

NO ROOM IN THE STABLE

by A. Bertram Chandler

A Briton by birth, the author worked most of his life in the merchant marine: tramp steamers in the Indian Ocean, passenger liners on the England-Australia service, and finally in the Australian coastal trade. Now retired from the sea and living in Australia, Captain Chandler continues with the writing career which began in 1944 and continues to this day.

Many of his stories have been set in the Rim Worlds at the outer reaches of the Galaxy; this tale, however, is another matter entirely . . .

It was a cold night, and dark, with wind and driving rain.

The refugees, sheltering in the old barn with its leaky roof, had lit a fire. This was risky, but not too risky. It was unlikely that They would be out in force in this kind of weather. They did not like water in any shape or form. They never had liked water.

The two men and the three women huddled around the flickering flame, grateful for its feeble warmth. They were in rags, all of them, with broken, disintegrating shoes. Their clothing, when new, had been of good quality, but not suitable for life on the run. Two of the women were young and might once have been pretty, the other one was middle-aged, as were the men. All five of them looked old—and all of them looked as though they had known better days. The girls, perhaps, had once worked in an office. The woman must have been a comfortably off, bridge-playing housewife. One of the men—a shopkeeper?—had been fat once; his skin was now as poor a fit as his clothing. The other one was in better condition physically, and by his speech and bearing suggested that he was accustomed to command. Whatever it was that he had commanded was irretrievably lost in the past. Perhaps, if this little band survived, he would become their leader; its members had come together, quite by chance, only a few hours prior to their taking shelter.

Ready to hand was their scant weaponry—a .22 rifle, a shotgun, a small axe, two kitchen knives. Of them all, the shotgun, belonging to the ex-shopkeeper, was the most useful—but only five cartridges remained for it.

The woman, hugging her still ample breasts, complained, "It's cold—"

"We daren't build a bigger fire," the tall man, the one who had never been fat, told her.

"I don't see why not—" grumbled one of the girls rebelliously. The tall man, speaking slowly and carefully, said, "They have sharp eyes—"

"It's more than their eyes that are sharp!" exclaimed the other girl.

"I miss the News ..." whined the ex-shopkeeper. "On the radio, on the TV ... What's happening? What's the Army doing?"

"How did it happen?" demanded the woman. "And why aren't the Americans doing something about it?"

"They'll be having their own troubles," said the girl who had wanted a bigger fire. "And the Russians, too. I heard something about it on the radio before They killed everybody in the town. Almost everybody."

"I thought They were only here," said the woman. "How could They get to other countries?"

"They're small," said the tall man. "And they've been stowing away aboard ships ever since there were ships. And now they have the intelligence to stow away aboard aircraft—"

"But how did it start?" asked the ex-shopkeeper.

"A mutation, I suppose. One of them born with superior intelligence, and other improvements. Tom-cattin around and spreading his seed over the entire country ... It's possible. It must be. It happened."

"But why do they hate us so much?" almost wept the woman. "I was always good to them, to the ones I had. The best food, and expensive, no scraps ... Their own baskets to sleep in . . ."

"Why shouldn't they hate us?" countered the more intelligent of the two girls. "I've been thinking about it quite a lot—when. I've had time to think, that is. We did give the bastards rather a rough spin. Having them doctored, males and females. Drowning their young ones ..."

The tall man laughed bitterly. "That's what I should have done—but I was too soft hearted. You know—" he laughed again "—I'm inclined to think that this is all my fault . . ."

"What the hell do you mean?" growled the ex-shopkeeper. "How the hell can it be?"

"I may as well tell you," was the reply.

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It all started, I suppose (said the tall man) a long time ago. Not so long really, but it seems centuries. We, my wife and I, lived in an old house in a quiet side street. I don't know what happened to her, to my wife. I'm still trying to find her. But ...

Anyhow, this street was infested with cats. She hated cats, although I liked the brutes. I used to like the brutes, that is. My wife'd raise Cain if ever I talked to one, and she used to keep the high walls around our garden sprayed with some muck that was supposed to keep them off.

Well, at the time I was Master of a small ship on a nice little coastal run—about a week away from home and then about three days in port. At times, though, I used to run late; I was having a bad spell with head winds. My wife had arranged to go away for a week at a holiday resort, for the week I was to be away. I should have been in and out before she left—as it was, I got in just before she left.

About the first thing she said to me when I walked into the house was, "You will do something about the cats."

"What cats?" I asked.

She told me. During my last voyage one of the local females had given birth to no less than eight kittens in our carport. It wouldn't have been at all hard to dispose of them when they were newborn—just a bucket of water and a fairly hard heart. But she not only hated cats, she couldn't bear to touch them.

There were other jobs lined up for me as well (he said reminiscently). Some inside painting, the chandeliers to clean, a few minor repairs around the place, a spot of gardening. But the cats had priority.

They were rather charming kittens; although their mother was grey they were black-and-white. They were lively—and they were full of fight. My first intention was to drown them. I half filled the garbage can with water, caught one and dropped him in. But he was a good swimmer and put up such a fight, trying to jump out, that I hadn't the heart to go through with it. I rescued him and turned him loose—and, naturally enough, he and all his cobbles bolted for cover. That was the first day.

The next day I decided to get the R.S.P.C.A. to do the job. I rang them up, and was told that they collected unwanted animals in our district only on Mondays—and I was sailing at midnight on Sunday. The alternative would be to take them round to the Dogs' Home in person. So, on Saturday afternoon, I had a large empty carton ready and had a lively time catching kittens. By this time they realized that I bore them ill will. Finally I had five in the carton—I was covered with sweat and scratches and stinking of cat—and decided that this was at least a start. I went back into the house to shower and change. When I was cleaned up I didn't ring at once for a taxi but went back outside, hoping that I'd be able to catch the remaining three kittens. I saw their mother leading four kittens up the drive. Then I saw that she had overturned the carton, freeing her offspring. One remained inside the box. He swore at me. I swore back and left him there, deciding to make a big effort the following day.

Now that you have to visualize the lay-out. There was the carport, with a shed at the end of it. There was no room under the shed, but there was a space at the back, between it and the back fence of our property. This space was too small for me to squeeze into, but there was ample room for cats. After I'd started my attack on them the kittens had taken refuge there.

I didn't like having to do what I did do, but I'd promised my wife that the place would be clear of cats on her return. I used the garden hose to flush them out, one by one. They were stubborn. I could feel them hating me, and by this time I was rather hating myself. Their mother was hovering around, not daring to intervene—but if looks could have killed I'd have dropped dead on the spot.

But, one by one, I caught the poor, half-drowned little wretches, opened the front gate just a crack, and threw them out into the street. They were yelling blue murder. The last one of all was more than just half drowned when he finally gave up the struggle and crawled from behind the shed. Even so, he gave me a nasty scratch.

I went outside to make a last check, to make sure that I'd evicted all eight of them. I had. Their mother was lying on her side in the gutter, giving suck. She looked at me very reproachfully.

But ...

But that wasn't what worried me. It was something that I saw, something that I heard—although I didn't remember it properly until They came out from hiding and started to take over the world. I suppose that He, even then, had powers, although they were yet to be developed. He must have inhibited my memory somehow—although, then, nobody would have believed my story.

As I picked Him up I saw that his front paws were more like little hands than paws—and it is the hands of His children that, with their brains, have enabled them to fight us with their acts of sabotage.

And I heard in my mind a voice, not a human voice, saying, "You will pay for this . . ."

§ § §

"You will! You will!" screamed the woman, reaching for the shotgun.

The ex-shopkeeper snatched it from her before she could use it. He said slowly, "Leave him for Them to deal with. Then, almost whispering, "I'd have drowned the little bastards . . ."