

Side Bet

BY WILL F. JENKINS

There was a vast blue bowl which was the sky. Across it, with agonizing slowness, there marched a brazen sun which poured down light to dazzle and burn out the man's eyes, and heat to broil the brains in his skull. At intervals the blue bowl grew dark and was dotted with stars, which ranged themselves in pairs like the eyes of a snake—unwinking and cold and maliciously amused—and watched through the night while the man recovered strength to endure the torture of another day. There was a sea of infinite blueness, which heaved slowly up and down and alternately reflected the blue bowl and the monstrous aggregation of star eyes. And there was the island, which was not more than fifty by fifteen metres in extent.

Also, there was the rat, with which the man played a game with rather high stakes, a game in which life was a side bet.

The man and the rat were not friends. No. When huge waves flung the man scornfully upon the island, he thought himself the sole survivor of his ship, and for twenty-four hours he disregarded every other thought or observation in trying to salvage as much of the wreckage as he could. He could not do much. During all that day and night colossal combers beat upon the shore, overwhelming two-thirds of its length in sputtering spume. There was then no sky or sea or any other thing but hurtling masses of water and foam plunging upon and over and past the island. And the island was only rock. There was no vegetation. There was no shelter. There was barely more than a foothold behind a steep upcropping of wet and slippery stone. But now and again some fragment of the ship was pounded senselessly upon that upcrop by the sea, and the man tried desperately to salvage it.

He saved but little. A dozen crates of fruit broke open and all their contents went to waste upon rockery so continuously wave-swept as to be past clinging to. Four separate times he saw masses of cargo—some of which must have been edible—surge past the island, infuriatingly near

yet impossibly distant. And a life raft, floating high in the water, was deliberately smashed and maliciously pounded before his eyes into splintered wood and crumpled metal—and then the sea took that away too.

Before the waves abated the man made sure of some bits of wood and some cordage, and from the life raft as it went to pieces he rescued a keg of water and a canvas bag of hard sea bread-biscuit. But there was nothing on which he could hope to leave the island, nor canvas to make a shelter, and he had not even a stick long enough to make a mast on which to fly his confession of helplessness and distress for the sea to look at.

But he did have a companion: the rat.

The rat was huge. It was a wise and resourceful ship rat and had all the cunning and ferocity of its race. Its body was almost thirty centimetres long. It had come ashore without help from the man; he never knew how. Perhaps clinging human-fashion to one of the two masses of spars and cordage now lodged securely on the island. But it had reached the island and it knew of the man's presence, and it knew exactly what the island offered of sustenance when the seas went down and the long, agonizing procession of days began in which the sky was a vast blue bowl and a brazen sun marched slowly across it.

When that happened, the man took account of his prospects, which were not bright. He counted his stores. He had twenty-two biscuits, all tainted with salt water, and a small keg of fresh water. There was a fairly impressive mass of lumber, mostly splintered and none suitable for the manufacture of a raft even if the man had possessed tools, which he did not. There was some rope, attached to shattered spars. In a money belt, the man had sixty dollars. That was all.



He had no matches, but he found that with a small spike extracted from the wreckage he could strike a spark from the rock of the island. He had nothing to cook, and therefore a fire was needless. But he picked cordage into oakum* for tinder, and he arranged his stock of wood in a great pyre, the smaller splinters lowest, so that from a single spark he could send up a roaring beacon of flame and smoke to summon any ship he might sight from the island. His stock of food and water was so trivial that he rationed himself strictly. He could not actually live on such an infinitesimal portion as he allotted himself for each day, but he would starve very slowly. He would live longer and suffer longer. The will to live is not a matter of reason. And then the days of waiting began as separate Gehennas** of heat and thirst and hopelessness.

The sun by day was horrible. There was no shade. There was no shelter. There was no soil. There was only fissured, tumbled rock. The man scorched, panting in the baking heat, and gazed with smarting eyes at the horizon. He looked for a ship, though he could not really hope for one. In the morning he ate his strictly allotted ration, drank a very little water, and during the night he gathered strength to suffer through another day. From the amount of food and drink he possessed, he had calculated exactly how long he could live upon the island. He did not ask himself why he should wish to.

It was probably the seventh or eighth day when he learned that the rat was also on the island.

He had picked up the canvas bag which held the sea biscuits. It should have been nearly full. His daily ration was small. But as he lifted the bag, something fell at his feet. There was a hole in the bag. A fine white powder sifted out of it, spreading it in the air. At his feet was half a biscuit, irregularly gnawed. The tooth marks were clearly those of a rat.

The man's heart tried to stop. He regarded the hole and the gnawed biscuits with a sort of stupefied horror. Then he swiftly counted the contents of the bag. He should have had nineteen biscuits. Instead he had sixteen and the fragment which was less than a half. More than a week of life had been taken from him.

He had no real hope of rescue, of course. The island was a speck in a waste of sea. It might or might not be on the charts. He did not know. If it was charted, ships would avoid it as a danger to navigation. But the instinct to cling to life is too strong for mere reason to controvert. The

* oakum: loose fibres made by picking apart old ropes used for caulking a ship's timbers

** Gehenna: hell; a place of torment and misery

man's hands shook. He carefully unravelled a strand of rope. He tied up the hole in the bag. And he had apportioned his supplies to keep him alive for a certain number of days. He could not bring himself to surrender one hour of that scheduled time. Since a part of his food had been taken from him, he desperately resolved to cut down his ration to make up for the theft. And he did.

He chewed the reduced fraction of sea biscuit, which was his daily food, with exhaustive care. He made it last a very long time. He watched the horizon with dazzled, reddened eyes. He was already hungry all the time. He had hunger cramps in the night. His knees felt oddly exhausted when he climbed about the wave-rounded mass which was the island, but he resolutely made the journey. He watched all day. He saw nothing. When night came he drank the few swallows he allowed himself. He tied the bag to a spliced stick and propped it up so that it hung in midair. He slept.

In the morning the bag was on the ground again. The rat had gnawed through the cord upholding it. There were only twelve biscuits left, and the man saw a floury scraping on the rock, two metres from the bag, which told him that the rat had carried off one biscuit uneaten.

The man knew hatred now. And he made a savage search of every square centimetre of the island. It was not difficult. Fifty metres in one direction. About fifteen in another. Nothing of any size could hide, but there were cracks and crevices and miniature caverns in which the rat could conceal himself during the search. The man found one tiny, crumby place, where the rat had eaten, at leisure, food which was more than the man allowed himself for three days. And he came to have an inkling of how the rat drank. Even now, the small crevices in the rocks were cool. Undoubtedly moisture condensed upon their surfaces during the night and the rat licked it. It would serve a rat, but no human could live that way.

But he did not find the rat. He did not even catch a glimpse of it, but by this time he hated it with an emotion far past any hatred people ordinarily know.

That night the man's rage kept him from sleeping. He had a section of splintered plank not too heavy to be a club. He put out the bag of biscuits as bait and sat on guard beside it. The sun sank. The vast blue bowl turned dark and very many pairs of malevolent stars shone out, to look down upon him and watch him maliciously. His hands shook with hatred.



The sea soughed and gurgled among the irregular rocks about the shoreline. The man waited, hating.

But he was very weak. He woke suddenly. His club, held ready, had fallen with a crash to the rock before him. The sound has roused him. He heard the scurrying of tiny feet. The rat, scuttling away.

The canvas bag was a good metre from where it had been. The rat had been trying to drag it to its own hiding-place.

The man made inarticulate noises of fury. He knew, now, that the rat would seek to prey upon him for food as long as the two of them lived upon the island. That is the instinct of rats. And in any case he would have tried to kill the rat if he saw it, because that is the instinct of men. But here the conflict of instincts became more than inevitable. It became deadly. Both the man and the rat could not live upon this island. If the man lived, the rat died. If the man died, the chance of the rat for survival would be directly and specifically increased.

But the man was too weak to think very clearly. He had found a rock with a hollow in it. He put the bag of biscuits there and lay down. The rat could not reach the biscuits without first gnawing the man. But the man slept fitfully and even through his dreams there moved a hazy, groping thought. The rat must die, or he must...

In the morning the man chewed his ration for hours. It was the fraction of a sea biscuit. He savoured every particle of flavour it possessed. The heat beat upon him. He panted, watching the unchanging horizon beneath a brazen sun. He kept his body wetted with seawater so that he would not need to drink. But already he suffered severely from thirst. And then, toward nightfall, he saw the rat.

It was swimming toward an outlying rock which was perhaps ten metres from the main island. The rock was certainly no more than two metres across and rose perhaps that much above the slow, smooth swells which forever swayed across the sea.

The rat reached the base of the rock. It swam about it trying to find gripping places for its paws. The man watched in a passion of sheer hatred until it disappeared. Then he moved closer. He heard its paws scratching and scrambling, out of sight. Presently its pointed muzzle appeared on top of the small rock. It went sniffing here and there. Suddenly it stopped stock-still. It began to eat. And the man smelled something tainted. Perhaps a dead fish flung to the top of the rock by a wave or swell. Perhaps a gull or tern which had died there recently. Whatever it was, the rat ate it.

The man trembled all over with hatred. He could no longer compute the anguish he had suffered, of hunger with but a tantalizing morsel of food

a day, and of thirst with but enough of lukewarm water barely to moisten his lips. But the rat had enough of water, somehow, and now it fed!

The man stumbled back to his utterly useless cache of shattered timbers and weathered cordage. He thought bitterly of the rat's smooth body. Of its unshrunk muscles. Of its sleek fur. And suddenly, as in his hatred he envisioned rending it limb from limb — suddenly he saw it in a new light. From a thing to be hated and destroyed, the rat suddenly became a fascinating, an infinitely desirable thing. The man was starving. As he thought of the rat, his mouth watered.

The conditions of the game now were wholly clear. If the man died, the rat's chances of survival would be directly increased. If the rat died, the man would live longer at least by days. So the rat must die, or the man. They had played a deadly game before. Now the side bet — of life — was explicit.

Days passed. The sun rose and there was a vast blue bowl which was the sky. The sun sank and a multitude of stars gazed down. The man gave all his thought, now, to the game. He did not even glance at the horizon. He grew rapidly weaker, but his whole thought was fixed upon the construction of elaborate snares and traps by which the rat might be captured. He made them, and they failed, because he could not bring himself to risk even a scrap of food for bait.

Then he made a bow and arrow. It was clumsy and crude, and it would be hopelessly inaccurate, because he had no tools. When he had made the weapon, he spent three days stalking the rat over the uneven surface of the island. Most of the time he had to crawl, because of his weakness. Much of the time he knew where the rat was. Some of the time he even saw it, because the rat had grown bolder since the man's weakness had forced him to crawl rather than walk.

The first day's stalking brought no results. Nor the second. But on the third day — even the rat was starving now — the man's persistence and infinite care took him to where he saw the rat clearly. It was sleeping. The man crept closer, centimetre by centimetre. He moved with breathless caution. He saw, though he did not realize, that the rat's ribs now showed through its fur. Its eyes were rimmed with red. It was no longer sleek and well-muscled. It was shabby and unkempt and almost as emaciated as the man.

The man drew his solitary arrow back. But he had not realized his



weakness. His heart pounded hysterically. His eyes glared. His mouth slobbered in horrible anticipation. His hands shook. And when he had drawn back the arrow to the fullest extent of which he was capable, the arrow flicked forward, glanced off a rock—it would have missed—and by sheer ironic accident was deflected again into its true path. It struck the rat.

And the bow had been drawn so weakly that the arrow did not penetrate. The rat leaped upright, squeaking, and fled. And the useless arrow lay where it had fallen while the starving man wept. He saw, now, that it was the rat which would win the game and the stakes—and the side bet.

The rat knew it, too. Two days later the man's rations, both of food and water, came to an end. He regarded them both for a long time. Once gone, the rat would win their deadly game.

The man ate the bread and drank the water. He lay down. He did not bother even to glance at the horizon, because the game was over and he had lost. He was not suffering at all when night came. He felt no hunger and even his thirst was not severe. He was peculiarly clear-headed and calm. His body was weak, to be sure, but there were no gripings in his belly. He lay and looked up at the stars and foresaw the rat's winning of game and stakes and side bet, and was unmoved by the foreknowledge. He was too weak for emotion.

But then he heard a little sound, and in the starlight he saw a movement. It was the rat. It was still for a long time. The man did not move. It crept toward him. The man stirred. The rat stopped. Presently it sank down on all fours, watching the man with glowing eyes.

There was silence save for the gurgling of the long, slow swells among the rocks. The man even laughed weakly. The rat waited with a quivering impatience. It had known nothing of rationing. It had eaten more fully than the man, but not as often. Its whole body was a clamouring, raging hunger. It quivered with a horrible desire to claim its winnings in the deadly game.

"No," said the man detachedly. His voice was a bare croak, but there was almost amusement in it. "Not yet! The one who dies first loses. I'm not dead yet..."

The rat quivered. It backed away when the man spoke, its eyes flaring hatred. But when he stopped it crept forward. A little closer than before. It stopped only when the man stirred.

Then the man thought of something. He was very weak indeed, but at the very beginning he had picked out some soft fibre from the cordage he had saved. He had worked out a small spike, and he tested it against the

rock. He had even dried out a little seaweed, as more practical than hemp for the making of a blaze.

Now he struck the spike against the rock. It sparked. The rat retreated. Presently it crept forward again. The man struck the spike again upon the rock. The rat was checked.

It happened many more times before the sparks struck in the improvised oakum tinder. Then it fatigued the man very much to blow it and sift dried and crumpled seaweed upon it—blowing the while—and later to transfer the small coal to the assembly of little splinters he had made ready long since. They were to kindle the signal fire he had intended to light if a ship should ever come into view. But now he lighted the kindling because the rat was no more than two metres from him and he could hear it panting in a desperate eagerness to claim its winnings. The flames caught and climbed.

The rat drew back slowly, its eyes desperate. The man watched.

Over his head malicious stars looked down, but now a huge and spreading column of smoke rose up, lighted from below by the blaze. It blotted out the stars. And the flames climbed higher, crackling fiercely, and the fire roared. There was a leaping thicket of yellow flame beneath the smoke. Its topmost branches reared up for five metres. Six. Long tongues of detached incandescence licked up into the thick smoke even higher still. And the reddish-yellow glare upon the smoke made it into a radiant mist.

It would have been a pretty good signal, the man thought.

Then he thought of something else. If he could have contrived to be upon that heap of blazing timber, and if it should catch fire after he was dead, the rat would never collect its winnings from the game.

"But that wouldn't have been fair," said the man lightheartedly. "It—it would have been welshing..."

The rat vanished, crept into some crack or crevice to hide from the glare and the heat of the fire. And the fire blazed up and up, and slowly died down, and when the dawn came the man saw smoke still rising from the ashes.

And again he saw the rat.

But he heard—he heard the rattle of an anchor chain. It was that of a ship that had seen the flame-lit smoke of the fire during the dark hours,



had thought it another ship ablaze, and had come to offer help. Now the boat was on its way ashore.

When they carried the man to the small boat, he croaked out a request. They placed him as he wished in the boat, so that as it pulled toward the ship he saw the island. And he saw the rat upon it.

The rat ran crazily back and forth, squealing. The squeals were cries of rage. The rat was a bare skeleton covered with tight-stretched hide, and its rage was ghastly. Its disappointment was incredible. The man was being carried away, and there was no other food upon the island.

"I...I've got a money belt on," croaked the man. "There's sixty dollars in it. I...I've lost a bet." He rested for a moment. "I want to buy some food and have it left on the island for that...rat. He won the game from me and I...don't want to welsh on a bet..."

They lifted him carefully to the steamer's deck. Weakly, he insisted on this final favour. The boat went back to the island. It left a great heap of more than fifty kilograms of ship's biscuits where the sea was not likely to wash any of it away. Before it had pulled out from the island, the rat had flung itself upon the heap and was eating.

They told the man. He grinned feebly...he had been fed...and went incontinently to sleep. They told him afterward that the rat was still eating when the ship sailed over the horizon.

What happened after that, the man never knew. But he felt that he had paid the side bet.

IN CONTEXT PERSPECTIVES

The Karluk Castaways

On June 17, 1913, thirteen scientists from around the world left Vancouver aboard the ship *Karluk* to explore the Arctic with their leader, Vilhjalmur Stefansson. The *Karluk* became locked in a huge, drifting ice pack in the early days of August. By January the pressure of the ice was beginning to crush the *Karluk* like a nut. When their ship finally caved in, the castaways moved into the snow and ice houses they had built on the drifting ice-island and began to plot an escape to deserted Wrangle Island — 100 km away — and from there to Siberia.

Gradually groups of the *Karluk* castaways

made the long and painful journey to Wrangle Island, but many died along the way or were too exhausted to go on to Siberia. In March the captain saw no alternative but to strike out on his own. Those who stayed behind slowly exhausted their supply of ammunition. Starvation took over where frostbite had begun and the remaining castaways began to die.

On September 7, 1914, those who had survived the summer were rewarded with a sight they had never really expected — a ship steaming towards them with their captain on deck. At last the ice that had crushed *Karluk* was broken by the bow of the ship Stefansson had brought to take the castaways home.

Flannan Isle

By W.W. Gibson

Though three men dwell on Flannan Isle
To keep the lamp alight,
As we steered under the lee, we caught
No glimmer through the night. —

A passing ship at dawn had brought
The news, and quickly we set sail,
To find out what strange thing might ail
The keepers of the deep-sea light.

The winter day broke blue and bright,
With glancing sun and glancing spray,
While o'er the swell our boat made way
As gallant as a gull in flight.

But as we neared the lonely Isle,
And looked up at the naked height,
And saw the lighthouse towering white,
With blinded lantern that all night
Had never shot a spark
Of comfort through the dark,
So ghastly in the cold sunlight
It seemed, that we were struck the while
With wonder all too dread for words.

