

A Rat Tamer



JOHNNY ROCHE, who hooks and un-hooks trips of cars near the foot of a deep shaft in a Lackawanna valley coal mine, is a great friend of rats. He is fourteen years of age, and he can

handle the biggest and most vicious mine rats just as he pleases without being bitten. No one else in the mine can do it, and the miners and mule drivers assert that Johnny has a mysterious power over the four-legged pests of the mine. Johnny never hurts or kills a rat, although every other laborer in the mine slays every rat he gets a chance to, and the foreman of the mule barn sets all sorts of traps for the rats, and keeps an army of cats to prey on them. It is impossible to exterminate the mine rats, and Johnny Roche says he is glad of it, because he would be lonesome if all the rats were killed. The rats get into the mine in bales of hay for the mules and by backing down the timbers of the shaft. They arrive and breed faster than the men and cats can kill them, and Johnny is cheerful whenever a new hatch comes.

A man fond of oddities found out the other day when he was lowered into the mine that Johnny Roche's way of catching rats with his bare hands was very interesting. As soon as there was an interval between trips Johnny placed his lamp on a chunk of coal at the side of the gangway and crawled on his hands and knees into a chamber a few feet away. In a minute or so a big gray rat hopped along the top of the gob, between Johnny and the light, and the next instant Johnny's right hand shot out and caught the rat by the back of the neck. He brought the rat out to the lamp to let the visitor see it and then he looked in its mouth, smoothed its fur and held it up by the tail. A trip of cars was coming, and Johnny slipped the rat into his coat pocket, unhooked the link, hooked another, took the rat out, tied a strand of lamp wick loosely around its neck and drove it back and forth in the dim light. When the lad heard the next trip rumbling through the mine toward him he fastened the wick to a prop and attended to his duties. The rat didn't offer to yank away or to bite the wick in two, but it hopped about a little and then it sat upon its hind quarters, gazed at Johnny and squealed as though it wanted him to come and fondle it.

"I'll catch another rat now and harness it with this one," said the boy, and again he crept into the recess and faced the lamp. The rat danced around the prop, but didn't break loose, and just before the next trip came Johnny nabbed another big rat and put it in his pocket. As soon as

the trip was gone Johnny sat down on a tie and let the second rat run over his lap without touching it. The rat might have jumped away, but it seemed to be under a spell, and when it had capered across the boy's legs a few times it crawled into his coat and snuggled up as if it was going to take a nap. Pretty soon Johnny took the rat out and stroked it and showed its teeth to the visitor. Then he held it up by the tail, and it curled up and stuck its nose between the lad's thumb and finger. Meanwhile the other rat was squealing for Johnny to come and take it, and the young rat tamer got some more strands, hitched the two together and drove them up and down the track.

"Now I'll hide these rats in my coat and catch two more," said the boy. Another trip came just then, and when Johnny had unhooked it, he pulled off his coat, bundled the rats up in it and crawled in the hole. He had to come out three times to attend to the cars before he got the next rat, but in twenty minutes he caught another and hitched them together as before. While



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he was making them perform a large black and white tom cat appeared and went to eyeing the lively rats. Johnny tied his little team to the prop when he heard the cars, and the tom cat sat on a tie with his tail across the rail, worked his smellers and glared at the rats. While he was watching the hopping animals the wheel of a car cut off his tail two inches from his body, and he instantly went yowling and spitting toward the mule barn. The cat's antics made Johnny roar. "Bet he won't watch my rats again very soon," he said. Soon the trips stopped coming. It was the quitting hour, and Johnny turned the four rats loose, and said to the visitor:

"Come with me to the barn, mister, if you want to see some fun."

Eleven well-fed cats and a lot of kittens were purring around the mule foreman near the feed box. Several dead rats lay on the floor, and Johnny said that the cats always lugged the rats to the feed box, no matter how far away in the mine they caught them. All the mules were in the stalls, and in the flickering light from the smoking oil lamps the foreman dumped the provender into their mangers. Presently you could hear the rats climbing up and tumbling into the mangers, and at that the mules struck at the feed robbers with their noses and grunted. The bob-tailed tom cat bounded out of a stall with a mammoth rat in his mouth, and Johnny seized the cat and took it away. But the rat had received a fatal bite, and the boy gave it back to the cat.

The next thing Johnny did was to reach in a manger and bring out a kicking rat in each hand. He gave them free swing over his lap, put them in his pockets, let them crawl over his shoulders and then tossed them into the hay. He caught two more presently, held them up by the tails in front of the cats and stuck them in his pockets when the cats sprang at them, afterward placing them in the one of the mangers.

"I don't know why the rats never bite me," said Johnny, "unless it is because they know I won't hurt 'em. I like rats better than I do cats or dogs, and I don't think I ever killed one. I've caught and played with rats ever since I was a little boy. They are so bright-eyed and slick that I like to handle 'em and harness 'em up, and I guess they all tell one another that I never hurt 'em when I catch 'em."—
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