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Man, in his arrogance, believes that he rules the world; but it is only the balance of nature among the other animals that enables him to maintain his ruling position. Let one spring pass without the feeding of fledgling birds; and the insects will dominate and destroy man's agriculture. Let man introduce anywhere (as he did in Australia with the rabbit) an animal without its natural enemy; and he must devote all his energy for generations to repairing his error. L. Major Reynolds, well known Los Angeles science fiction fan and occasional professional writer, has given us a terrifying glimpse of a moment when man's security was all but destroyed by the intrusion of a new factor, when man was strangely saved without ever knowing that he had been in peril.

Flood

by L. MAJOR REYNOLDS

THE RAGING FLOOD tore at the side of the rain-sodden mountain just below the city. Imperceptibly the surface of the tortured slope quivered, slid for a few inches, and subsided. The high cliff on the opposite bank stood rock solid ignoring the tumult below.

The driving spring storm drove its waters into the widening crevice formed by many centuries of freezing winters, opening it still more. The last of the ice disappeared, and the warmer waters rushed to fill the opening. The weight was too much. With a groan almost human, the mountain side slid with a rush, damming the river from bank to bank.

The torrent flung itself against the barricade and rose swiftly, forming a lake that backed rapidly toward the unsuspecting city.

A watery moon peered from a break in the clouds and shone down on the scene.

The streaming sewer outlets were soon covered, and the water crept higher and higher along the great pipes.

Below the streets the sound of scrabbling claws increased as the rats raced to escape the certain death that rushed upon them.

The pressure in the deepest sewer became unbearable. At several points the concrete cracked. In one place an entire section broke away and crumbled into fragments. The water reached eager fingers into the opening and tore great slabs of earth free, mingling it with the racing flood. Deeper and deeper

the openings grew as more and more of the pipe gave way to the water.

A long fault opened, and the water raced down the steep slope to collect in a deep cavern far below the surface.

It was quiet for a breath, then a tremendous upheaval came and the water foamed and boiled. Something fought a battle with the roaring flood, and the cavern became a maelstrom. The upsurge tore the fault open to the top, and something rushed from the dark space in an attempt at escape.

Above ground, and bracing the rain, a nondescript cat left the dubious shelter of a packing case and slunk through an alley to the street. Some inner sense took him to the nearest sewer entrance, and he crouched above it, waiting for something he dimly sensed. A pair of eyes blazed in the half light and a mangy tom slid from the shadows to help with the vigil. Across the street more padding forms appeared. There was no thought of battle. Each accepted the other, and all feuds were forgotten in the instinctive call that had brought them there. The rain poured down on the waiting animals.

Suddenly the line tensed. There was a scratching sound at the curb, and the nose and whiskers of a giant rat slid cautiously into view. The cats waited with the inborn patience of the hunter until the prey pulled himself into the street.

There was no audible sound, but only two of the cats made the leap that brought them, one on each side of their victim.

A quick rip of sharp teeth and the instant sheen of claws left the rat dead on the pavement, and the cats returned to their vigil.

Time after time the scene was repeated. As the water flooded higher, the rats became more frantic in their efforts to escape. Often, when the struggle ended, it was a cat who lay quietly in the street while the rat tried desperately to find an opening in the circle of enemies which surrounded him. But there was always another foe to face no matter where he turned.

There was excitement in the city now. The sound of sirens, and the roar of trucks as the aroused populace rushed to the river.

Giant searchlights split the sky and focused on the landslide. Wires hummed with hurried messages for help.

And still the water rose, eating away the dam with tiny ineffectual nibbles that could never keep pace with the volume pouring down from the distant mountains, building up the force of the water, till the pressure was almost unbearable.

Something in the sewers was going mad.

Something that hated the touch of water. Something that wanted again the dry solitude of its deep cavern. The water beat at it, and it beat back in insane flailings which smashed sections of pipe as if they were made of paper.

The weight of water continued to increase, and a wide crack opened to the street.

Something screamed soundlessly as the watery moonlight shone into the crevice.

Across the river, a truck loaded with dynamite started toward the scene along the river road. A wall of water hit a bridge and swept it away to add its debris to the barricade. One flailing girder reached out, struck the truck, and the night bloomed with the flash of the explosion.

Smaller slides started along the mountain and the waves slapped against the opposite bank and overran the streets.

Two battles were raging now. Man against the elements, and the cats against their hereditary foes.

The rats were pouring from the sewer in a steady stream, and the cats, reinforced by the arrival of several dogs, fought grimly. There was a tangled mass in the street now, but it was uncannily quiet except for an occasional squeal of rage and frustration from a cornered victim.

The rain-washed pavement shone oddly red in the dim light.

Far down the street a roof blossomed in scarlet flame, and a fire engine howled past the unheeding animals. No man-made noise could stop them. They were grim on the business of extermination.

Under the streets in the sewers, things that had long lived beyond the sight of man moved upward as the surge completely filled the pipes.

The rain was slackening over the city, but dark masses of cloud hung blackly over the distant mountains. And still the water rose higher.

At the landslide, great steam shovels dug frantically at the mass of earth and rock that was spelling the doom of the city. Drills and jackhammers pounded at the base of the cliff, only to be stopped by a harried engineer and sent to the top to start from there.

The tempo of the drills stepped up even faster; and as more lights were added, the scene became almost as bright as day. Frantic scurrying figures seemed to chase each other up and down the cliff face, laying the ropes to hold the hard-rock men in their race against time.

And the water rose, merciless and deadly.

In the city, where there was no eye to see, strange things happened along the main sewer route. Great cracks appeared in the pavements, and car tracks twisted as if endowed with some inner life. Manhole covers shot into the air as if propelled by mighty guns. Geysers of solid water held them up like tangible pillars for the moment, then blew them airily aside to fall with a destructive crash.

And in the sewers the black something keened in suffering as it forced itself higher and higher seeking the dry security left behind.

On the outskirts of the city a number of shadowy forms padded along the soaked ground. They hesitated when they reached the pavement, but some inner force urged them on. Pointed ears cocked forward, they slunk toward the compelling scent that had reached for miles.

The rats were frantic. The sewer opening was a squirming mass that churned within itself. Outside, the cats and dogs waiting in a grim circle for any brave enough to show himself. Inside, a menace they knew was there, but could not comprehend.

There was a movement on the outer edge of the ring, and room was made for the newcomers. The wildcats moved in silently and waited.

Down the street the water rose, keeping pace with the sewers. A long lithe water snake came from the opening and the line parted to allow it to pass. Enemy of the rats, as the waiting warriors seemed to sense, the sinuous form cleared the circle, coiled itself for action, and waited.

The mass of rats gibbered and squealed, trying in vain to communicate to their antagonists the presence behind them of a greater unknown foe, an enemy of *all* life.

For a moment it was stalemate. The steep slope of the street held the rushing waters back long enough for the rats to mass for the final charge.

An earth-shaking blast announced the first explosion, but not an eye moved from the milling rats.

Down at the river, men battled madly to open a way for the waters. Half the cliff was gone now, but the barricade was still too high for the rising water to surmount.

From the distant mountains came flashes of lightning, and the deep rumble of thunder tried to copy the man-made blast of explosives.

All roads were part of the river now, and the beleaguered ones looked toward the west in a vain search for help. But in that direction lay only the vast expanse of ocean.

Five hundred miles away there was sudden activity around a group of planes. Shiny fat-bellied bombs were being loaded, and each of the flying monsters vibrated with eagerness to be gone. A reassuring message was sent, but the last wires were swept away before the news was received.

One by one the ships roared into the air, and help was on its way.

The cats were becoming bolder now. Several of them had made a lightning-fast dash and pulled some of the rats from their hold. That seemed to break the spell that had held them in the sewer entrance.

The battle was no longer quiet. It was a roaring mêlée of cats, dogs, rats and wildcats. And on the outskirts of the throng, the sleek water snake patrolled, alert for any rodent that escaped the maddened crowd.

And still the water rose. Down the street, and creeping closer, came the

steady march, keeping pace with the sewers. The entire end of the city was one with the mighty lake the river had become.

The river had a new sound now. It was a low growl, as if it realized with some uncanny instinct that this time it had the ruling hand. Man had tamed its waters and made it do his bidding for too long. But now the age-old scale had shifted.

Time paced by as the flood occupied the city.

The rain started again, and the waters draining from the upper street were dappled with red.

It was uncannily quiet now. The rain lasted for only a few moments; then the sky cleared as if by magic. There was the first hint of the false dawn in the east, and hopeful eyes waited the coming of the day. But still the raging flood raced down from the mountains to drive the level still higher.

The battle was to the death now. Giant rats, who had lived in darkness for years, were coming out of the sewer. Four of them swung from the throat of a dog, slicing away the flesh till they reached the jugular. But even as victory was attained, other defenders fell on them and life was a fleeting thing.

There was a moment's pause as the final victims searched frantically for one last foothold inside the sewer. The first glint of water slopped over the edge into the street, and suddenly every rat made a wild scramble for the dubious safety of the open air. But they came in sorry shape. Some of them were oddly crushed and bleeding.

The defenders moved forward as one, only to stop dead in their tracks. The soundless screaming came again, was perceptible to all now, and each animal reacted in its own way.

The hackles of the dogs lifted, and they crouched, belly down on the wet pavement, lips snarled back over white fangs.

Cats, in midstride with one lifted foot, arched their backs and low rumblings came from their throats.

And the rats turned and faced the opening, waiting in the same menacing line with their recent enemies.

Something alien was just within the entrance of the sewer. Something older than life itself. Side by side, the animals waited, hearing subconsciously the soundless scream.

The light was strengthening as the sunrise grew brighter.

Suddenly the quiet was broken as the sound of roaring motors cut across the sky, and the great bombers came into view, heading for the river.

A black mass filled the sewer entrance and crawled out on the pavement. Every animal faced it tensely.

At the landslide, the populace cheered at the sight of the planes, and scattered to points of safety. The ships made a trial run over the site, and swung to come in on the line.

One of the fat-bellied bombs came free from the leading craft and spun downward.

The black mass was out of the sewer, ringed by a circle of fangs. Great gobbets were torn from it, as the frenzied animals fought with the courage of desperation. Higher and higher the unheard scream became, until even the pilots of the planes shifted uneasily in their seats and shook their heads, trying to force it from their minds. The townspeople seemed frozen as the keening went on.

The first bomb hit squarely on top of the slide, and half of it vanished in an upsurge of rocks and rubble. The next plane made its run, and again the perfectly aimed blast shook the earth.

As the third craft set itself, the first rays of the sun shone down upon the streets of the city. They struck the opening of the sewer where the battle was being fought. The mass of blackness suddenly exploded in a cloud of greasy smoke. Where it had been was nothing.

There was a final blast, and a wild cheer as the landslide was blown away. The river raced once more through its bed, and the flooding waters lowered rapidly.

The rats that were left turned slowly, and threading their way through the crowd of erstwhile enemies, went once again into the darkness of the sewer.

And not a claw was raised to stop them.

