

A.E. Van Vogt

THE RAT AND THE SNAKE

Mark Gray's main pleasure in life was feeding rats to his pet python. He kept the python in a blocked-off room in the old house in which he lived alone. Each mealtime, he would put the rat in a narrow tunnel he had rigged. At the end of the tunnel was an opening. The rat, going through the narrow space into the bright room beyond, automatically spring-locked a gate across the opening.

It would then find itself in the room with the python, with no way of escape.

Mark liked to listen to its squeaks as it became aware of its danger, and then he would hear its mad scurrying to escape the irresistible enemy. Sometimes he watched the exciting scene through a plate-glass window, but he actually preferred the sound to the sight, conjuring his own delectable mental pictures, always from the viewpoint of the python.

During World War III, the O.P.A. forgot to put a ceiling price on rats. The catching of rats got no special priority. Rat catchers were drafted into the armed forces as readily as the other people. The supply of rats grew less. Mark was soon reduced to catching his own rats; but he had to work for a living in the ever-leaner times of war, so that there were periods of time when the python was fed infrequently.

Then one day Mark, ever searching, glimpsed some white rats through a window of an old commercial-style building.

He peered in eagerly, and though the room was dimly lighted with wartime regulation bulbs, he was able to make out that it was a large room with hundreds of cages in it and that each of the cages contained rats.

He made it to the front of the building at a dead run. In pausing to catch his breath, he noticed the words on the doors CARRON LABORATORIES, Research.

He found himself presently in a dim hallway of a business office. Because everybody was clearly working twice as hard because of the war, it took a little while to attract the attention of one of the women employees; and there were other delays such as just sitting and waiting while it seemed as if he was the forgotten man. But after all those minutes he was finally led into the office of a small, tight-faced man, who was introduced as Erie Plode and who listened to his request and the reason for it.

When Mark described his poor, starving python, the small man laughed a sudden, explosive laughter, but his eyes remained cold. Moments later he curtly rejected the request.

Whereupon he made a personal thing out of it. "And don't get any ideas," he snarled. "Stay away from our rats. If we catch you filching around here, we'll have the law on you."

Until those words were spoken, Mark hadn't really thought about becoming a rat-stealing criminal. Except for his peculiar love for his python, he was a law-abiding, tax-paying nobody.

As Mark was leaving, Plode hastily sent a man to follow him. Then, smiling grimly, he walked into an office that had printed on the door: HENRY GARRON, Private.

"Well, Hank," he said gaily. "I think we've got our subject."

Carron said, "This had better be good since we can't even get prisoners of war assigned us for the job."

The remark made Plode frown a little. He had a tendency toward ironic thoughts, and he had often thought recently, "Good God they're going to use the process on millions of the unsuspecting enemy after we get it tested, but they won't give us a G.D. so-and-so to try it out on because of some kind of prisoner of war convention."

Aloud, he said smugly, "I suppose by a stretch of the imagination you

could call him human.'

"That bad?"

Plode described Mark and his hobby, finished, "I suppose it's a matter of point of view, But I won't feel any guilt, particularly if he sneaks over tonight and with criminal intent tries to steal some of our rats." He grinned mirthlessly, "Can you think of anything lower than a rat stealer?"

Henry Carron hesitated but only for moments. Millions of people were dead and dying, and a test absolutely had to be made on a human being. Because if something went wrong on the battlefield, the effect of surprise might be lost with who knew what repercussions.

"One thing sure," he nodded "there'll be no evidence against us. So go ahead."

It seemed to Mark, as he came stealthily back that night, that these people with their thousands of rats would never miss the equivalent of one rat a week or so, He was especially pleased when he discovered that the window was unlocked and that the menagerie was unguarded. No doubt, he thought good-humoredly, babysitters for rats were in scarce supply because of the wartime worker shortage.

The next day he thrilled again to the familiar sound of a rat squeaking in fear of the python. Toward evening his phone rang. It was Erie Plode.

"I warned you," said the small man in a vicious tone. "Now you must pay the penalty."

Plode felt better for having issued the warning. "Be it on his own soul," he said sanctimoniously, "if he's there."

Mark hung up, contemptuous. Let them try to prove anything.

In his sleep that night he seemed to be suffocating. He woke up, and he was not lying on his bed but instead was on a hard floor. He groped for the light switch but could not find it. There was a bright rectangle of light about twenty feet away. He headed for it.

Crash! A gate slammed shut behind him as he emerged.

He was in a vast room, larger than anything he had ever seen. Yet it was vaguely familiar. Except for its size it resembled the room in which he kept his python.

On the floor in front of him, an object that he had noticed and regarded as some sort of a leathery rug, thicker than he was tall, stirred and moved toward him.

Realization came suddenly, horrendously.

He was the size of a rat. This was the python slithering across the floor with distended jaws.

Mad squealing as Mark Gray experienced the ultimate thrill of the strange method by which he had enjoyed life for so many years ... Experienced it this one and only time from the viewpoint of the rat.