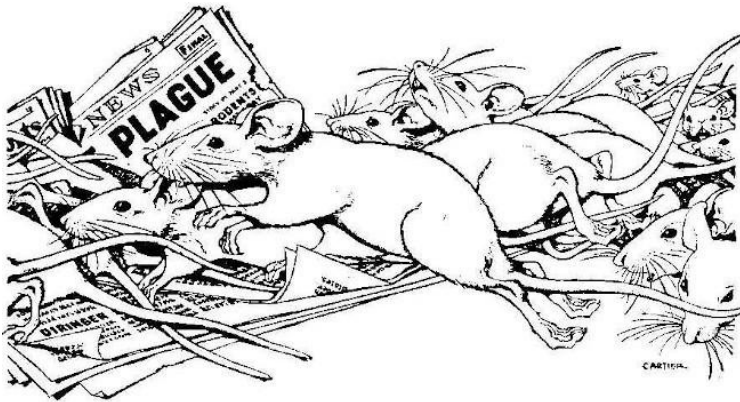


RAT RACE



BY GEORGE O. SMITH

RAT RACE

"You're nuts," came the reply, but the voice on the telephone was jovially reproving rather than sarcastic. "I can't do anything about this order."

Peter Manton blinked. "But it has a Four-A-One priority."

Brannon nodded—invisibly, of course—and said, "Sure you have a top priority. Anything your lab wants has top. But darn it, Peter, the best priority in the world isn't going to buy you a dozen mousetraps that are nonexistent."

"But—"

"Besides which, that building you're in is about as rat-proof as a sealed gasoline can. There isn't an item of comestible in the place."

"I know that. And the mice can go hungry for all I care. But the mice don't seem to understand that bringing food into the place is not only forbidden by law but dangerous."

"But there ain't a mousetrap in the country. Ding bust it, Peter, mousetraps take spring wire, and labor. The people who used to make mousetraps are now making bombsights and tanks. Besides, Peter, over at that laboratory of yours there should be enough brains and gear to really build the Better Mousetrap. If you can spot a plane at fifty miles, split atoms, and fire radio equipment out of a cannon, you ought to be able to dispose of a mouse or two."

Peter grinned. "You mean spot 'em with radar, and then shoot 'em down in flames with proximity fuses loaded with plutonium war

heads? That might be a little strenuous, don't you think? Like cutting the throat to stop the spread of impetigo."

"Well, if you have mice over there, you think of something. But top priority or not, we can't get you your mousetraps!"

Peter hung up unhappily. He turned from his desk to see an impertinent mouse sitting on the floor watching him out of beady black eyes. Peter hurled a book at it and swore, a rare thing for him.

The mouse disappeared behind a bank of filing cabinets.

"That's right," he grunted. "Go on—disappear!"

The word struck home. Peter blinked. And remembered....

It was dark, though not too dark for the mouse to see his surroundings. It was hungry, and it was beginning to understand that of the many places occupied by man, this was one place where man left nothing that could be eaten. This evening, however, the situation was changed. There was a faint smell of food in the place, relatively great compared to the sterile atmosphere of previous days.

The mouse located the odor. A small wire tunnel closed at the far end. A nice, rancid bit of bacon hung there.

The mouse was no fool. He inspected the wire tunnel carefully. Three of his brothers had been taken away by various metal contrivances and he was not going to follow them if he could help it. The mouse sniffed the wires, climbed the top of the little cage and raced around it, poking it and bumping it. Often a trap could be sprung by poking it with a foot—just jarring it. That left the bait safe to eat.

But this seemed innocuous. No springs, no wires, no trapdoor, no mirrors. Just a little tunnel of wire cloth about six inches long and two inches in diameter.

The mouse entered the tunnel; headed for the bit of bacon.

Nothing happened, and the mouse gathered speed. It paid no attention to the silvery metal ring that encircled the inside of the tunnel, and would not have known what it was anyway. There were other things there, too. Bits of Alnico V, a couple of cubes of Cerise Wax, some minute inductances and a very small capacitor made of a tiny square of mica with some silver sputtered on both sides. Down in the center was a clear crystal with electrodes clamped on it. The whole assembly was about a half inch cubed and from it on either side emerged the ends of the silvery-wire loop.

Had the mouse seen all this, it would not have understood. That was not strange, for even the man who built it was not too certain what it did, or what it was, nor how it worked.

He knew it worked, and it served its purpose. He was like the man who daily uses electricity enough to kill him, but is not quite sure of what goes on in the instant between his snap of the switch and the arrival of the illumination.

The mouse cared not. All he was after was food.

He paused, uncertainly and checked to see if there were any moving parts. There were, but they were intangible fields and stresses of space.

Then the mouse raced forward and passed through the silvery circle.

But did not come out on the far side.

A second mouse, watching, took a sigh of relief. The bait was still there. There had neither been cry of pain nor was there a captive warning the rest away in mouse-ese.

He, too, came to the trap, and entered, the odor from the rancid bacon drawing him with a magnetic force.

He, too, came to the silvery circle, passed through—into nothingness!

Came then another, and another, each pleased in turn that the bait was his alone for the taking. And as each one entered and disappeared, a tiny silent counter moved one digit higher.

Came morning....

And—

"Great Unholy Madness," exploded Peter. "If this is a rat-proof building, I am a Chinese policeman!"

Jack Brandt looked over Peter's shoulder. "How many?" he asked.

"Twenty-three!"

"Golly," grinned Brandt. "We're outnumbered."

"We won't be long if this thing works like this every night. This is better than the original ball-bearing mousetrap."

"Which?"

Peter grinned. "The tomcat," he said.

That was how it started. It went on for a week, passed through a huge peak of catch, and then tapered off abruptly. A month later, the trap had passed no mouse into—nothingness—for three days. The Better Mousetrap was placed back in the cabinet and forgotten.

For this was during the days of War, when he who was not fighting was working to provide the fighting man with what he needed. And Peter Manton's laboratory had too much to do in too short a time to permit even an hour's wonder or work on anything not directly concerned with the problem at hand.

The months passed. Peter Manton nodded knowingly when Hiroshima heralded the atomic age. He made penciled notes on the margin of the paper correcting some of the reporter's errata in describing radar. He wrote a hot letter to OSRD complaining that the news release on the proximity fuse had been mishandled, that he knew the real facts. He followed sonar and loran with interest.

More months passed, and the peace which was raging all over the world continued, but Peter Manton's laboratory was disbanded. Much of the stuff was sold as scrap, and among it was the Better Mousetrap. It no longer worked. Its magnets were mere bits of metal alloy; its permanent wax-electrets were discharged. The crystal no longer vibrated molecularly, and besides, the wire loop was crushed beneath a pile of scrap metal.

The next time Peter Manton remembered his Better Mousetrap was when a friend of his mentioned that he wanted to move.

"Move?" asked Peter. "Where to?"

"That's the point," grumbled Tony Andrews. "There's no place. But I'm not going to stay where I am!"

"It looks like a nice enough place. What's wrong?"

"Mice. The place is lousy with 'em."

"Oh? Thought that was a fairly respectable place."

"It was," replied Andrews. "But lately—the mouse population has increased. Probably due to the lack of traps created by the war."

Peter nodded. "We had a mousetrap at the lab," he said with a fond smile of reminiscence. Then he told Tony about it, and the other man blinked hungrily. "That good?" he exclaimed.

Peter nodded.

"Can you build another?"

"Sure."

Andrews smiled. "Look," he said. "You are the man who built the Better Mousetrap. But the old platitude isn't good enough. The world will not beat a path to your door unless you make yourself known. This should make you famous."

Peter frowned a bit. "Is it that good?" he asked.

"It has one feature that will outdo all other traps," said Andrews. "In any trap, there is the corpse to dispose of. In this one, there is the disposal system built in. Look, you build one for me, and we'll form a company to build them."

"If you think so."

"I think so. How long will it take?"

"To build another? About an hour once I get the parts. Luckily there's a section of the Central Scientific Company handy. They have most of the stuff."

It took several days to collect the material, after which Peter called Andrews. By the time the other man arrived, Peter was finishing off the main part of the trap. He handed the thing to Andrews, who looked at it, squinted through the circlet of wire, and then poked a pencil into it. Where it came level with the plane of the circlet, it ceased to exist in a slick plane of cleavage.

Andrews withdrew the pencil and it was complete again.

"Great Harry," he shouted. "Where did you get that?"

"That," smiled Peter, "is something out of Campbell by Edward E. Smith."

"Who?"

"Writers of science fiction that turned out millions of words dealing with strange minerals, space warps, and the like. They used to spend their leisure hours thinking up something that would outdo the other. Actually," he said, becoming serious again, "the thing was discovered in our lab during the war. We were working on a closed means of radio communication—a method of wireless connection that would not only prevent the enemy from decoding or unscrambling, but which would be impossible to detect unless you were set up properly. Too many things happened under radio-silence that a means of communication might have prevented. Anyway, in our search for a new level of communications, we got this effect."

"Seems to me that it should be good for something."

"The trouble is that it can't be made any bigger. Once that loop size is changed, the effect is no longer there. We worked on it for about a month and gave it up because there it is and that's all that could be done with it."

"How about using it to pump water out of a sinking ship?"

"Can't fasten anything to the ring," said Peter.

"But the thing that bothers me is where does it go?" asked Andrews, poking his finger through the ring and withdrawing it hastily as he saw the clean-cut cross section.

"Haven't the vaguest idea."

"You haven't worked on it much, then?"

Peter shook his head. "There were a lot of things that had priority," he said. "We had that scheduled for about three years from now, even. Anyway—what are you doing?"

"I'd like to know where the stuff goes," said Andrews.

"How are you going to find out?"

Tony Andrews handed Peter a key ring tag. It was an advertisement for an automobile salesroom, and it stated that any possible finders should merely drop the key ring and chain into the nearest mailbox; that the addressee would pay the postage. It then gave Tony Andrews' name and address and telephone number.

"Think ... if it's found anywhere ... it'll be returned?"

"That's how they sent them out," he said. "Darned good advertisement, too."

"But—"

"Look, Peter, if this ... and it must go somewhere ... lands close by, it'll be returned. Perhaps we'll get a letter, too, telling us where. If it lands in some distant country, we'll probably get it back with a letter telling us that I sure did get around."

"You feel certain that it will land somewhere on earth."

Tony Andrews nodded. "There is no pressure gradient worthy of the name across the face of this," he said. "Though there is a very slight motion of air through the ring. That means that the air pressure on either side of this ding busted ring is about the same. Funny, though, it sort of blows both ways."

Peter nodded. From either side he poked forefingers in. At the plane of cleavage, both fingers passed forward into—through—one another, giving an appearance very much like poking the forefinger into a pool of mercury.

Andrews shuddered. Then he took the little circlet, held the ring sidewise, and dropped the tag from the key ring through it. Through the ring they heard it clang onto the floor.

Peter took the ring from Andrews and put it horizontal, close to the floor. He put a finger through it and probed.

He said: "Ah!" and put thumb and forefinger through the ring and came up with the tag.

"What's down there?" asked Andrews.

"Feels like wood." Peter poked a ruler through and measured the distance. About two inches differed between the concrete of Peter's basement floor and the wood surface of the other.



"We'll lick that," said Peter. "I've got a tiny miniature camera upstairs. We poke it through and take a picture or two."

That was a flat failure, they found. The film came out utterly black. Whether the film was exposed in passing, or whether the "other side" was highly illuminated could not be determined. They could control the light in the cellar so that the partially "gone" camera would not cause exposure of the film. But if the other side were brightly illuminated, there would be an instant where the film was open to the light. They tried for hours, but failed.

Eventually, Andrews took his mousetrap home with him and set it up in the kitchen.

Again, its take was enormous.

Senator Treed entered the hardware store along Connecticut Avenue and asked the clerk for a mousetrap. The clerk looked surprised and said, "But you're living in the Wardman Park Hotel, senator."

"I know. Reputed to be one of the finest hotels in Washington, too. But, there're mice there."

"Hard to believe. Does the management know?"

"Not yet," said the senator quietly. "And say nothing, please. You see, Mrs. Treed and I just returned from a vacation in Wisconsin and we had a large number of packing cases delivered to our suite. It is more than possible that we included a few field mice. I'd hate to be held responsible for bringing mice into the Wardman Park."

The clerk grinned. "Mice in the Wardman Park. That's a national calamity, isn't it?"

Senator Treed scowled. "Young man, this rat plague is a national calamity. You do not realize how bad it really is. An outbreak caused by the war."

"Come now, senator. Don't blame everything on the war."

Senator Treed shook his head. "I try to be level headed and as honest as I can," he said. "But how many mousetraps have you had in the place since Pearl Harbor?"

"Not many," admitted the clerk.

"Freedom from rodent pests is a warfare that must be constantly and ruthlessly waged," replied the senator. "Otherwise, they overwhelm us. We stopped fighting rats to fight another kind. We

licked the other kind, but there's this kind still. Now, what's new in mousetraps?"

"Here's a new number. It's called the Better Mousetrap. A new company started about a week ago and we accepted one on consignment."

"How much is it?" asked the senator.

"It's not for sale."

The senator spluttered in confusion.

"It's on a rental basis," said the clerk. "There's a register below. It counts the catch. You pay two cents per catch."

"Really a guaranteed job, hey?" smiled the senator. "How does it work?"

The clerk held up the trap. "This is where you put the bait," he said. "You impale it on this spike and then swivel it through the slit in the wire so the mice must enter the tunnel to get to it."

"Yeah, but there's nothing there to stop the mice from having a free lunch," objected the senator.

The clerk took a small bolt, set it on the floor of the tunnel, tilted the cage and let the bolt run down the floor slowly. It passed through the circlet and disappeared.

"Hey!"

The clerk grinned. "Convenient, isn't it? No muss, no fuss, no strain, no pain. And no corpse to clean away."

"A very definite advantage," said the senator. "But where do they go?"

"No one knows. They go—and we ask no questions."

"Make a fine garbage disposal unit," suggested the senator.

"Could be. I imagine so. Also a swell way to get rid of old razor blades. But every item that goes through this trap is registered—and that bolt will cost the firm two cents. It can't tell the difference between a bolt and a mouse."

"Hm-m-m. Good thing that tunnel is long and small. People would be poking all manner of things into them. But where do they go?"

"They're trying to find out. So far they don't know. It's said that one of the founders of the Better Mousetrap Company dropped a tag through with name and address and the offer of a reward. It hasn't been returned. Maybe the mail is irregular from Mars, huh?"

"Mars?"

The clerk shrugged. "I wouldn't know where," he said doubtfully.

The senator nodded. "Despite the population of the country—of the world—there are places where men seldom go," he said. "That tag may be lying in the rough at Bonnie Dundee Golf Course for all we know."

Miss Agatha Merrit placed her pince-nez firmly on her nose. "Good morning, class," she said primly and with perfect diction.

"Good morning, teacher," responded forty third-grade voices.

Miss Agatha Merrit went to her desk and sat down. "Today," she said, "we will learn about being afraid. It is known that ninety percent of all things that people fear will not harm them. I know of big strong men afraid of insects and many women are dreadfully frightened of mice."

Peter Manton, Junior, raised his hand and said: "My father built a Better Mousetrap," he announced irrelevantly.

Miss Agatha Merrit was annoyed at the sidetracking, but young Manton's father was becoming a financial force in the community and she felt it unwise to ignore the comment. "I understand that the world is starting to beat a path to your door," she said, completing the old platitude. "But we're speaking of fear, not mice."

"You're not afraid of mice?" insisted young Peter.

"I can't say that I like them," said Miss Agatha Merrit. "Though I feel that the mouse is more frightened of me than I could possibly be of it. After all, I am quite a bit larger and more capable than a mouse—"

Miss Agatha Merrit opened the drawer of her desk but was prevented from looking in.

The next several minutes are not describable. Not in any sort of chronological order because everything happened at once. Miss Agatha Merrit headed for the chandelier and got as far as the top of her chair which somehow arrived on the top of the table. Mice boiled out of the desk drawer and spread in a wave across the desk and across the floor. In a ragged wave front, the third-grade girls found the tops of their desks and the third-grade boys yelped in amusement and started to corral the mice. By the time the room

was cleaned up an hour later, the boys had thirty-four mice in a wastebasket covered by a small drawing board, four mice had escaped down holes in the woodwork, seven had gone out under the door, and three were trying to find their way out of nine-year-old pockets.

Miss Agatha Merrit never did learn the name of the ringleader of that prank. She strongly suspected Peter Junior who was at best an imaginative child with a clever mind and few inhibitions. What bothered her most was that the trick was repeated.

There were three drawers in her desk. Young Peter Manton brought, on the following morning, one of his father's Better Mousetraps. She placed it in the drawer that had been "salted" with mice the day before, but the pranksters used the second drawer that night. Carefully she concealed the trap in the third drawer on the following night, and the mice turned up in the top drawer again.

It became a race. Whether the problem would be solved before Miss Agatha Merrit became a quivering nervous wreck.

A total of one hundred and seventy-three mice registered on the Better Mousetrap in a week, and then Miss Agatha Merrit polished off the job by procuring enough traps for all of the desk drawers. Since no place remained to place them without the mice being collected and destroyed, the mice-filled drawers ceased to be a favorite prank of the school. The children, all of them sweet innocents, took to other forms of childish torture.

She confessed to Peter Manton, Senior, that had it not been for his excellent product, she would be a nervous wreck. "And," she said, "I never did find out where they came from."

He grinned. "We've never found out where they went," he told her.

"I shudder," said Miss Agatha Merrit, "to think. Do you suppose, Mr. Manton, that your device transmits them to some other corner of the world?"

"We have tried to find out. Mice, unfortunately do not take well to being tagged. But we've tagged a number of them in the hope that we will discover where they go."

"I've noticed in the papers," replied Miss Agatha Merrit, "that there is a veritable plague of rats. The Chicago *World* had an editorial about you ... did you see it?"

"No," he admitted. "But I'm rather pleased. What did they say?"

"It seems that the Chicago *World* was plagued with rats until they got about two dozen of your Better Mousetraps. That fixed them. Now they claim that your invention came along at the proper time. The world is about to beat its path to your door, Mr. Manton."

Peter shrugged. "Most inventions are made to fill a definite need," he said. "Discoveries are made because of man's curiosity. An invention is an aggregation of discoveries collected because their principles add up to the proper effect to take care of the necessity. I'm glad that I was able to make this invention of mine. It seems timely."

Senator Treed rapped for attention and the committee came to order. "This morning," said Treed, "we will have open discussion of the problem."

General Hayes nodded and said: "This much is known: The mice are delivered somewhere out of Manton's Better Mousetrap. I

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