



Flashback No.

RODENT REVELS

"For two pins I'd ram the Eddystone light and find out whether rats really leave a sinking ship. Its my guess that our lot would rush the lifeboats and leave the rest of us to drown." Clearly the Captain was reaching the end of his tether and none of us around the mess table had any word of comfort.

All ships provide food, accommodation and free passage for some rats but the S/S Edendale when I was her radio officer in the mid-twenties was a rodent's paradise, the most popular rat's boarding house afloat and with a very distinguished clientele. The vessel, a steamship with auxilliary sails or, if you prefer, a sailing ship with auxilliary engines, had been built for the Australian immigrant service but long since had been converted to a bulk freight carrier without any loss of her classical lines. With her three tall well-raked masts, clipper bow and a painted figurehead representing Eve with a golden apple in each hand, she aroused interest and admiration in every port she entered. I am confident that she brought more profit to Eastman Kodak than to her shareholders. All her officers and crew adored the old lady as did her rats none of whom had ever been seen to leave her. The Chief Officer, hoping against hope that some of his four-footed charges might be tempted to jump ship in Marsailles, a port favoured by rats of all nationalities, four-legged and two, had purposely omitted to fit rat guards to the mooring lines but all he had to show for it was a whacking big fine and the Captain's formal if half-hearted reprimand.

With over a hundred generations of inbreeding it was hardly surprising that our pedigree pets had developed complete immunity from every known brand of rat poison. It was no wonder that the Captain was at his wits end and that the rest of us were appathetic but when ~~he~~ went on to offer a fifty pond reward to any member of the crew who would rid him of his turbulent and non-paying guests there was a new surge of interest. The engine-room staff came up with a spring-loaded catapult designed to flick over the side any rat unwary enough to step on it. It had worked perfectly when tested with one of the Chief Engineers' shore-going shoes but no rat ever approached within a yard of it.

A long, slim, well greased plank projecting over the bow and baited with salt fish had turned out to be a novel and amusing arrangement for feeding dolphins and the

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the carpenter had visions of patenting the device and selling it to passenger liners but it didn't drown a single rat. My own attempt, bare electric wires stapled to the wooden deck failed dismally but how was I to know that a diet that included rubber boots would result in insulated feet! Anyway, I did bag a couple of barefooted seamen before a tropical rainstorm short-circuited the ship's generator. Emergency oil lamps are so romantic and quite in keeping with ^{marine} history.

Our four cats patrolled the decks and alleyways in pairs during daylight hours but had taken to sleeping in the crows nest.

Such then was the state of play as the S/S Edendale put into the German port of Bremen at the mouth of the River Weser. Most of us in the officers' mess had either forgotten about the Captain's offered reward or had given up trying to win it. Not so our young Third Officer. A born romantic and something of a poet he was the only man aboard to recall that 'Hamelin town is in Brunswick' and that 'the River Weser, deep and wide, washes its walls in the southern side'. He had a hunch that the town of the Pied Piper could hold the solution to our difficulty. It was just sixty miles up-stream from Bremen and he determined to go there on his day off. He was well aware that the Pied Piper had long since disappeared into the hollow mountain along with the town's children but he reasoned that over the years the shocked townsfolk must have discovered a better way of dealing with a plague of rats. In the event the Third Officer's enquiries had led him to the Municipality's Senior Pest Exterminator who listened with respect and sympathy to the English youth's story before asking; "What colour are your rats?" On being told that they were common or garden brown he smiled and looked relieved; there was no problem at all; half a dozen White Siamese fighting rats if released below deck would gobble up a whole ship load of common browns though naturally it could take a little time. On being asked where White Siamese fighting rats could be obtained it 'transpired' that the Pied Piper's successor had only that morning received a small consignment from Bangkok and would be happy to release not more than six at the nominal price of fifty thousand Marks (about £3.00) each plus ten thousand Marks for a carrying cage.

Back aboard the S/S Edendale the Captain congratulated his junior officer and

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handed over nineteen pounds along with an assurance that the money would not be deducted from the award to be paid when the ship arrived rat-free at the first British port.

The White Siamese fighting rats certainly looked ^hteir part, half as big again as our poor Brownies and with teeth like marlin-spikes but in the officers' mess rejoicing was less than might have been expected. In a strange way I think we all felt a bit self-conscious and not a little ashamed over releasing the rodent equivalents of Bengal tigers among our innocent and unsuspecting fellow shipmates. Such stratagems might be acceptable in Hamelin but the S/S Edendale flew the red ensign and what ever the name of the present game it wasn't cricket. Never-the-less when our cargo of maize had been discharged a white Frankenstein was released in each of the four holds, another in the engine room and the sixth in the paint and rope locker.

After loading a cargo of coal in the Bristol Channel it was back to Buenos Aires for more grain. It was a mellancholly passage for those of us sensitive to the masacre taking place below. The Third Officer became insufferable with his repeated accounts of how he would spend his reward. The Captain even more self-satisfied called for a daily count of the rats seen on deck. The number decreased daily from fifty on passing the Longship light to two on the day we picked up our pilot at the mouth of the River Plate. So overjoyed was the Captain that he promised a day's leave to everyone in the forcastle and a slap-up dinner ashore to all his officers. The announcement was made at dinner in the officers' mess. The Chief Engineer, a cynic if ever there was one and still bemoaning the loss of his shoe put forward a suggestion that the celebratory dinner should take place aboard and that we should dine on rabbit. The Captain's reply was both swift and angry.

"Rabbit, mister? What the devil so you mean, rabbit? If this is some kind of a joke I would remind you that I have no sense of humour, none whatever."

"I only mean that the Second Engineer, the Donkeyman and a couple of stokers have all reported seeing large brown and white rabbits down below. I know that the Donkeyman has been known to see pink elephants but not at sea. The Second is a lifelong tetotaller and I have no reason to doubt the word of the stokers

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both of whom have sailed with me since I became chief."

"Brown and white did you say?" The awful truth was dawning. The Third Officer jumped from his chair and vanished only a fraction of a second before the Captain's baleful glare could have paralysed him where he sat. The Second officer collapsed in a fit of hysterical giggles and several others at the table appeared to be choking.

Yes, you have guessed it! The brown and white spectres were not rabbits but hybrid rats, twice as big as their Siamese dads and three times as big as their British mums. Where there had been scores before there were hundreds now and this was only the beginning but a good point to end my story.

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