Jack Black

A chapter from *London Labour and the London Poor* by Henry Mayhew, of historical Interest to the rat fancy, and digitalised by Alan diGangi, January 2009.
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As I wished to obtain the best information about rat and vermin destroying, I thought I could not do better now than apply to that eminent authority “the Queen’s rat catcher,” and accordingly I sought an interview with Mr. “Jack” Black, whose hand-bills are headed:

“V.R. Rat and mole destroyer to Her Majesty.”

I had already had a statement from the royal bug-destroyer relative to the habits and means of exterminating those offensive vermin, and I was desirous of pairing it with an account of the personal experience of the Queen of England’s rat catcher.

In the sporting world, and among his regular customers, the Queen’s rat catcher is better known by the name of Jack Black. He enjoys the reputation of being, the most fearless handler of rats of any man living, playing with them as one man expressed it to me--“as if they were so many blind kittens.”

The first time I ever saw Mr. Black was in the streets of London, at the corner of Hartstreet, where he was exhibiting the rapid effects of his rat poison, by placing some of it in the mouth of a living animal. He had a cart then with rats painted on the panels, and at the tailboard, where he stood lecturing; he had a kind of stage rigged up, on which were cages filled with rats, and pills, and poison packages.

Here I saw him dip his hand into this cage of rats and take out as many as he could hold, a feat which generally caused an “oh!” of wonder to escape from the crowd, especially when they observed that his hands were unbitten. Women more particularly shuddered when they beheld him place some half-dozen of the dusty-looking brutes within his shirt next his skin; and men swore the animals had been tamed, as he let them run up his arms like squirrels, and the people gathered round beheld them sitting on his shoulders cleaning their faces with their front-paws, or rising up on their hind legs like little kangaroos, and sniffing about his ears and cheeks.

But those who knew Mr. Black better, were well aware that the animals he took up in his hand were as wild as any of the rats in the sewers of London, and that the only mystery in the exhibition was that of a man having courage enough to undertake the work.

I afterwards visited Jack Black at his house in Battersea. I had some difficulty in discovering his country residence, and was indebted to a group of children gathered round and staring at the bird-cage in the window of his cottage for his address. Their exclamations of delight at a grey parrot climbing with his beak and claws about the zinc wires of his cage, and the hopping of the little linnets there, in the square boxes scarcely bigger than a brick, made me glance up at the door to discover who the bird-fancier was; when painted on a bit of zinc--just large enough to fit the shaft of a tax cart I saw the words, “J. Black, Rat Destroyer to Her Majesty,” surmounted by the royal initials, V.R., together with the painting of a white rat.

Mr. Black was out “sparer ketching,” as his wife informed me, for he had an order for three dozen, “which was to be shot in a match” at some tea-gardens close by. When I called again Mr. Black had returned, and I found him kneeling before a big, rusty iron-wire cage, as large as a sea-chest, and transferring the sparrows from his bird catching apparatus to the more roomy prison.
He transacted a little business before I spoke to him, for the boys about the door were asking, “Can I have one for a penny, master?”

There is evidently a great art in handling birds; for when Mr. Black held one, he took hold of it by the wings and tail, so that the little creature seemed to be sitting upright and had not a feather rumpled, while it stretched out its neck and looked around it; the boys, on the contrary, first made them flutter their feathers as rough as a hair ball, and then half smothered them between their two hands, by holding them as if they wished to keep them hot.

I was soon at home with Mr. Black. He was a very different man from what I had expected to meet, for there was an expression of kindliness in his countenance, a quality which does not exactly agree with one’s preconceived notions of rat catchers. His face had a strange appearance, from his rough, uncombed hair, being nearly grey, and his eyebrows and whiskers black, so that he looked as if he wore powder.

Mr. Black informed me that the big iron wire cage, in which the sparrows were fluttering about, had been constructed by him for rats, and that it held over a thousand when full for rats are packed like cups, he said, one over the other. “But,” he added, “business is bad for rats, and it makes a splendid havery; besides, sparers is the rats of birds, sir, for if you look at ‘em in a cage they always huddles up in a corner like rats in a pit, and they are a most vermin in colour and habits, and eats anything.”

The rat catcher’s parlour was more like a shop than a family apartment. In a box, with iron bars before it, like a rabbit-hutch, was a white ferret, twisting its long thin body with a snake-like motion up and down the length of its prison, as restlessly as if it were a miniature polar bear.

When Mr. Black called “Polly” to the ferret, it came to the bars and fixed its pink eyes on him. A child lying on the floor poked its fingers into the cage, but Polly only smelt at them, and, finding them not good to eat, went away.

Mr. Black stuffs animals and birds, and also catches fish for vivaria. Against the walls were the furred and feathered remains of departed favourites, each in its glazed box and appropriate attitude. There was a famous polecat “a first rater at rats” we were informed. Here a ferret “that never was equalled.” This canary “had earned pounds.” That linnet “was the wonder of its day.” The enormous pot-bellied carp, with the miniature rushes painted at the back of its case, was caught in the Regent’s Park waters.

In another part of the room hung fishing lines, and a badger’s skin, and lead-bobs and curious eel-hooks--the latter as big as the curls on the temples of a Spanish dancer, and from here Mr. Black took down a transparent looking fish, like a slip of parchment, and told me that it was a fresh-water smelt, and that he caught it in the Thames--“the first he ever heard of.” Then he showed me a beetle suspended to a piece of thread, like a big spider to its web, and this he informed me was the Thames beetle, “which either live by land or water.

“You ketch ‘em,” continued Mr. Black, “when they are swimming on their backs, which is their nature, and when they turns over you finds ‘em beautifully crossed and marked.”
Round the room were hung paper bags, like those in which housewives keep their sweet herbs. “All of them there, sir, contain cured fish for eating,” Mr. Black explained to me.

I’m called down here the Battersea otter,” he went on, “for I can go out at four in the morning, and come home by eight with a barrowful of freshwater fish. Nobody knows how I do it, because I never take no nets or lines with me. I assure them I ketch ‘em with my hands, which I do, but they only laughs incredulous like. I knows the fishes’ harnts, and watches the tides. I sells fresh fish--perch, roach, dace, gudgeon, and suchlike, and even small jack, at three pence a pound, or what they’l fetch; and I’ve caught near the Wandsworth ‘Black Sea,’ as we calls it, half a hundred weight sometimes, and I never took less than my handkerchey full.

I was inclined--like the inhabitants of Battersea--to be incredulous of the rat catcher’s hand-fishing, until, under a promise of secrecy, he confided his process to me, and then not only was I perfectly convinced of its truth, but startled that so simple a method had never before been taken advantage of.

Later in the day Mr. Black became very communicative. We sat chatting together in his sanded bird shop, and he told me all his misfortunes, and how bad luck had pressed upon him, and driven him out of London.

I was fool enough to take a public-house in Regent-street, sir,” he said. “My daughter used to dress as the ‘Ratketcher’s Daughter,’ and serve behind the bar, and that did pretty well for a time; but it was a brewer’s house, and they ruined me.

The costume of the “ratketcher’s daughter” was shown to me by her mother. It was a red velvet bodice, embroidered with silver lace.

“With a muslin skirt, and her hair down her back, she looked very genteel,” added the parent.

Mr. Black’s chief complaint was that he could not “make an appearance,” for his “uniform”--a beautiful green coat and red waistcoat--were pledged.”

Whilst giving me his statement, Mr. Black, in proof of his assertions of the biting powers of rats, drew my attention to the leathern breeches he wore, “as were given him twelve years ago by Captain B----.”

These were pierced in some places with the teeth of the animals, and in others were scratched and fringed like the wash leather of a street knife-seller.

His hands, too, and even his face, had scars upon them from bites.

Mr. Black informed me that he had given up tobacco “since an accident he met with from a pipe. I was smoking a pipe,” he said, “and a friend of mine by chance jobbed it into my mouth, and it went right through to the back of my palate, and I nearly died.”

Here his wife added, “There’s a hole there to this day you could put your thumb into; you never saw such a mouth.”

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Mr. Black informed me in secret that he had often, “unbeknown to his wife,” tasted what cooked rats were like, and he asserted that they were as moist as rabbits, and quite as nice.

If they are sewer-rats,” he continued, “just chase them for two or three days before you kill them, and they are as good as barn rats, I give you my word, sir.

Mr. Black’s statement was as follows:

I should think I’ve been at ratting a’most for five-and-thirty year; indeed, I may say from my childhood, for I’ve kept at it a’most all my life. I’ve been dead near three times from bites as near as a toucher. I once had the teeth of a rat break in my finger, which was dreadful bad, and swole, and putrefied, so that I had to have the broken bits pulled out with tweezers. When the bite is a bad one, it festers and forms a hard core in the ulcer, which is very painful, and throbs very much indeed; and after that core comes away, unless you cleans ‘em out well, the sores, even after they seemed to be healed, break out over and over again, and never cure perfectly.

This core is as big as a boiled fish’s eye, and as hard as a stone. I generally cuts the bite out clean with a lancet, and squeege the humour well from it, and that’s the only way to cure it thorough—as you see my hands is all covered with scars from bites.

The worst bite I ever had was at the Manor House, Hornsey, kept by Mr. Burnell. One day when I was there, he had some rats get loose, and he asked me to ketch ‘em for him, as they was wanted for a match that was coming on that afternoon. I had picked up a lot indeed, I had one in each hand, and another again my knee, when I happened to come to a sheaf of straw, which I turned over, and there was a rat there. I couldn’t lay hold on him ‘cause my hands was full, and as I stooped down he ran up the sleeve of my coat, and bit me on the muscle of the arm. I couldn’t lay hold on him ‘cause my hands was full, and as I stooped down he ran up the sleeve of my coat, and bit me on the muscle of the arm. I shall never forget it. It turned me all of a sudden, and made me feel numb. In less than half-an-hour I was took so bad I was obliged to be sent home, and I had to get some one to drive my cart for me. It was terrible to see the blood that came from me I bled awful. Burnell seeing me go so queer, says, ‘Here, Jack, take some brandy, you look so awful bad.’ The arm swole, and went as heavy as a ton weight pretty well, so that I couldn’t even lift it, and so painful I couldn’t bear my wife to ferment it. I was kept in bed for two months through that bite at Burnell’s. I was so weak couldn’t stand, and I was dreadful feverish—all warmth like. I knew I was going to die, ‘cause I remember the doctor coming and opening my eyes, to see if I was still alive.

I’ve been bitten nearly everywhere, even where I can’t name to you, sir, and right through my thumb nail too, which, as you see, always has a split in it, though it’s years since I was wounded. I suffered as much from that bite on my thumb as anything. It went right up to my ear. I felt the pain in both places at once a regular twinge, like touching the nerve of a tooth. The thumb went black, and I was told I ought to have it off; but I knew a young chap at the Middlesex Hospital who wasn’t out of his time, and he said, ‘No, I wouldn’t, Jack;’ and no more I did; and he used to strap it up for me. But the worst of it was, I had a job at Camden Town one afternoon after he had dressed the wound, and I got another bite lower down on the same thumb, and that flung me down on my bed, and there I stopped, I should think, six weeks.

I was bit bad, too, in Edwards-street, Hampstead-road; and that time I was sick near three months, and close upon dying. Whether it was the poison of the bite, or the medicine the doctor give me, I can’t say;
but the flesh seemed to swell up like a bladder regular blowed like. After all, I think I cured myself by cheating the doctor, as they calls it; for instead of taking the medicine, I used to go to Mr.----’s house in Albany-street (the publican), and he’d say, ‘What’ll yer have, Jack?’ and I used to take a glass of stout, and that seemed to give me strength to overcome the poison of the bite, for I began to pick up as soon as I left off doctor’s stuff.

When a rat’s bite touches the bone, it makes you faint in a minute, and it bleeds dreadful--ah, most terrible--just as if you had been stuck with a penknife. You couldn’t believe the quantity of blood that come away, sir.

The first rats I caught was when I was about nine years of age. I ketched them at Mr. Strickland’s, a large cow-keeper, in Little Albany-street, Regent’s-park. At that time it was all fields and meaders in them parts, and I recollect there was a big orchard on one side of the sheds. I was only doing it for a game, and there was lots of ladies and gents looking on, and wondering at seeing me taking the rats out from under a heap of old bricks and wood, where they had collected theirselves. I had a little dog--a little red ‘un it was, who was well known through the fancy--and I wanted the rats for to test my dog with, I being a lad what was fond of the sport.

I wasn’t afraid to handle rats even then; it seemed to come nat’ral to me. I very soon had some in my pocket, and some in my hands, carrying them away as fast as I could, and putting them into my wire cage. You see, the rats began to run as soon as we shifted them bricks, and I had to scramble for them. Many of them bit me, and, to tell you the truth, I didn’t know the bites were so many, or I dare say I shouldn’t have been so venturesome as I was.

After that I bought some ferrets--four of them--of a man of the name of Butler, what was in the rat-ketching line, and afterwards went out to Jamaicer, to kill rats there. I was getting on to ten years of age then, and I was, I think, the first that regularly began hunting rats to sterminate them; for all those before me used to do it with drugs, and perhaps never handled rats in their lives.

With my ferrets I at first used to go out hunting rats round by the ponds in Regent's park, and the ditches, and in the cow-sheds roundabout. People never paid me for ketching, though, maybe, if they was very much infested, they might give me a trifle; but I used to make my money by selling the rats to gents as was fond of sport, and wanted them for their little dogs.

I kept to this till I was thirteen or fourteen year of age, always using the ferrets; and I bred from them, too,--indeed, I’ve still got the ‘strain’ (breed) of them same ferrets by me now. I’ve sold them ferrets about everywhere; to Jim Burn I’ve sold some of the strain; and to Mr. Anderson, the provision-merchant; and to a man that went to Ireland. Indeed, that strain of ferrets has gone nearly all over the world.

I never lost a ferret out ratting. I always let them loose, and put a bell on mine--arranged in a peculiar manner, which is a secret and I then puts him into the main run of the rats, and lets him go to work. But they must be ferrets that’s well trained for working dwellings, or you’ll lose them as safe as death. I’ve had ‘em go away two houses off, and come back to me. My ferrets is very tame, and so well trained, that I’d put them into a house and guarantee that they’d come back to me. In Grosvenor-street I was clearing once, and the ferrets went next door, and nearly cleared the house--which is the Honourable Mrs. F----’s-- before they came back to me.
Ferrets are very dangerous to handle if not well trained. They are very savage, and will attack a man or a child as well as a rat. It was well known at Mr. Hamilton’s at Hampstead—it’s years ago this is—there was a ferret that got loose what killed a child, and was found sucking it. The bite of ‘em is very dangerous not so poisonous as a rat’s—but very painful; and when the little things is hungry they’ll attack anything. I’ve seen two of them kill a cat, and then they’ll suck the blood till they fills theirselves, after which they’ll fall off like leeches.

The weasel and the stoat are, I think, more dangerous than the ferret in their bite. I had a stoat once, which I caught when out ratting at Hampstead for Mr. Cunningham, the butcher, and it bit one of my dogs—Black Bess by name, the truest bitch in the world, sir—in the mouth, and she died three days afterwards at the Ball at Kilburn. I was along with Captain K----, who’d come out to see the sport, and whilst we were at dinner, and the poor bitch lying under my chair, my boy says, says he, ‘Father, Black Bess is dying;’ and had scarce spoke the speech when she was dead. It was all through the bite of that stoat, for I opened the wound in the lip, and it was all swole, and dreadful ulcerated, and all down the throat it was inflamed most shocking, and so was the lungs quite red and fiery. She was hot with work when she got the bite, and perhaps that made her take the poison quicker.

To give you a proof, sir, of the savage nature of the ferrets, I was one night at Jimmy Shaw’s, where there was a match to come off with rats, which the ferret was to kill; and young Bob Shaw (Jim’s son) was holding the ferret up to his mouth and giving it spittle, when the animal seized him by the lip, and bit it right through, and hung on as tight as a vice, which shows the spitefulness of the ferret, and how it will attack the human frame. Young Shaw still held the ferret in his hand whilst it was fastened to his lip, and he was saying, ‘Oh, oh!’ in pain. You see, I think Jim kept it very hard to make it kill the rats better. There was some noblemen there, and also Mr. George, of Kensal New-town, was there, which is one of the largest dog-fanciers we have. To make the ferret leave go of young Shaw, they bit its feet and tail, and it wouldn’t, ‘cos—as I could have told ‘em—it only made it bite all the more. At last Mr. George, says he to me, ‘For God’s sake, Jack, take the ferret off.’ I didn’t like to intrude myself upon the company before, not being in my own place, and I didn’t know how Jimmy would take it. Everybody in the room was at a standstill, quite horrerfied, and Jimmy himself was in a dreadful way for his boy. I went up, and quietly forced my thumb into his mouth and loosed him, and he killed a dozen rats after that. They all said, ‘Bravo, Jack, you are a plucked one;’ and the little chap said, ‘Well, Jack, I didn’t like to holla, but it was dreadful painful.’ His lip swole up directly as big as a nigger’s, and the company made a collection for the lad of some dozen shillings. This shows that, although a ferret will kill a rat, yet, like the rat, it is always vicious, and will attack the human frame.

When I was about fifteen, sir, I turned to bird-fancying. I was very fond of the sombre linnet. I was very successful in raising them, and sold them for a deal of money. I’ve got the strain of them by me now. I’ve ris them from some I purchased from a person in the Coal-yard, Drury-lane. I give him 2l. for one of the periwinkle strain, but afterwards I heard of a person with, as I thought, a better strain—Lawson of Holloway—and I went and give him 30s. for a bird. I then ris them. I used to go and ketch the nestlings off the common, and ris them under the old trained birds.

Originally linnets was taught to sing by a bird-organ—principally among the weavers, years ago,—but I used to make the old birds teach the young ones. I used to molt them off in the dark, by kivering the cages up, and then they’d learn from hearing the old ones singing, and would take the song. If any did not sing perfectly I used to sell ‘em as cast-offs.
The linnet’s is a beautiful song. There are four-and-twenty changes in a linnet’s song. It’s one of the beautifullest song-birds we’ve got. It sings ‘toys,’ as we call them; that is, it makes sounds which we distinguish in the fancy as the ‘tollah eeke eeke quake le wheet; single eke eke quake wheets, or eek eek quake chowls; eege pipe chowl: laugh; eege poy chowls; rattle; pipe; fear; pugh and poy.’

This seems like Greek to you, sir, but it’s the tunes we use in the fancy. What we terms ‘fear’ is a sound like fear, as if they was frightened; ‘laugh’ is a kind of shake, nearly the same as the ‘rattle.’

I know the sounds of all the English birds, and what they say. I could tell you about the nightingale, the black cap, hedge warbler, garden warbler, petty chat, red start a beautiful song-bird the willow wren little warblers they are linnets, or any of as if to prove this, he drew from a side pocket a couple of tin bird-whistles, which were attached by a string to a button-hole. He instantly began to imitate the different birds, commencing with their call, and then explaining how, when answered to in such a way, they gave another note, and how, if still responded to, they uttered a different sound.

In fact, he gave me the whole of the conversation he usually carried on with the different kinds of birds, each one being as it were in a different language. He also showed me how he allured them to him, when they were in the air singing in the distance, and he did this by giving their entire song. His cheeks and throat seemed to be in constant motion as he filled the room with his loud imitations of the lark, and so closely did he resemble the notes of the bird, that it was no longer any wonder how the little things could be deceived.

In the same manner he illustrated the songs of the nightingale, and so many birds, that I did not recognise the names of some of them. He knew all their habits as well as notes, and repeated to me the peculiar chirp they make on rising from the ground, as well as the sound by which he distinguishes that it is “uneasy with curiosity,” or that it has settled on a tree. Indeed, he appeared to be acquainted with all the chirps which distinguished any action in the bird up to the point when, as he told me, it “circles about, and then falls like a stone to the ground with its pitch.”

“The nightingale,” he continued, “is a beautiful song-bird. They’re plucky birds, too, and they hear a call and answer to anybody; and when taken in April they’re plucked enough to sing as soon as put in a cage. I can ketch a nightingale in less than five minutes; as soon as he calls, I calls to him with my mouth, and he’l answer me (both by night or day), either from a spiny (a little corpse), a dell, or a wood, wherever he may be. I make my scrapes, (that is, clear away the dirt), set my traps, and catch ‘em almost before I’ve tried my luck. I’ve ketched sometimes thirty in a day, for although people have got a notion that nightingales is scarce, still those who can distinguish their song in the daytime know that they are plentiful enough--almost like the lark. You see persons fancy that them nightingales as sings at night is the only ones living, but it’s wrong, for many on them only sings in the day.

You see it was when I was about eighteen, I was beginning to get such a judge about birds, sir. I sold to a butcher, of the name of Jackson, the first young un that I made money out of--for two pounds it was- and I’ve sold loads of ‘em since for thirty shillings or two pounds each, and I’ve got the strain by me now. I’ve also got by me now the bird that won the match at Mr. Lockwood’s in Drury-lane, and won the return match at my own place in High-street, Marabun. It was in the presence of all the fancy. He’s moulted pied (pie-bald) since, and gone a little white on the head and the back. We only sang for two pounds a side--it wasn’t a great deal of money. In our matches we sing by both gas and daylight. He was
a master baker I sang against, but I forget his name. They do call him ‘Holy Face,” but that’s a nick-
name, because he’s very much pockmarked. I wouldn’t sell that bird at all for anythink; I’ve been
offered ten pounds for it. Captain K----put ten sovereigns down on the counter for him, and I wouldn’t
pick ‘em up, for I’ve sold lots of his strain for a pound each.

When I found I was a master of the birds, then I turned to my rat business again. I had a little rat dog a
black tan terrier of the name of Billy, which was the greatest stock dog in London of that day. He is the
father of the greatest portion of the small black tan dogs in London now, which Mr. Isaac, the bird-
fancier in Princes-street, purchased one of the strain for six or seven pounds; which Jimmy Massey
afterwards purchased another of the strain, for a monkey, a bottle of wine, and three pounds. That was
the rummest bargain I ever made.

I’ve ris and trained monkeys by shoals. Some of mine is about now in shows exhibiting; one in particu-
lar--Jimmy.

One of the strain of this little black tan dog would draw a badger twelve or fourteen lbs. to his six lbs.,
which was done for a wager, ‘cos it was thought the badger had his teeth drawn, but he hadn’t, as was
proved by his biting Mr. P---- from Birmingham, for he took a piece clean out of his trousers, which
was pretty good proof, and astonished them all in the room.

I’ve been offered a sovereign a-pound for some of my little terriers, but it wouldn’t pay me at that price,
for they weren’t heavier than two or three pounds. I once sold one of the dogs, of this same strain, for
fourteen pounds, to the Austrian Ambassador. Mrs. H---- the banker’s lady, wished to get my strain of
terriers, and she give me five pounds for the use of him; in fact, my terrier dog was known to all the
London fancy. As rat-killing dogs, there’s no equal to that strain of black tan terriers.

It’s 15 year ago since I first worked for Government. I found that the parks was much infested with rats,
which had undermined the bridges and gnawed the drains, and I made application to Mr. Westley, who
was superintendent of the park, and he spoke of it, and then it was wrote to me that I was to fulfil the
sitewration, and I was to have six pounds a-year. But after that it was altered, and I was to have so much
a-head, which is three pence. After that, Newton, what was a varmint destroyer to her Majesty, dying,
I wrote in to the Board of Hordnance, when they appointed me to each station in London--that was, to
Regentseypark-bar- racks, to the Knights bridge and Portland barracks, and to all the other barracks in
the metropolis. I’ve got the letter now by me, in which they says ‘they is proud to appoint me.’

I’ve taken thirty-two rats out of one hole in the islands in Regentsey-park, and found in it fish, birds,
and loads of eggs--duck-eggs, and every kind.

It must be fourteen year since I first went about the streets exhibiting with rats. I began with a cart and
a’most a donkey; for it was a pony scarce bigger; but I’ve had three or four big horses since that, and
ask anybody, and they’ll tell you I’m noted for my cattle. I thought that by having a kind of costume,
and the rats painted on the cart, and going round the country, I should get my name about, and get
myself knowed; and so I did, for folks ‘ud come to me, so that sometimes I’ve had four jobs of a-day,
from people seeing my cart. I found I was quite the master of the rat, and could do pretty well what I
liked with him; so I used to go round Finchley, Highgate, and all the suburbs, and show myself, and
how I handled the varmint.
I used to wear a costume of white leather breeches, and a green coat and scarlet waist kit, and a gold band round my hat, and a belt across my shoulder. I used to make a first-rate appearance, such as was becoming the uniform of the Queen’s rat-ketcher.

Lor’ bless you! I’ve travelled all over London, and I’ll kill rats again anybody. I’m open to all the world for any sum, from one pound to fifty. I used to have my painted at first by Mr. Bailey, the animal painter—with four white rats; but the idea come into my head that I’d cast the rats in metal, just to make more appearance for the belt, to come out in the world. I was nights and days at it, and it give me a deal of bother. I could manage it no how; but by my own ingenuity and perseverance I succeeded. A man axed me a pound a-piece for casting the rats--that would ha’ been four pound. I was very certain that my belt, being a handsome one, would help my business tremendous in the sale of my composition. So I took a mould from a dead rat in plaster, and then I got some of my wife’s sarsepans, and, by G--, I casted ‘em with some of my own pewter-pots.

The wife, who was standing by, here exclaimed--

Oh, my poor sarsepans! I remember ‘em. There was scarce one left to cook our vittels with.

“Thousands of moulders,” continued Jack Black, “used to come to see me do the casting of the rats, and they kept saying, ‘You’ll never do it, Jack.’ The great difficulty, you see, was casting the heye--which is a black bead--into the metal.

When the belt was done, I had a great success; for, bless you, I couldn’t go a yard without a crowd after me.

When I was out with the cart selling my composition, my usual method was this. I used to put a board across the top, and form a kind of counter. I always took with me a iron wire cage--so big a one, that Mr. Barnet, a Jew, laid a wager that he could get into it, and he did. I used to form this cage at one end of the cart, and sell my composition at the other. There were rats painted round the cart--that was the only show I had about the vehicle. I used to take out the rats, and put them outside the cage; and used to begin the show by putting rats inside my shirt next my bousem, or in my coat and breeches pockets, or on my shoulder --in fact, all about me, anywhere. The people would stand to see me take up rats without being bit. I never said much, but I used to handle the rats in every possible manner, letting ‘em run up my arm, and stroking their backs and playing with ‘em. Most of the people used to fancy they had been tamed on purpose, until they’d see me take fresh ones from the cage, and play with them in the same manner. I all this time kept on selling my composition, which my man Joe used to offer about; and whenever a packet was sold, I always tested its virtues by killing a rat with it afore the people’s own eyes.

I once went to Tottenham to sell my composition, and to exhibit with my rats afore the country people. Some countrymen, which said they were rat-ketchers, came up to me whilst I was playing with some rats, and said -- ‘Ugh, you’re not a rat-ketcher; that’s not the way to do it.’ They were startled at seeing me selling the poison at such a rate, for the shilling packets was going uncommon well, sir. I said, ‘No, I ain’t a rat-ketcher, and don’t know nothing about it. You come up and show me how to do it.’ One of them come up on the cart, and put his hand in the cage, and curious enough he got three bites directly, and afore he could take his hands out they was nearly bit to ribbons. My man Joe, says he, ‘I tell you, if
we ain’t rat-ketchers, who is? We are the regular rat-ketchers; my master kills ‘em, and then I eats ‘em and he takes up a live one and puts its head into his mouth, and I puts my hand in the cage and pulls out six or seven in a cluster, and holds ‘em up in the air, without even a bite. The countrymen bust out laughing; and they said, ‘Well, you’re the best we ever see.’ I sold near 4l. worth of composition that day.

Another day, when I’d been out flying pigeons as well--carriers, which I fancies to-- I drove the cart, after selling the composition, to the King’s Arms, Hanwell, and there was a feller there--a tailor by trade--what had turned rat-ketcher. He had got with him some fifty or sixty rats--the miserablest mangy brutes you ever seed in a tub taking ‘em up to London to sell. I, hearing of it, was determined to have a lark, so I goes up and takes out ten of them rats, and puts them inside my shirt, next my bosom, and then I walks into the parlour and sits down, and begins drinking my ale as right as if nothing had happened. I scarce had seated myself, when the landlord --who was in the lay--says, ‘I know a man who’ll ketch rats quicker than anybody in the world.’ This put the tailor chap up, so he offers to bet half-a-gallon of ale he would, and I takes him. He goes to the tub and brings out a very large rat, and walks with it into the room to show to the company. ‘Well,’ says I to the man, ‘why I, who ain’t a rat-ketcher, I’ve got a bigger one here,’ and I pulls one out from my bosom. ‘And here’s another, and another, and another,’ says I, till I had placed the whole ten on the table. ‘That’s the way I ketch ‘em,’ says I,--‘they comes of their own accord to me.’ He tried to handle the varmints, but the poor fellow was bit, and his hands was soon bleeding furiously and I without a mark. A gentleman as knowed me said, ‘This must be the Queen’s rat-ketcher, and that split the fun. The poor fellow seemed regular done up, and said, ‘I shall give up rat-ketching, you’ve beat me! Here I’ve been travelling with rats all my life, and I never see such a thing afore.’

When I’ve been in a mind for travelling I’ve never sold less than ten shillings’ worth of my composition, and I’ve many a time sold five pounds’ worth. Ten shillings’ worth was the least I ever sold. During my younger career, if I’d had a backer, I might, one week with another, have made my clear three pounds a-week, after paying all my expenses and feeding my horse and all.

I challenge my composition, and sell the art of rat-destroying, against any chemical rat destroyer in the world, for any sum--I don’t care what it is. Let anybody, either a medical or druggist manufacturer of composition, come and test with rats again me, and they’ll pretty soon find it out. People pay for composition instead of employing the Queen’s rat-ketcher, what kills the varmint and lays down his composition for nothing into the bargain likewise.

I also destroy black beetles with a composition which I always keep with me again it’s wanted. I often have to destroy the beetles in wine-cellar, which gnaw the paper off the bottles, such as is round the champagne and French wine bottles. I’ve killed lots of beetles too for bakers. I’ve also sterminated some thousands of beetles for linen-drapers and pork-sausage shops. There’s two kinds of beetles, the hard-shell and the soft-shell beetle. The hard-shell one is the worst, and that will gnaw cork, paper, and anythink woollen. The soft-shell’d one will gnaw bread or food, and it also lays its eggs in the food, which is dreadful nasty.

There’s the house ant too, which there is some thousands of people as never saw I sterminate them as well. There’s a Mrs. B. at the William the Fourth public-house, Hampstead; she couldn’t lay her child’s clothes down without getting ‘em full of ants. They’ve got a sting something in feel like a horse-fly’s,
and is more annoying than dangerous. It’s cockroaches that are found in houses. They’re dreadful nasty things, and will bite, and they are equal to the Spanish flies for blistering. I’ve tried all insects on my flesh to see how they bite me. Cockroaches will undermine similar to the ant, and loosen the bricks the same as the cricket. It’s astonishing how so small an insect as them will scrape away such a quantity of mortar as they do—which thing infests grates, floorings, and such-like.

The beetle is a most ‘strordinary thing, which will puzzle most people to sterminate, for they lays sitch a lot of eggs as I would never guarantee to do away with beetles--only to keep them clear; for if you kills the old ones the eggs will revive, and young ones come out of the wainskitting and sitch-like, and then your employers will say, ‘Why you were paid for sterminating, and yet here they are.’

One night in August--the night of a very heavy storm, which, maybe, you may remember, sir--I was sent for by a medical gent as lived opposite the Load of Hay, Hampstead, whose two children had been attacked by rats while they was sleeping in their little cots. I traced the blood, which had left lines from their tails, through the openings in the lath and plaster, which I follered to where my ferrets come out of, and they must have come up from the bottom of the house to the attics. The rats gnawed the hands and feet of the little children. The lady heard them crying, and got out of her bed and called to the servant to know what the child was making such a noise for, when they struck a light, and then they see the rats running away to the holes; their little night-gowns was covered with blood, as if their throats had been cut. I asked the lady to give me one of the night-gowns to keep as a curiosity, for I considered it a phee-nomenon, and she give it to me, but I never was so vexed in all my life as when I was told the next day that a maid had washed it. I went down the next morning and sterminated them rats. I found they was of the specie of rat, which we term the blood-rat, which is a dreadful spiteful feller--a snake-headed rat, and infests the dwellings. There may have been some dozens of ‘em altogether, but it’s so long ago I a’most forget how many I took in that house. The gent behaved uncommon handsome, and said, ‘Mr. Black, I can never pay you for this;’ and ever afterwards, when I used to pass by that there house, the little dears when they see me used to call out to their mamma, ‘O, here’s Mr. Ratty, ma!’ They were very pretty little fine children-- uncommon handsome, to be sure.

I once went to Mr. Hollins’s, in Edwardstreet Regent’s-park--a cow-keeper he was where he was so infested that the cows could not lay down or eat their food, for the rats used to go into the manger, and fight at ‘em. Mr. Hollins said to me, ‘Black, what shall I give you to get rid of them rats?’ and I said to him, says I, ‘Well, Mr. Hollins, you’re a poor man, and I leave it to you.’ (He’s got awful rich since then.) I went to work, and I actually took out 300 rats from one hole in the wall, which I had to carry them in my mouth and hands, and under my arms, and in my bosom and pockets, to take them to the cage. I was bit dreadful by them, and suffered greatly by the bites; but nothing to lay up for, though very painful to the hands. To prevent the rats from getting out of the hole, I had to stop it up by putting my breast again it, and then they was jumping up again me and gnawing at my waist kit. I should think I sterminated 500 from them premises. Ah! I did wonders round there, and everybody was talking of my feats.

I’ll tell you about another cow-keeper’s, which Mr. Hollins was so gratified with my skill what I had done, that he pays me handsome and generous, and gives me a recommendation to Mrs. Brown’s, of Camden-town, and there I sterminated above 700 rats; and I was a-near being killed, for I was stooping down under the manger, when a cow heard the rats squeak, and she butts at me and sends me up again the bull. The bull was very savage, and I fainted; but I was picked up and washed, and then I come to.
Whilst doing that job at Mrs. Brown’s I had to lie down on the ground, and push my naked arm into the hole till I could reach the rats as I’d driven up in the corner, and then pull them out with my hand. I was dreadful bit, for I was obliged to handle them anyhow; my flesh was cut to ribbons and dreadful lacerated.

There was a man Mrs. Brown had got of the name of John, and he wouldn’t believe about the rats, and half thought I brought ‘em with me. So I showed him how to ketch rats.

You see rats have always got a main run, and from it go the branch runs on each side like on a herring-bone, and at the end of the branch runs is the bolt-holes, for coming in and out at. I instantly stopped up all the bolt-holes and worked the rats down to the end of the main run, then I broke up the branch runs and stopped the rats getting back, and then, when I’d got ‘em all together at the end of the main run, I put my arm down and lifted them up. I have had at times to put half my body into a hole and thrust down my arm just like getting rabbits out of their burrers.

Sometimes I have to go myself into the holes, for the rats make such big ones, there’s plenty of room. There was a Mrs. Perry in Albany-street, that kept an oil and coke shop she were infested with rats dreadful. Three of her shop-boys had been sent away on suspicion of stealing fat, instead of which it was the rats, for between the walls and the vault I found a hundred and a half of fat stowed away. The rats was very savage, and I should think there was 200 of them. I made a good bit of money by that job, for Mrs. Perry give the fat to me.

I have had some good finds at times, rat hunting. I found under one floor in a gent’s house a great quantity of table napkins and silver spoons and forks, which the rats had carried away for the grease on ‘em--shoes and boots gnawed to pieces, shifts, aprons, gowns, pieces of silk, and I don’t know what not. Servants had been discharged accused of stealing them there things. Of course I had to give them up; but there they was.

I was once induced to go to a mews in Tavistock-place, near Russell-square, which was regular infested by rats. They had sent to a man before, and he couldn’t do nothing with ‘em, but I soon sterminated them. The rats there had worried a pair of beautiful chestnut horses, by gnawing away their hoofs and nearly driving them mad, which I saw myself, and there was all their teeth-marks, for I could scarcely believe it myself till I see it. I found them near a cart-load of common bricks, under the floor, and near the partition of the stable, which, when the men pulled the wood-work down, the coachman, says he, ‘Well, rat-ketcher, if you’d been employed years ago a deal more corn would have gone into the horses.’

This coachman give me a recommendation a muffin-maker in Hanway-yard, and I went there and killed the rats. But a most singular thing took place there; my ferret got away and run through into a house in Oxford-street kept by a linen-draper, for the young men come to say that the rat-ketcher’s ferret was in their shop, and had bit one of their lady customers. I worked the ferret through three times to make sure of this; and each time my little dog told me it was true. You see a well trained dog will watch and stand and point to the ferret working under ground just as a pinter does to game; and although he’s above ground, yet he’ll track the ferret through the runs underneath by the smell. If the ferret is lost--which I tell by the dog being uneasy --I say to the dog, ‘Hi, lost;’ and then he instantly goes on scent and smells about in every direction, and I follers him, till he stands exactly over the spot where it may be, and then I have either to rise a stone or lift a board to get him out.
I’ve ratted for years for Mr. Hodges, of Hodges and Lowman’s, in Regent-street; and he once said to me, that he was infested dreadful with rats at the house, which he took for the children, at Hampstead; so I went there, and witnessed, certainly, the most curious circumstance, which puzzles me to this day. I had to lay on my belly half in the hole and pull out the rats; and, on looking at them, as I brings them up, I am astonished to find that nearly every one of them is blind, and has a speck in the eye. I was never so much astonished in my life, for they was as a wall-eyed dog might be. I supposed it to be from lightning (I couldn’t account for it no other ways), for at that time there was very heavy lightning and floods up there, which maybe you might remember, sir. They was chiefly of the blood-rat specie--small snake headed rats, with a big, fine tail. They was very savage with me, and I had them run all over me before I ketched them.

Rats are everywhere about London, both in rich and poor places. I’ve ketched rats in 44 Portland-place, at a clergyman’s house there. There was 200 and odd. They had under minded the oven so, that they could neither bile nor bake; they had under-pinioned the stables, and let every stone down throughout the premises, pretty well. I had to crawl under a big leaden cistern which the rats had under-pinioned, and I expected it would come down upon me every minute. I had one little ferret kill thirty-two rats under one stone, and I lifted the dead ones up in the presence of the cook and the butler. He didn’t behave well to me--the gent didn’t--for I had to go to my lawyer’s afore I could get paid, and after the use of my skill; and I had to tell the lawyer I’d pawn my bed to stick to him and get my earnings; but, after all, I had to take one-third less than my bill. This, thinks I, isn’t the right thing for Portland-place.

Rats will eat each other like rabbits, which I’ve watched them, and seen them turn the dead one’s skins out like pusses, and eat the flesh off beautiful clean. I’ve got cages of iron-wire, which I made myself, which will hold 1,000 rats at a time, and I’ve had these cages piled up with rats, solid like. No one would ever believe it; to look at a quantity of rats, and see how they will fight and tear one another about,--it’s astonishing, so it is! I never found any rats smothered, by putting them in a cage so full; but if you don’t feed them every day, they’ll fight and eat one another--they will, like cannibals.

I general contracts with my customers, by the year, or month, or job. There’s some gents I’ve worked for these fifteen years-- sitch as Mr. Robson, the coach--builder, Mivart’s Hotel, Shoulbreds’, Mr. Lloyds, the large tobacconist, the Commercial Life Assurance, Lord Duncannon’s, and I can’t recollect how many more. My terms is from one guinea to five pounds per annum, according to the premises. Besides this, I have all the rats that I ketch, and they sell for three pence each. But I’ve done my work too well, and wherever I went I’ve cleared the rats right out, and so my customers have fell off. I have got the best testimonials of any man in London, and I could get a hatful more tomorrer. Ask anybody I’ve worked for, and they’ll tell you about Jack Black.

One night I had two hundred rats in a cage, placed in my sitting-room, and a gent’s dog happened to get at the cage, and undid the door, sniffing about, and let ‘em all loose. Directly I come in I knew they was loose by the smell. I had to go on my knees and stomach under the beds and sofas, and all over the house, and before twelve o’clock that night I had got ‘em all back again into the cage, and sold them after for a match. I was so fearful they’d get gnawing the children, having sterminated them in a house where children had been gnawed.

I’ve turned my attention to everything connected with animals. I’ve got the best composition for curing the mange in a horse or a dog, which has regular astonished medical gents. I’ve also been bit by a mad
dog a black retriever dog, that died raving mad in a cellar afterwards. The only thing I did was, I washed the wound with salt and water, and used a turpentine poultice.

Mrs. Black here interposed, exclaiming,—

O dear me! the salt and water he’s had to his flesh, it ought to be as hard as iron. I’ve seen him put lumps of salt into his wounds.

Mr. Black then continued:–

I never had any uneasiness from that bite of a mad dog; indeed, I never troubled myself about it, or even thought of it.

I’ve caught some other things besides rats in my time. One night, I saw a little South African cat going along the New-road. I thought it was a curious specie of rat, and chased it, and brought it home with me; but it proved to belong to Mr. Herring’s menagerie in the New-road, so I let him have it back again.

Another time I met with two racoons, which I found could handle me just as well as I could handle a rat, for they did bite and scratch awful. I put ‘em in the cart, and brought them home in a basket. I never found out to whom they belonged. I got them in Ratcliff highway, and no doubt some sailors had brought them over, and got drunk and let ‘em loose. I tried them at killing rats, but they weren’t no good at that.

I’ve learnt a monkey to kill rats, but he wouldn’t do much, and only give them a good shaking when they bit him. After I found the racoons no good, I trained a badger to kill rats, and he was superior to any dog, but very difficult in training to get him to kill, though they’ll kill rabbits fast enough, or any other kind of game, for they’re rare poachers are badgers. I used to call her Polly. She killed in my own pit, for I used to oblige my friends that wouldn’t believe it possible with the sight. She won several matches—the largest was in a hundred match.

I also sterminate moles for her Majesty, and the Woods and Forests, and I’ve sterminated some hundreds for different farmers in the country. It’s a curious thing, but a mole will kill a rat and eat it afterwards, and two moles will fight wonderful. They’ve got a mouth exactly like a shark, and teeth like saws; ah, a wonderful saw mouth. They’re a very sharp-biting little animal, and very painful. A rat is frightened of one, and don’t like fighting them at all.

I’ve bred the finest collection of pied rats which has ever been knowed in the world. I had above eleven hundred of them all wariegated rats, and of a different specie and colour, and all of them in the first instance bred from the Norwegian and the white rat, and afterwards crossed with other specie.

I have ris some of the largest tailed rats ever seen. I’ve sent them to all parts of the globe, and near every town in England. When I sold ‘em off, three hundred of them went to France. I ketched the first white rat I had at Hampstead; and the black ones at Messrs. Hodges and Lowman’s, in Regent-street, and them I bred in. I have ‘em fawn and white, black and white, brown and white, red and white, blue-black and white, black-white and red.
People come from all parts of London to see them rats, and I supplied near all the ‘happy families’ with them. Burke, who had the ‘happy family’ showing about London, has had hundreds from me. They got very tame, and you could do anything with them. I’ve sold many to ladies for keeping in squirrel cages. Years ago I sold ‘em for five and ten shillings a-piece, but towards the end of my breeding them, I let ‘em go for two-and-six. At a shop in Leicester-square, where Cantello’s hatching-eggs machine was, I sold a sow and six young ones for ten shillings, which formerly I have had five pounds for, being so docile, like a sow sucking her pigs.