, halfway down on the inside column, the word, 'Vermin'.

We sat on the edge of P's bed with the candle and the Notorious R read quietly [he had trained in voice projection]: 'Acknowledged as the species Rat [see R] and Mouse [see M]; also Jerboa, Ground squirrel, Muskrat, Guillies and Polpova [see J, M, G and P]. The Brown rat, more vicious than the black rat is called Marcus Aurelius and lives in sewers etc. This species of vermin along with the black rat [rattus rattus] is a plague carrier, contracting the virus from the flea Arghreus which transmits it to man. The mouse is a smaller rodent which nevertheless can carry the same disease [see P, Plague and B, Black plague, Bubonic Blague]. As with the rat, this creature can be black, white, grey or brown. There are Church mice, Dormice [smaller], fieldmice.

I and the Notorious R turned and looked at P who sat, occupied, waving the candle in the darkness, watching the flame bend.

'Black?'

'White?'

'Brown?'

'Grey?'

'Church?'

'Field?'

'Door?' Still no reaction. We swiped the candle from him and looked at the cover: 'Child's Way to Biology'.

'What is this?' said R. P mumbled. 'Speak up,' said R heavily. 'H-h-had it ... for a while.'

'What kind of stupid prank are you trying to play? There was another long silence. The candle burnt steadily. Flickering on our faces. P was now distorting into more and more disconcerting shapes. He mumbled and fretted. He was like the shadow of the lines of the railings silouhetted against the curtain, misshapen in the folds. Against the flicker of the candlelight the lines bent and moved and grew fat and thin in silence, like dark foetuses. R bumped me as he thumped P on his arm. Fieldmice, Churchmice? Idiot he said. P began whimpering. The jerking candle flashed pictures of fear on his face, becoming more and more outlandish. R stopped and sat thoughtfully. P tried to speak. 'I-I- ....'

'Life your palate.' R was proud of his training in voice projection. Crushed P fell silent, breathing heavily. I paid no heed however, as I, sitting nearest the door, could hear certain noises which came from the kitchen.

Then R turned slowly to P and said.: 'You are going into the kitchen to seek out and destroy what ever is in there.' R was an actor [hence his voice projection] who consequently had a strong sense of drama and so was wont to deliver phrases such as 'Seek out and destroy.' There was nothing in the book about vermin in the kitchen. I think there were two nestfuls. Families. There was silence following this request and P and looked steadily, without expression at R: utter panic. I sensed it.

I decided to take a firm grip on the situation, knowing that R himself was too much in the dark to do anything. He's good at things he can do well but he finds difficulty breaking new ground. The first we had known of the mice was when P sneaked into the kitchen to make himself a cheese sandwich on the sly and stood on a small furry thing which made him scream.

'What is it?' We were tired, too tired to be angry with him. P had already burst open the door and was prancing about the room barefooted like a reindeer with protozoa. 'I opened the fridge.' He stopped. He was breathless. 'And what happened?'

'I stood on a small furry thing.' Christ it was horrible. We calmed him down and turned over to go to sleep again. The following night P again sneaked into the kitchen for a cheese sandwich - as you can imagine he is fond of them - and the same thing happened except this time there were two screams and even more prancing. He had stood on one and seen another one by the light of the fridge door, in front of his eyes, on top of the fridge, staring into his eyes, a Rich Tea Digestive biscuit before it. Although he was in a state of severe shock, he managed to describe an image of a small dark brown creature with a long tail and little incisor teeth and the air of one who doesn't like being interrupted when eating. The instant of fear must have flashed a photographic image in his mind which he was able to relate without thinking. Either this or he was lying. We suspected nightmares, paranoia or simply too many cheese sandwiches late at night. P took to wandering about the house with his trousers tucked inside his socks. He kept the leg of a broken stool by the kitchen door which he took to hand whenever he went in. When in the kitchen, he would tread around on his toes, ready to jump, to scream, to run, to flail with his stick. He would knock on the back door and wait for R or myself to answer, with the idea that we would frighten away the mice by having to walk through the kitchen to answer it. We became tired of this and ordered him to use his key but he refused. Eventually we responded by refusing to answer the door and he then retaliated by refusing to go out. He lost his job this way.

He became hypertensive and shifty-eyed. He paced about the house, looking quickly over his shoulder whenever we entered the room. Then he would corner one of us, usually as we sat eating in the evening, and deliver a desperate testament about what the mice had been doing when we were away. They had been crawling into the sink. We laughed. He had seen them hopping about between the cups and plates in the dishrack. We turned away. He had even seen several crawling up the walls. We choked on our food. One night he swore almost tearfully he had seen one actually scurrying along the ceiling. This was ridiculous. It was giving us digestion. R and I are both susceptible to acidic indigestion so we had enough of these rantings. We had long since ceased to listen or believe him. There was no longer the possibility of nightmares or paranoia. He was sick. He stopped going into the kitchen altogether. He became pale from lack of sleep and fresh air. He became erratic with worry. He left clothes lying around. Forgot to flush the WC, hid under the bed when people came in. His big fear was that they would crawl up his trouser leg at high speed. He slept with a pair of football socks. Then one evening we came home and found him strapped inside a harness made from a canvas laundry bag, dangling from the kitchen doorway, a long stick with a carving fork strapped to the end. He swung about in the doorway trying to stab at something up at the shelves. We knew, of course, that this had got out of hand but we didn't tell him he was mad, instead we said kindly that it was Azheimer's Disease, a common ailment among the elderly, if not, with young men.

