

A. Bertram Chandler, a long-time contributor to this magazine as well as others in the field, returns with a story about a frightening experiment. The experiment deals with the City of the Future, a city peopled not by human beings, but by rats.

The Pied Potter

by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

WE'D TALKED ABOUT MOST THINGS that evening; it had been one of those parties where everybody has something to say about something—or everything. Rather surprisingly, quite a few of those present actually knew what they were talking about. Bingham, for example. When Croucher said confidently that Old Mother Nature would take care of the population explosion in her own way, Bingham laughed, but not happily.

"There," my wife whispered to me, "is a man who knows too much. But what's he so frightened about?"

Bingham overheard her. He said to us, "Yes, I am frightened, and I don't care who knows it. So would you be, if ..."

"If what?" demanded Croucher, getting back into the conversation. "If you could watch the experiment I'm carrying out. That I'm carrying out? No, it's carrying itself out. But it should be shown on the screen of every TV set in the world every night, and then people would realize" He sipped from his almost empty glass, then wandered away to the bar to get a refill. But he returned to us. "Why don't you come out to the university tomorrow? You should see the experiment"

Croucher said that he couldn't spare the time, and neither could his wife. But Sandra and I were free; the life of a self-employed writer has its compensations. We made arrangements and then got caught up in an argument about student unrest and then another one about pot. Everybody was talking and nobody was listening and a good time was being had by all.

I hoped the next morning that Bingham had remembered the invitation, and a telephone call to the university confirmed that he had. He had told us that we would find him in the Biological Research Block, which turned out to be a rectangular slab of concrete not harmonizing at all well with the pseudo-Gothic of the older buildings. We gave our names to the girl at the desk in the office just inside the main entrance. She told us that Dr. Bingham was expecting us, and got a uniformed messenger to take us to his laboratory.

We followed the man along what seemed like miles of featureless, brilliantly lit corridors. We came at last to a plain grey numbered door set in the plain grey wall. It was, I recall, number 13. Whether or not that has any significance I can't say.

Our guide knocked on the door. Bingham opened it. He was wearing a badly stained white smock over a rumpled suit as well as his habitual worried expression. He managed to turn on an apology for a smile and said, "Come in. Welcome to the City of the Future."

The City of the Future?

The first thing I noticed was the smell. Like most of us I kept pet white rats as a kid, and during World War II, I served for several months in an ancient, rat-infested freighter. I know what rats smell like—but this stink was concentrated essence of rat.

"You'll get used to it," Bingham told me. "You get used to anything in time." He laughed harshly. "That's the trouble with us. We get used to the most appalling conditions, and do nothing about them."

"Appalling is the word!" complained Sandra through the handkerchief she was holding to her nose.

"But you've seen nothing yet," said Bingham.

"If it looks as bad as it smells," my wife told him, "I'm not sure that I want to see anything!"

And it did look as bad as it smelled. It was a huge cage, glass-sided for the observation of its inmates. There were twenty-four floors, originally transparent like the cage walls, but now badly befouled. On each floor were streets of little, box-like houses. There were ladders from floor to floor and up the inside walls of the cage. I remembered again those childhood pets. They would have regarded a cage like this as a sort of rat paradise—but I never owned more than six of the little brutes at any one time. This, obviously, was no rat paradise; it was more like the Hell painted by Hieronymus Bosch, only it was peopled not by human beings but by a squirming mass of white-furred rodents.

"How . . . how many?" asked Sandra in a muffled voice.

"Too many," replied Bingham. "Too many, Mrs. Whitley. To be precise, five thousand one hundred. Seventeen times more than the number that would be living in that same space in natural conditions."

"How about . . . food?"

"They're quite well fed. A balanced diet, with all that's required for physical health. Facilities for exercise—if they don't mind crawling over each other on the ladders . . ."

"And they fight as well, I suppose?" I asked, looking with horrified fascination at a poor little brute, a piebald one, cowering at the bottom of one of the ladders. He had lost most of his tail, and the stump was still oozing blood.

"Oddly enough, no. Once the pecking order's been established, they seem to stick to it. Look closely; you'll see that the rats on the top levels are all fat and sleek, whereas the lower classes are scrawny and bedraggled . . . But the general apathy is rather frightening. Not even sex seems to interest them any more. We thought at first that the overcrowding would become worse as Nature, as Croucher would say, took its course, but we have to put in new rats to replace those who die . . ."

"H'm." That glass cage was horridly fascinating. It reminded me far too

much of cities I had seen in the Orient—but the people in such cities are still too fecund. Could there be a missing factor in this artificial environment? I recalled the drug shops that I had seen in the poorer quarters of Calcutta, and their signs. How did they read? Licensed to sell Maas, Bhang and Ganja . . . Was there some connection? Does the overcrowded human animal need some sort of drug to enable him to copulate, and his mate to conceive? "H'm."

"And what's biting you?" asked Sandra. She still had her handkerchief to her face, but she could not take her eyes away from the pullulating rat city.

"Just an idea . . ."

"What is it?"

I laughed. "I'm only a layman."

Bingham said seriously, "Ethology is a very young science. The status of all of us is little, if at all, better than that of laymen."

"Oh, all right. It just occurred to me that there's one feature of an overcrowded human city you haven't duplicated. Pot smoking."

He laughed. "Rats are intelligent, but I somehow can't see them rolling their own reefers, although I'm sure that our bright boys in engineering would be able to make a supply of miniature lighters for them!"

"So marijuana's out. But there're more ways of getting high than by smoking. How about . . . hashish?"

Bingham showed signs of increasing interest. "You have something there, Whitley. But how do we get hold of the stuff, even for research? You know what the customs are like."

"Too right. But . . . some of your students possibly . . .?"

"You're putting the most shockingly illegal ideas into my head."

"Or perhaps your chemistry people could whip you up a batch of LSD ..

"I'd sooner keep them out of it." Then, speaking more to himself than to us, "Hashish . . . Charas . . . Cannabis indica ... Can be taken in a number of ways . . . as a food, or as a drink . . ."

"Can't we leave, George?" asked Sandra imploringly. "This . . . stink. I'm sorry, Dr. Bingham, but it's getting me down."

So we left, and as Bingham escorted us from the building, he promised to keep me informed and to let me know when to come out to the university again. Sandra, in the car on the way home, hoped that he would forget his promises. She said she had seen enough rats in one morning to last her for several lifetimes. I was inclined to agree with her.

I was rather surprised when Bingham rang me up just over a week later. It has been my experience that people who promise to keep one informed very rarely do so. "Can you come out?" he asked.

"Yes," I told him. Sandra said that I could do as I pleased but that she was staying at home. She did not, repeat not, like rats, and the more rats there were, the more she didn't like them.

Bingham was waiting for me at the entrance to the Biological Research Block. He said, without preamble, "You've started somethin . . ."

"I've started something?" I countered defensively. "It was just an idea ..."

"But your idea, Whitley. Don't worry, I'll see that you're given full credit."

He said nothing more as he led me to his laboratory.

The huge, glass-walled cage was still there. The stink was just as bad as before. To first glance the rat city was unchanged; its furry masses were still crawling around and over each other, still apathetic, still acting out for us the all-too-possible doom of mankind.

I said, "I can't see anything different."

"Just watch carefully. And listen to what I tell you. I was able to get hold of a supply of hashish, never mind how. I made it up into little pellets, which I mixed in with the food supply. But rats are suspicious brutes, as you'll already know if you'd tried to get rid of the wild variety with poison. The 'upper classes' got the lion's share of the food, as usual, and left all the drugged pellets. The 'middle classes' didn't starve either, and took none of the hashish. The 'lower classes' got enough food to sustain life, so weren't obliged to adopt new eating habits. All but one, that is. Do you see him?"

I looked for him on the ground level of the cage—not that I knew what I was looking for. I stared at the skinny, bedraggled little brutes, crawling listlessly through their own filth. None of them seemed any different from 'his companions in misery.

"Not there," Bingham told me. "Halfway up. Do you see him? That little, piebald fellow . . ."

I saw him then. I recognized him. It wasn't altogether due to his coloring, although he was one of the few animals that were not entirely white. He was the one whose tail had been gnawed off. But the stump was healed now. He was fatter; his fur, although not yet sleek, was glossier. He came out of the little box in which he had made his home (and who had been evicted, and how?) and walked quite deliberately to the glass wall, staring out at us. He was not, as were the majority of his fellow inmates, a true albino, so his eyes were brown and not red. And they were ... wrong. Damn it all, one does not expect to be looked down on by a lower animal, a little brute to whom one is a towering giant by comparison, intellectually as well as physically. But that was the very strong impression I gained.

"That's him," said Bingham. "He's risen in the world," I remarked.

"He has." Bingham turned away from the cage, walked slowly to his desk, where there were two chairs. He sat down in one, motioned me to the other. "Drugs aren't my field,

Whitley. What do you know about them?"

"Precious little. Only what I've read."

"Oh. I thought that you, as a writer, might have firsthand experience. I thought that you might have tried the hallucinogens, the consciousness-expanders ..."

"Not me."

"A pity. I was hoping that you'd be able to tell me what the effects are like."

"Why not try it yourself?"

He laughed uneasily. "Intellectually I can see nothing wrong with the idea. But emotionally—that's different. It's my upbringing, I suppose. I just feel that some things are wrong, and taking drugs is one of them." He carefully filled and then lit a battered pipe. He asked suddenly, "What does happen when you expand the consciousness of a rat?"

"What has happened so far?"

"I'll tell you. Our little, piebald friend got the hashish pellets. He nibbled one. There wasn't much else for him to nibble. He seemed to like it. He had several—but they didn't put him out, as I thought they would. They didn't slow him down, even. Then he gathered up those that were left and rolled them into a corner, where he stowed them under a pile of refuse. None of the others were at all interested—but then, they aren't very interested in anything.

"The next feeding time he stood up for his rights. He managed to get his share, more than his share, of the normal food. And all the hashish pellets. Shortly afterward, I noticed that he was acquiring a harem, from among the females on the lower levels. Those females, as you might have noticed, are much more aggressive than the males—but somehow he gained ascendancy over them. One of them, in fact, is the vicious little bitch who chewed his tail off a while back."

"Good for him."

"H'm. Yes. Very good for him. His . . . gang made a raid yesterday on the middle-level boxes, bundled their occupants out and took over."

"A sort of rodent Old Man of the Mountain."

He stared at me. "Yes. You could be right. That angle never occurred to me until now. Assassins, rewarded with hashish . . ."

I said, "I suppose you'll cut the supply off now."

"Why?"

"Isn't the experiment getting rather out of hand?"

"It's developing in an unexpected direction, that's all." He looked at his watch. "Almost time to feed the brutes."

A chittering from the cage was distinctly audible.

"They know it, too," I commented.

"They always do. But they didn't use to be as noisy as this when they got impatient."

I watched with interest as he fed the rats. This was done through a sort of air lock in the flat roof of the cage. The food pellets were pushed through a double, spring-loaded door into the chamber—the yellow ones that were normal nutriment, the green ones that had been made up from the drug—and then, at the touch of a button, the lower double-door opened, letting the food fall to the floor of the first level.

Until now, Bingham told me, the "upper classes" had taken their leisurely pick of what was available; then the "middle classes" and finally the "lower classes" had got what was left, scurrying hack down to their own level as though they were guiltily conscious of having trespassed among their betters.

But the pattern of behavior had changed.

The pellets fell, forming a mound on the floor. The fat, sleek rat aristocracy gathered around it, in no hurry at all to begin their meal. Suddenly their composure was shattered. The little piebald animal had appeared on the scene, and following him was a half dozen of his tribe—tough, scarred, vicious-looking brutes, and even through the thick, glass walls their menacing chittering was loud. The inhabitants of the upper level gave way, ludicrously clumsy in their panic haste. One or two of them were too slow, and screamed rather than squeaked as the intruders used their teeth.

Sudden blotches of blood bloomed on white fur.

The piebald rat scabbled in the mound of pellets while his followers stood guard. He was working with intelligent deliberation, separating the green ones from the yellow ones, using his paws to arrange them in a neat pile. Meanwhile there was an eviction in progress; three of his bodyguard made their way into one of the box houses, and, very shortly thereafter, its two former occupants stumbled out dazedly, their fur ruffled and bloodied. One of them had lost half its tail.

The hashish pellets were rolled into the vacated box. Only then did the raiders eat, slowly, taking their time, while the cowed population of the cage watched timidly. Their meal finished, the gangsters (for so I was beginning to think of them) defecated deliberately on the remaining food.

"Charming animals ..." I said.

"They were, comparatively speaking, until I started trying out your bright idea. But it's fascinating, isn't it?"

"H'm." I looked at my watch. "I told Sandra that I'd be home for lunch. I'd better be going."

"Thanks for coming out," said Bingham. "I'll let you know how things go."

"Do that, Doctor. But I still think that you should make another switch—from hashish to cyanide!"

As it happened, I didn't see Bingham again, although I heard from him. His voice on the telephone sounded frightened, almost hysterical. He said, "They got out. Not all of them. Just the pied one and a dozen of his followers . . ."

"I thought that the cage was escape-proof."

"So it was—to normal rats. But those bastards of yours . . . They made a ladder. They must have worked at night when there was nobody round. They cut up the walls of one of the boxes with their teeth and fitted the pieces together. The catch on the lower doors of the feeding hatch wasn't working properly. I'd been meaning to get it fixed, but ... you know how it is. And they forced the upper doors open somehow . . . I found a piece of tail that had been cut off when they snapped shut . . ."

"Where are they now, the ones that escaped?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"Have you notified the authorities?"

"What authorities? And why should I?"

"Those things could be dangerous."

He laughed then, with genuine amusement. "Come off it, Whitley. This isn't one of your science fiction stories. I can imagine what you'd make of it—a plague of rats, their intelligence expanded by hashish, taking over the world. These things don't happen in real life!"

And that was it. I hope that he was right in what he said, that these things don't happen in real life. I sincerely hope so, especially since I have read a small item in the morning paper. It was about a raid by the police on a house from which a suspected hashish smuggler was operating. They found the man there, He was dead. His throat had been torn out by some small animal or animals. The official theory was that he had been murdered by a person or persons unknown and that rats had partially devoured his corpse.

They found the hashish—but not all of it.

The rats had been at that too.