

BACKSTAGE WITH ESQUIRE

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Three Skeleton Key

The rats of the sea are clammy and brave—if you harm one his fellows will tear you to pieces

by **GEORGE G. TOUDOUZE**

(Continued)

Most terrifying experience? Well, one does have a few in thirty-five years of service in the Lights, although it's mostly monotonous routine work—keeping the lights in order, making out the reports.

When I was a young man, not very long in the service, there was an opening in a lighthouse newly built off the coast of Orleans, on a small rock twenty miles or so from the mainland. The pay was high, so in order to reach the rock I had set out to sea before I married. I volunteered for service in the new light.

Three Skeleton Key, the small rock on which the light stood, bore a bad reputation. It earned its name from the story of the three convicts who, escaping from Cayenne in a stolen dogskin canoe, were wrecked on the rock during the night, managed to escape the sea but eventually died of hunger and thirst. When they were discovered, nothing remained but three heaps of bones, picked clean by the birds. The story was that the three skeletons, glowing with phosphorescent light, danced over the small rock, screaming: . . .

But there are many such stories and I did not give the warnings of the old-timers at the *Le Du Jan* a second thought. I signed up, boarded ship and in a month I was installed at the light.

Picture a grey, tapering cylinder, welded in the solid black rock by iron rods and concrete, rising from a small island twenty odd miles from land. It looms in the midst of the sea, this island, a small, bare piece of stone, a sharp, craggy cliff feet long, perhaps forty, wide. Small, barely large enough for a man to walk about and stretch his legs at low tide.

This is an advantage one doesn't find in all lights, however. For some of them sit close from the waves, with no room for one's nose over within the light itself. Still, on our island, one must be careful, for the rocks were treacherously smooth. One misstep and down you would fall into the sea—not that the risk of drowning was so great, but the waters about our island swarmed with huge sharks who kept an eternal patrol around the base of the light.

Still, it was a slow life there. We had enough provisions to last for months, in the event that the sea should become too rough

for the supply ship to reach us on schedule. During the day we would work about the light, cleaning the lenses, polishing the metal-work and the lens and reflector of the light itself, and at night we would sit on the gallery and watch our light, a twenty thousand candle-power lantern, swinging its strong, white bar of light over the sea from the top of its hundred twenty foot tower. Some days, when the air would be very clear, we could see the land, a thread-like line to the west. To the east, north and south stretched the ocean. Landmen, perhaps, would soon have fired of that kind of life, perched on a small island off the coast of South America for eighteen weeks, until one's turn for leave others came around. But we liked it there, my two fellow-convicts and myself—so much so that, for twenty-two months on end with the exception of shore leaves, I was greatly satisfied with the life on Three Skeleton Key.

I had just returned from my leave at the end of June, that is to my mid-winter in that latitude, and had settled down to the routine with my two fellow-keepers, a French by the name of Le Glee and the land-keeper, Johnson, a Neagus some dozen years or so older than either of us.

Eight days went by as usual, then on the sixth night after my arrival, Johnson, who was on night duty, called Le Glee and me, sleeping in our rooms in the middle of the tower, at two in the morning. "Wakeup immediately and, thinking the thirty or so stars that led to the gallery, stood beside my chair."

Johnson pointed, and following his finger, we saw a big three-masted, with all and one, heading straight for the light. A queer vessel, for the vessel must have seen us, one light lit her with the glare of day each time it passed over her.

Now, ships were a rare sight in our waters for our light was a warning of treacherous reefs, barely hidden under the surface and missing far out to sea. Consequently we were always given a wide berth, especially by sailing vessels, which cannot maneuver as readily as steamers.

We wonder that we were surprised at seeing this three-masted heading dead for us in the gloom of early morning. I had instinctively recognized her lines, for the stand

out plainly, even at the distance of a mile, when our light shone on her.

She was a beautiful ship of some four thousand tons, a fast cutter that had carried cargo to every part of the world, plowing the seas successfully. By her lines she was identified as Dutch-built, which was understandable as Pernambuco and Dutch-Guiana are very close to Cayenne.

Watching her sailing dead under a white wake looking under her bows, Le Glee cried out:

"What's wrong with her crew? Are they all drunk or insane? Can't they see us?"

Johnson, notified solemnly, looked at us sharply so he reminded "See us? No doubt—if there is a crew aboard!"

"What do you mean, chief?" Le Glee had started, turned to the Neagus. "Are you saying that she's the Flying Dutchman?"

His sudden fright had been so evident that the older man laughed. "No, old man, there's not what I meant. If I say that an one's aboard, I mean she's a steamer."

Then we understood her queer behavior. Johnson was right. For some reason, believing her doomed, her crew had abandoned her. Then she had righted herself and called us, wondering with the wind.

The lines of a green lance as the ship moved ahead to reach us one of our number rose, but she suddenly lurched with some change of the wind, the yards swung around and the steamer came directly about and sailed dead away from us.

In the light of our lantern she seemed so small, so strange, that Johnson exclaimed impudently:

"But why the devil was she abandoned? Nothing is smashed, no sign of fire—and she doesn't sail as if the crew taking water."

Le Glee waved to the departing ship:

"See again?" he smiled at Johnson and went on. "She's leaving us, chief, and now we'll never know what—"

"No she's not!" cried the Neagus. "Look! She's leaving!"

As I obeyed his words, the shrouled three-masted stopped, came about and headed for us once more. And for the next few hours the vessel played around us—zigzagging, coming about, stopping, then suddenly heading forward. No doubt some break of current and wind, of which our island was the center, kept her near us.

Then suddenly, the tropic dawn broke, the sun rose and it was day, and the ship was plainly visible—she sailed past us. Our



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light extinguished, we returned to the gallery with our glasses and inspected her.

The three of us focused our glasses on her jaws, now standing out sharply, black letters on the white background of a life-line, the stretched maw:

"Carnivore-de-Fit, Rats-dean."

We had read her lines correctly, she was Dutch. Just then the wind rose and the Carnivore de Fit changed course, leaned to port and headed straight for us once more. But this time she was so close that we knew she would not turn to starboard.

"Buckley" said to Olin, his English mind working at seeing a line-ship doomed to smash upon a reef, "she's going to pile up! She's gone!"

I shook my head.

"Yes, and a chance to see that beautiful ship wreck herself. And we're helpless."

There was nothing we could do but watch, a ship sailing with all sail spread, crossing the sea with her bowhead as the van before the wind, is one of the most beautiful sights in the world—but this time I could find the terms straining in my eyes as I saw this line ship headed for her doom.

All this time our glasses were fixed on her and we suddenly

cried out together:

"The rats!"

Here we knew why this ship, in perfect condition, was sailing without her crew aboard. They had been driven out by the rats. Not those poor specimens of rats you see ashore, barely reaching the length of one foot from their trembling noses to the tip of their skinny tails, wretched creatures that scurry and hide at the mere sound of a footfall.

No, these were ships' rats, huge, wise creatures, born on the sea, sailing all over the world on ships, transferring to other, larger ships as they multiply. There is no such difference between the rats of the land and those maritime rats as between a fishing smelt and an unweeded onion.

The rats of the sea, sea ferret, bold animals. Leaps, strong and intelligent, cunning and nervous, able to put the best of ourselves to shame with their knowledge of the sea, their amazing ability to forecast the weather.

And they are brave, these rats, and wonderful. If you so much as harm one, his sharp cry will bring hordes of his fellows to rescue over you, tear you and not cease until your flesh has been stripped from the bones.

The crew on this ship, the rats

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of Holland, are the worst, superior to mine rats in the sea as their brethren are in the land rats. There is a well-known tale about these animals.

A Dutch captain, thinking to protect his cargo, brought aboard his ship—not rats—but ten terriers, dogs trained in the hunting, killing and killing of vicious rats. By the time the ship, sailing from Rotterdam, had passed the Island light, the dogs were gone and never seen again. In twenty-four hours they had been overwhelmed, killed and eaten by the rats.

At times, when the cargo does not suffer, the rats attack the crew, either driving them from the ship or eating them alive. And studying the *Croquis de l'Île*, I turned aside, for her small boats were all in place. She had not been abandoned.

Over her bulwarks, on her deck, in the rigging, on every outside spot, the ship was a writhing mass—a starving army coming towards us almost a vessel gone mad!

Our island was a small spot in that immense stretch of sea. The ship could have grazed us, passed to port or starboard with its muzzles open—but no, she came for us at full speed, as if she were leading the rats to a noon, and impaled herself on a sharp point of rock.

There was a dull throb as her bottom struck us, then a horrible crashing as the three masts went overboard as one, as if cut down with one blow of some gigantic ax. A rushing green came in the water rushed into the ship, then she split in two and sank like a stone.

But the rats did not drown. Not those fellows! As much as bones in the sea as any fish, they formed made in the water, heads lifted, tails stretched out, jaws pulling. And half of them, then from the foremast of the ship, swam along the masts and over the rocks in the current below the deck. Before we had time even to move, striking remained of the three-mast were some pieces of wreckage floating on the surface and an army of rats covering the rocks left bare by the receding tide.

Thousands of heads ran, felt the wind and we were amazed, were? To them we were black moat, after possible words of starving. Then came a noise, composed of innumerable screams, sharper than the howl of a cow attacking a bar of iron, and in the one instant, every rat leaped to attack the tower!

We barely had time to leap back, close the door leading onto the gallery, descend the stairs and shut every window tightly. Luckily the door at the base of the light, which we never could be reached in time, was of brass set in granite and was tightly closed.

The heaviest head, in no man-

nable time, had creased up and over the tower as if it had been a tree, piled on the railings of the windows, squeezed at the glass with thousands of claws, covered the light-house with a furry mantle and reached the top of the tower, filling the gallery and going up the ladders.

Their teeth grated as they pressed against the glass of the lantern-room, where they could plainly see us, though they could not reach us. A few millimeters of glass, hardly very strong, appeared our faces from every place, in, heady seas, their sharp claws and teeth. Their odor filled the tower, poisoned our lungs and roused our nostrils with a peculiar, nauseating smell. And there we were, sealed alive in our own light, prisoners of a horde of starving rats.

That first night, the tension was so great that we could not sleep. Every moment, we felt that some opening had been made, some window given way, and that our horrible invaders were passing through the breach. The rising tide, chasing those of the rats which had crept on the lower rocks, increased the numbers clinging to the walls, piled on the balcony—so much so that clusters of rats clinging to one another hung from the lantern and the gallery.

With the coming of darkness we lit the light and the tower was completely illumined. The beams, as the light turned, illuminated thousands of rats crowded against the glass, while the darkness of the lantern-room gleamed with thousands of points of light, burning like the eyes of jungle beasts in the night.

All the while we could hear the muffled scraping of claws against the stone and glass, while the chorus of cries was so loud that we had to strain to hear our sentences. From time to time, some of the rats leaped among those above and a dark cluster would detach itself, falling into the sea like a ripe fruit from a tree. Then we would see phosphorescent streaks as triangles the dashed the water—sharks, permanent guardians of our rock, feeding on our fallen.

The next day we were calmer, and missed ourselves leaving the sea, glancing our faces against the glass which separated us. They could not follow the invisible barrier which separated them from us and we laughed as we watched them leaping against the heavy glass.

But the day after that, we realized how serious our position was. The air was foul, even the heavy smell of all within our stronghold could not dominate the foul odor of the beasts massed around us. And there was no way of admitting fresh air without also admitting the rats.

The morning of the fourth day, at early dawn, I saw the wooden

framework of my window, even away from the outside, sagging inward. I called my comrades and the three of us fastened a sheet of tin in the opening, sealing it tightly. When we had completed that task, Helms turned to us and said loudly:

"Well—the supply here came thirteen days ago, and the way I look for twenty-nine." He pointed at the white metal plate sealing the opening through the grate—"If that goes way—" he shrugged—"they can change the name of this place to Six Sixteen Key."

The next six days and seven nights, our only distraction was watching the rats whose holes were innumerable, fall a hundred and twenty feet into the maw of the sharks—but they were so many that we could not see any distinction in their numbers.

Thinking to calm ourselves and pass the time, we attempted to count them, but we soon gave up. They moved incessantly, never still. Then we tried identifying them, naming them.

One of them, larger than the others, who seemed to lead them in their rushes against the glass separating us, we named "Nero"; and there were several others whom we had learned to distinguish through various postures.

But the thought of our losses joining those of the survivors was always in the back of our minds. And the gloom of our prison fed these thoughts, for the interior of the light was almost completely dark, as we had had to seal every window in the same fashion as mine, and the only space that still admitted daylight was the glass-in lantern-room at the very top of the tower.

Then La Giza became morose and had nightmares in which he would see the three skeletons dancing around him, glancing sulkily, seeking to grasp him. His mindless, raving descriptions were so vivid that Helms and I began seeing them also.

It was a living nightmare, the wailing cries of the rats as they scurried over the light, mad with hunger; the sobbing, straggling odor of their bodies—

True, there is a way of slipping from lightlessness. But it costs the man, in which to hang the signal we would have to go out on the gallery where the rats were.

There was only one thing left to do. After debating all of the night day, we decided not to light the lantern that night. This is the gravest breach of our service, never committed so long as the tinders of the light are alive; for the light is something sacred, warning signs of danger in the night. Either the light glows, a quarter-hour after midnight, or no one is left alive to light it.

Well, that night, Three Skeleton Light was dark, and all the men were alive. At the risk of costing signs to crash on our heads, we left it dark, for we were

were out—going mad!

At five in the morning, while Helms was dozing in his room, the sheet of metal sealing his window gave way. The chief had just time enough to leap to his feet and cry for help, the rats swarming over him.

But La Giza and I, who had been watching from the lantern-room, got to him immediately, and the three of us battled with the hordes of maddened rats which poured through the gaping window. They bit, we struck them down with our knives—and retreated.

We locked the door of the room on them, but before we had time to band our wounds, the door was eaten through, gave way and we retreated up the stairs, fighting off the rats that leaped on us from the knee-deep stream.

I do not remember, in this day, how we ever managed to escape. All I can remember is wading through them up the stairs, striking them off as they swarmed over us; and then we found ourselves, bleeding from innumerable bites, our clothes shredded, sprawled across the trapdoor in the floor of the lantern-room—without food or drink. Luckily, the trapdoor was metal set into the grate with iron bolts.

The rats occupied the entire light beneath us, and on the floor of our retreat lay some forest of their fellows, who had fallen in with us below the trapdoor closed, and whom we had killed with our knives. Below us, in the tower, we could hear the screams of the rats as they devoured everything within that they found. Those on the outside squabbed in fury, and worked in a horrible curtain as they stared at us through the glass of the lantern-room.

Helms sat up, stared stupidly at his blood trickling from the wounds on his limbs and body, and pointing in this stream on the floor around him. La Giza, who was in an odd state (and so was I, for that matter) stared at the chief and me vaguely, started at his gaze owing to the multitude of rats against the glass, then suddenly began laughing loudly:

"How! How! The Three Skeletons! How! The Three Skeletons are now six skeletons! Six skeletons!"

He threw his head back and howled, his eyes glazed, a trickle of saliva running from the corner of his mouth and thinking the blood flowing over his chest. I shouted to him to shut up, but he did not hear me, so I did the only thing I could to quiet him—I swung the back of my hand across his face.

The howling stopped suddenly, his eyes swung around the room, then he bowed his head and began weeping softly, like a child.

The reflected light had been noticed from the outside, and as dawn was breaking the patrol was there, to investigate the fall-out of our light. Looking through

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my blowdown. I could see the livid expression on the faces of the officers and crew when, the daylight strengthening, they saw the light completely covered by a swirling mass of rats. They thought, as I afterwards found out, that we had been eaten alive.

But the rats had also seen the ship, so had scouted the crew. As the ship drew nearer, a solid phalanx left the light, plunged into the water and, swimming out, attempted to board her. They would have succeeded, as the ship was low in, but the engineer converted his steam to blast on the deck and scalded the head of the attacking column, which drove them up long enough for the ship to get underway and leave the rats behind.

Then the sharks took part. Belly up, mouths gaping, they swarmed in swarms and scooped up the rats, sweeping through them like a scythe through wheat. That was one day that sharks really served a useful purpose.

The remaining rats turned tail, swim to the shore and escaped dripping. As they swam the light, their mouths gaped with what resembled like a devil's grin, and mingled with their billows. From the several bushes that broke out, they mounted being ridiculed for their failure to capture the ship.

For all this did nothing to get us out of our jail. The small ship could not approach, but remained around the light as a watch-tower, and the larger ones have several fantastic, some weird, many-headed head looking defiances at them.

Finally, seeing the rats running in and out of the tower through the door and the windows, those on the ship decided that we had perished and were about to leave when Itihama, regaining his senses, thought of using the light as a signal. He lit it and, using a flash placed and withdrawn before the lens to form the dots and dashes, quickly sent out our story in flames on the coast.

Our reply came quickly. When they understood our position, how we could not get rid of the rats, Le Giffo's mind going fast, Itihama and myself received with interest in the bottom-room without food or water, they had a signalman send us their reply.

His arms swinging like those of a windmill, he eagerly spelled out:

"Don't give up, hang on a little longer! We'll get you out of this!"

Then she turned and steamed at top speed for the coast, leaving us little moment.

She was back at noon, accompanied by the supply ship, two small coast-guard boats, and the fire boat—a small squadron. At twelve-thirty the battle was on.

After a short reconnaissance, the fire boat picked her way warily slowly through the reef in-

til she was close to us, then turned her powerful jet of water on the rats. The heavy stream tore the rats from their places, hurled them screaming into the water where the sharks gulped them down. But for every ton that was dislodged, seven more swam ashore, and the stream could do nothing to the rats within the tower. Furthermore, some of the rats, instead of returning to the rocks, landed like the first and the men were forced to battle them hand to hand. They were true rats of Holland, having no sense, fighting for the right to live!

Nightfall came, and it was as if nothing had been done, the rats were still in possession. One of the patrol boats stayed by the island, the rest of the flotilla departed for the coast. We had to spend another night in our prison. Le Giffo was writing on the floor, holding about skeletons and as I turned to Itihama, he fell unconscious from his wounds. I was in no better shape and could feel my blood flowing with fever. Somehow the night dragged by, and the next afternoon I saw a tug, accompanied by the fire boat, come from the mainland with a huge barge tow. Through my glasses, I saw that the barge was filled with men.

Hooking the treacherous reef, the tug dragged the barge so close to the island as possible. To the last rat, our bargepayers deserted the rock, swam out and boarded the huge barge with the sweep of a flycatcher's net. The tug dragged the barge about a mile from shore, where the fire boat descended the barge with precision. A well placed incendiary shell from the patrol boat set her on fire.

The barge was covered with flames immediately and the rats took to the water in swarms, but the patrol boat bombarded them with shrapnel from a safe distance, and the sharks finished off the survivors.

A windmill from the patrol boat, hoist on off the island and left there now to replace us. By nightfall we were in the hospital in Cayenne. What became of my friends?

Well, Le Giffo's mind had cracked and he was racing mad. They sent him back to France and locked him up in an asylum. The poor devil! Itihama died with a weak, a rat's bite is dangerous in that hot, humid climate, and infection sets in rapidly.

As for me—when they fastigiated the light and repaired the damage done by the rats, I received my service then. Why not? No reason, why such an incident should keep me from finishing out my service there, is there?

Besides—I told you I liked the place—to be truthful, I've never had a post as pleasant as that one, and when my time came to leave it however, I tell you that I almost regret my Three-Skeleton Key disappearance before the horizon. ☼