

IT started some six or seven years ago when young Bill was a toddler and before Jill was born.

"My word, he's a little tough," said a neighbour. "How will you get on when there is a baby?" Well, that didn't worry Dad, but it worried Mum. Bill was rough and bouncing. How was the baby going to get along with such a ferocious child in the house?

"I know what," Mum said, "we will get a kitten. Then he'll learn to be gentle with little things."

This seemed to be a trifle hard on the kitten and anyhow the idea wasn't Mum's. Mrs. A's cat had just had a batch of female kittens and Mrs. A. had been doing a little propaganda. "Females are always so gentle," she would say, "just the thing for children. We would always dispose of any surplus kittens for you. My husband chloroforms them beautifully."

Well, that was where it started. Bill liked the kitten all right and on the whole the kitten made a very good fist of it. He got very quick at nipping under the couch when Bill came into the room, and scrambling up the tree outside. No one could say that it exactly helped Bill to be gentle with little things; indeed, the reverse. Bill looked on little nippy things as fair game when caught — it didn't matter much whether it was tail or ear or what. That was when he started being fond of little animals. But the family had to move north before Jill was born and dispose of the kitten before the move and it was quite a big cat by this time.

BLACKOUT BRIGHTLIGHTS



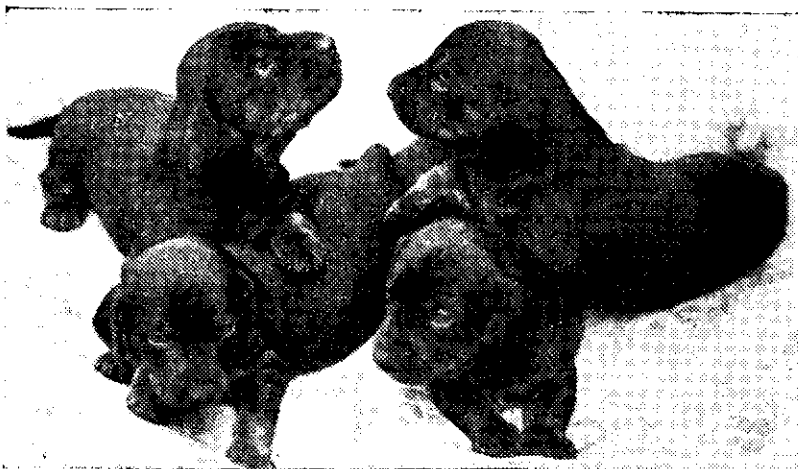
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THEY KEPT PETS

One Way To Deal With A Rat Problem

(Written for "The Listener" by S.S.)



"Now's the time for a spot of Mrs. A's husband's chloroform," said Dad, but Mrs. A seemed to have forgotten about it and Dad had to dispose of it after all. Mum promised it would not happen again. Anyhow, once Jill arrived, Bill would hardly need a pet any more.

IT was never quite established whether it was the fact that Bill was thwarted of that first kitten that made him jealous of Jill. About that time Mum began reading up Child Psychology and going to lectures on How To Bring Up Children. She thought that Bill's tendency to tease was just a natural Oedipus Complex or something like that and that he needed outlet for his affections. Two parents and a sister had the makings of a fair outlet, but anyway by this time other factors were working for more pets. Psychology books stressed the importance of bringing the facts of life unobtrusively before the young, and what better way than a pet—female for preference? For days and weeks they discussed the relative merits of bantams and guinea pigs and rabbits and budgies, but they hadn't any cages and couldn't afford a big outlay. Fowls seemed a happy compromise between education and utility, but Mum drew the line at fowls. Dad suggested bees, but even the pollen part didn't really appeal to her and in these days honey could still be bought.

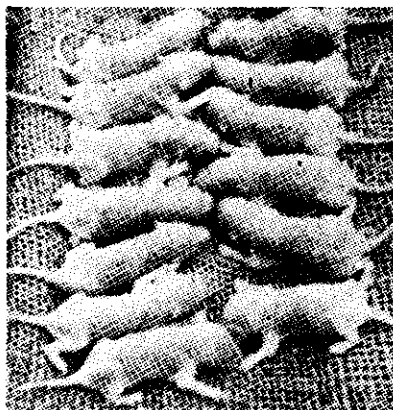
ANYWAY Mum got a kitten. Mrs. B. down the road didn't approve. "You always catch things from cats," she said. "Or else they sit on the baby's pillow. I once knew a woman who lost her only boy that way. . . ."

But Mum got a kitten all the same and Bill was very pleased, so pleased that she always had to look through his bed at night to make sure that the kitten had not crept into it. They all got very fond of that kitten even after it had turned into a fair-sized cat, and a tom, too. Dad was glad it was a tom after all, though the whole point of getting it was rather lost. Then the kids next door got ringworm. Mum was very sorry and she went over to help all she could. Then she found that Mrs. C. thought it was the cat. Besides she grew afraid that Bill and Jill would get ringworm, too. Dad could see it was worrying Mum. She

used to start every evening: "I wonder whether we ought to keep Edie?" (that was short for Oedipus); or "Do you think that he has ringworm?"; or "Wouldn't it be awful if Jill got it?"

In the end Dad decided that it was up to him to relieve her mind and sacrifice Edie, though he felt bad for a long while after, when Mrs. C. called over the fence that her kids had caught it from young David D. and that cats couldn't carry that variety of ringworm anyhow.

CATS were out as pets after that. They had a puppy, but as Scott said, "The worst thing about dogs is that they die." Just when they had trained him not to



"Thirteen red little cheerio sausages"

chase sheep and to behave himself and sit up and beg, and when they were all feeling quite safe that he never had and would never have hydatids, he was run over. He had a special grave with a rhododendron bush and the youngsters were so broken-hearted that Mum promised them another pet quickly to make up.

"But we must never have another pup," said Bill. "It wouldn't be fair to Eustace." (Jill called him Eustace because "he got used to us so quickly.")

AND that is how they worked up to having white rats. Mrs. D., who also went to psychology lectures, decided on rats, and decided on a pair, and now her first family was hatched or reared or

whatever a family of rats does. Mrs. D. promised to keep Bill a really good pair, and Bill promised to make the cage himself out of apple boxes and to keep them clean himself. Mum suggested that Dad might try some experiments with feeding them and prove to the children that vegetables were an essential part of their diet. By this time vitamins had rather outdistanced child psychology, which had in certain respects proved itself less practical than the old-fashioned "Mother Knows Best" formula.

Anyway Bill got a fine pair of white rats with long pink tails and ruby red eyes and they looked nice and clean and were very tame. There was a bad moment the first afternoon when one of them popped down a hole under the house and Bill thought he was gone for good. Bill sat at the hole for a long time holding a piece of bacon-rind in his hand and then just when he was giving up, out popped the rat, took the rind, and popped down the hole again. He gave up the bacon-rind idea after that and he would have given up the rat, too, but he found him later looking mournfully in at the cage and only too glad to get back to his wife.

A week later the family were awakened with eager cries from Bill. "The rats have babies!" Sure enough all sorts of strange little squeaks came from the nest. The thirteen little rats had no glamour about them; they looked like very red little cheerio sausages, but after a couple of weeks or so they were covered in very soft white fur and they could scamper round. They were tame, too. Bill used to set up his Hornby train in the nursery and put a little rat in each truck and carriage and they would sit in the train and ride round and round—not exactly with any evident signs of enjoyment, but they tolerated it. Jill used to take her six rats and make them sit up in her doll's house, and she would tuck them up in the dolls' beds and dress them up.

OF course, there were accidents. One might get trodden on or left out in the cold or somehow come to grief, and as the weeks advanced there was the threat of more and more families. By the time the second generation of rats had reached maturity—only two months or so—things began to look congested. The original apple box cage of Bill's was rapidly becoming a slum. Besides, the rats, especially Emmanuel and Emmanuela, had an unfortunate habit of gnawing through the weaker portions. Mum discovered to her dismay that they had actually walked off and made a nest in an old sack in the corner of the wash-house. This time there were 10 red little cheerios. Something needed to be done. Bill put a second story on the rat house and made stairs and swings.

About this time the rat menace found its own solution. Bill grew so fond of the young rats that he was seldom seen without one. He would carry one round in his pocket or on his shoulder for a whole afternoon. He would take them out for walks on the end of a string. Soon the back yard became the happy hunting ground of the small boys of the neighbourhood.

"Please may I have a rat? Mum says I can."

"Please, Mum says after all she doesn't want me to keep it."

"Please may I have another? Mine got away on the way home and a cat got it."

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