

## A Man's Best Friend

In New Guinea Dr Alan was very pleased to be given a whole house in one corner of the mission hospital compound to live in. It was of fibro-cement sheeting with a corrugated iron roof, painted a pretty blue and surrounded by banana palms, crotons and flowering bougainvillea, merging into the rainforest behind. A few coconut palms arched gracefully to one side, edging a little gully with a trickling stream. An old German nun – she must have been nearing eighty – ushered him up the wooden steps and into his spacious, albeit slightly mildewed, accommodation and showed him round. She had bought tea, sugar, rice, cooking oil, washing powder and everything else he might want to start with, as well as having placed a vase of frangipani on his living room table and a bowl of fruit in his kitchen. She also told him she had trapped one or two rats and showed him where she had repaired holes in the insect wire outside the louvered windows, through which they must have entered.

Just as well he had somewhere pleasing to live, since the hospital work disappointed him. There was no shortage of doctors, as he had been advised there was. The real problem was that the local doctors worked only a few hours a day, and even fewer now he had arrived. The real shortage was of patients, despite the large population the hospital was supposed to serve. The doctors and the nurses were also remarkably unfriendly, compared to what he expected. Was this because he was white? Or because they did so little work and attracted so few customers, and felt embarrassed?

Whatever the reason, he knew it was very important to make his solitary home life as enjoyable as possible. He was soon quite lonely, nevertheless, but toughed it out by cooking himself good meals, watching DVDs and reading novel after novel.

Home life had its problems too, however. The rats had not been kept out by the old nun's repairs to the insect meshing, and many of them invaded the house each night. He searched in vain for how else they were getting in. He kept his

bedroom door closed, and they did not come in there, but he heard them scampering about the rest of the house and sometimes squeaking. This made him shiver sometimes as he lay in bed.

Every morning he found terrible damage had been inflicted. In the bathroom they partly ate his soap, leaving tiny teeth marks on the piece that remained, and bit into his tube of tooth paste. He felt slightly disgusted washing and cleaning his teeth, and tried to think of other things. In the kitchen they ate everything not in a metal container. They gnawed through the yellow plastic lid of his cooking oil, for example, leaving tiny flecks of yellow suspended in the oil. How could he use that? In the living room they chewed his books and ate a hole in the tubing of his stethoscope, rendering it unusable. Worst of all, they left rat shit on every surface. What cleaning he did, and all to have the same problem the following day.

He bought rat poison in the form of little blue pellets and left heaps in every corner. But the rats did not eat them, and the heaps of pellets remained undisturbed. He discussed the problem with the other doctors, and a sort of friendship developed sharing this problem that was no-one's fault, even if they could not see eye to eye on the medical work. They advised putting food with the pellets. But the rats just ate the food and not the poison.

'No,' they said when he told them this. 'You have to put the pellets in the food.'

Next evening he used tweezers to insert the pellets one by one into pieces of banana and pieces of cheese, and even into pieces of soap. He went to bed with high hopes. In the morning, however, he found that the rats had eaten banana, cheese and soap and left sticky blue pellets uneaten.

He bought several spring-loaded rat traps as his next maneuver and baited these with banana and cheese. He found, in the morning, the rats had managed to remove the bait without setting off the traps. This made him cross that he was wasting so much money and effort in vain.

He discussed the failure with the general store owner, who sold him rat glue instead, guaranteed to work. This took the form of brown glue that did not set, in which the rats' feet would get stuck. He laid a sheet of cardboard covered in glue

on the kitchen floor and rose the next morning alarmed at the prospect of dealing with stuck, live rats. There were none. The glue lay undisturbed until he accidentally put one bare toe on it himself, which was a terrible problem.

Next night he spread glue on the floor of a high-sided cardboard box and placed cheese in the middle of the glue. His plan was that a rat would have to jump down into the box to get the food, and thus get stuck. It would also be easier to deal with a rat in a box than on a flat sheet, he thought. Next morning, however, the cheese was gone but there was no rat and the glue lay undisturbed. He could not see how any rat had managed to do this. Did they work as a team, perhaps?

He discussed the problem with the New Guinea gardener, hoping to benefit from local wisdom. The old man smiled pleasantly, shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Mr Rat, he more clever than you.'

In desperation he went to the convent to tell the nuns he needed alternative accommodation. There was nothing else available, they said. The old German women were sympathetic, nevertheless, and, after some deliberation, they gave him a little cat to take home.

The cat, however, was barely more than a kitten and able to sit in the palm of his hand. She rode comfortably in his pocket, in fact. When he got her home he decided he could not possibly leave her out to face the rats in the night, in case they ate her alive. So she spent the nights in the bedroom with him, purring loudly and licking his face from time to time as he tried to sleep.

This could have been said to make matters worse, except that Dr Alan and the cat became friends. He kept her locked in the house for several days, in case she ran back to the convent, and fed her well on rice and meaty cat food. She gained some weight and sleek good health, but remained a tiny, fragile thing. He talked to her a lot in the evenings, and got the impression no-one had paid her this much attention before. She paid him her catty attention in return.

Meanwhile the rats continued their nightly scampering and squeaking, as both of them now listened from the bedroom, and every morning Dr Alan cleaned the surfaces again and made good the damage as best he could.

Until one evening when everything changed. He sat on one of his cushioned wicker chairs, watching his television, and the cat sat on the other one, as usual. She washed her little body with her tongue, and he reached across to interrupt her and stroke her tiny head. Just then a large rat appeared from the kitchen, in full sight, apparently oblivious to their presence. Almost instantaneously the cat leapt from her chair, had the rat by the throat and shook vigorously. Blood spurted up the wall and the rat was dead. It was twice the size of the cat, but that was that.

Alan picked up the dead rat by its tail and carried it outside in the dark, where he threw it as far as he could into the jungle. The cat did not follow him. When he got back he found she had returned to her seat and was continuing her washing unconcerned. He brought soapy water to wash the rat blood off the wall, feeling slightly sick but grateful and astonished. He would buy her a fresh fish at the market next day, he decided, as a reward.

So it was that the cat roamed the house by night after that, while Alan slept soundly in his closed room, and the rat problem was solved. There had been many of them, he was sure, but none returned. News had somehow got back to the rat population that a killer now patrolled the premises and kept his possessions safe.