

TT 13 Day 35 (Rattin')

The Guvnor likes this little tale from Ascot Racecourse over a century ago: 'Hats range from the traditional to the eccentric at Ascot. A bad hat choice can be a disaster for a socialite. In the late 19th century, Lord Harris is said to have attended Ascot wearing a brown bowler. Edward VII looked at him, and loudly asked: "Goin' rattin', 'Arris?"

This amuses us because the Guvnor wears a tweed cap when out of doors and it is often referred to as his 'rattin' cap'. As a matter of fact, it looks much less like a rattin' cap than the one his father in law used to wear but he was unable to refer to this until the old man had escaped up that great drainpipe in the sky.

This is a lengthy preamble to telling you about the rattin' and mousin' and general rodentry that goes on here simply because we live in the country and more particularly keep chickens (well, chicken) that have to be fed and thus provide a ready source of food for vermin (no 'g'). It is important, apparently, for man to do his bit with regard to vermin control. It is also important that terriers keep up their reputations as ratters and mousers. We have teamed human technology with native cunning to create a formidable team of assassins here and while I was quite excited about telling you all about it when I started, I am losing interest now the Guvnor insists I include some statistics at the end of the tail (or is that tale?)

He sets up his ambush spot in a top window overlooking the chicken run with a good air rifle bead on the feeder. Initially, I would roam excitedly around the run waiting to pick off escapers but the Guvnor soon realised that my presence was

keeping the little beggars inside, so he gave himself an advantage by shutting me in the kitchen. Meanwhile, his wife sets a couple of mouse traps in the greenhouse to keep her spring seedlings safe from prying and greedy little mouths and I prowl along the riverbank seeking out the field mouse nests that abound there mainly to harass the occupants in order to exercise them. All this, I hasten to add, is necessary behaviour in the countryside to maintain the right ecological balance and keep our corporate prime-eval instincts honed.

Since he began the tally, about a year ago, it looks like this: Rats – the Guvnor 51, his wife nil and me 2 with one additional one shared between him and me. Mice – the Guvnor nil, his wife 2 and me one, and mine was along the riverbank before anyone could stop me. The Guvnor told me to leave it for 'waptors' that were hungrier than me. I know, you're going to ask me what a 'waptor' is; it is what that eco-warrior and well-meaning but over-zealous nutcase, Cwis Packham, calls a raptor.

We saw an adder along that stretch the other day sunning itself on the path. Avoiding it, and dragging us dogs away from sniffing inquisitively, he began to talk about what snakes eat. Guess what? Voles, mice, lizards, frogs, newts and small birds.

He has sympathy for the woman who wrote to his daily paper recounting how her brother adopted a snake that he named Slinky and who lived by eating live mice. She was sent off to the pet shop to buy Slinky's lunch of mice, choosing the juiciest-looking ones. She found it difficult to turn down the offer of vitamins to ensure longevity but the hardest part was carrying them back to the car in a box that said, 'Thank you for giving me a home.'