

The Norwegian Rat by Naguib Mahfouz

Fortunately we were not alone in this affliction. Mr. A.M., being the senior householder in the building, had invited us to a meeting in his flat for an exchange of opinions. There were not more than ten people present, including Mr. A.M., who, in addition to being the oldest among us, held the most senior position and was also the most well off. No one failed to show up--and how could they, seeing that it had to do with the rats and their likely invasion of our homes and their threat to our safety? Mr. A.M. began in a voice of great gravity with "As you all know..." and then set forth what the papers had been reiterating about the advance of the rats, their vast numbers, and the terrible destruction that would be wrought by them. Voices were raised around the room.

"What is being said is quite beyond belief."

"Have you seen the television coverage?"

"They're not ordinary rats; they're even attacking cats and people."

"Isn't it likely that things are a bit exaggerated?"

"No...no, the facts are beyond any exaggeration."

Then, calmly and with pride in being the chairman, Mr. A.M. said, "It has in any case been established that we are not alone. This has been confirmed to me by the Governor."

"It's good to hear that."

"So all we have to do is carry out instructions meticulously, both those that come directly through me and those that come by way of the authorities."

"And will this cost us a great deal?" it occurred to one of us to inquire.

He resorted to the Koran for a reply. "'God does not charge a soul beyond its scope.'"

"The main thing is that the costs should not be excessive."

This time he resorted to a maxim. "An evil is not warded off by something worse."

At which more than one voice said, "We would hope that you will find us cooperative."

"We are with you," said Mr. A.M., "but do not rely upon us wholly. Rely too upon yourselves, starting at least with the obvious things."

"Absolutely so, but what are the obvious things?"

"Having traps and the traditional poisons."

"Fine."

"Having as many cats as possible in the stairwell and on the roofs. Also inside the flats if circumstances permit."

"But it's said that the Norwegian rat attacks cats."

"Cats are not without their use."

We returned to our homes in high spirits and with a sincere resolve. Soon, rats predominated over the rest of our worries. They made frequent appearances in our dreams, occupied the most time in our conversations, and came to engross us as life's main difficulty. We proceeded to take the precautions we had promised to, as we awaited the coming of the enemy. Some of us were saying that there was not long to go, while others said that one day we'd spot a rat darting past and that this would be the harbinger of imminent danger.

Many different explanations were given for the proliferation of rats. One opinion was that it was due to the Canal towns being empty after the evacuation, another attributed it to the negative aspects of the High Dam, others blamed it on the system of government, while many saw in it God's wrath at His servants for their refusal to accept His guidance. We expended laudable efforts in making rational preparations, about which no one was negligent. At a further meeting held at his home, the estimable Mr. A.M., may God preserve him, said, "I am happy with the preventive measures you have taken, and I am pleased to see the entrance to our building swarming with cats. Certainly there are those who complain about the expense of feeding them, but this is of little importance when we think of our safety and security." He scrutinized our faces with satisfaction, then asked, "What news of the traps?"

One of us (an eminent educator) answered. "I caught a skinny specimen--one of our local rats."

"Whatever a rat's identity, it's still harmful. Anyway, today I must inform you of the necessity, with the enemy at our gates, for being even more on your guard. Quantities of the new poison ground up in corn will be distributed to us. It is to be placed in vulnerable places such as the kitchen, though extreme care should be taken to protect children, poultry, and pets."

Everything happened just as the man said, and we told ourselves that we were truly not alone in the battle. Gratitude welled up in us for our solicitous neighbor and our revered Governor. Certainly all this had required of us a lot of care on top of our daily worries. And unavoidable mistakes did occur. Thus a cat was killed in one home and a number of chickens in another, but there were no losses in terms of human life. As time went on we became more and more tense and alert, and the suspense weighed heavily on us. We told ourselves that the happening of a calamity was preferable to the waiting for it. Then, one day, I met a neighbor at the bus stop, and he said, "I heard from a reliable source that the rats have annihilated an entire village."

"There was not a thing about this in the papers!"

He gave me a scornful look and said nothing. I imagined the earth heaving with hordes of rats as far as the eye could see and crowds of refugees wandering aimlessly in the desert. Good God, could such a thing come about? But what was so impossible about it? Had not God previously sent the Flood and the flocks of birds as mentioned in the Koran? Would people tomorrow cease their daily struggle and throw all they possessed into the raging fires of battle? And would they be victorious, or would this spell the end?

At the third meeting, Mr. A.M. appeared in cheerful mood. "Congratulations, gentlemen," he said. "We are as active as can be. The losses are slight and will not, one hopes, recur. We shall become experts in matters of fighting rats, and perhaps we shall be called upon in the future in other places. His Excellency the Governor is extremely happy."

One of our number began to complain. "The fact is that our nerves--."

But he was cut short by Mr. A.M. "Our nerves? Do you want to spoil our success with a thoughtless word?"

"When will the rats begin their attack?"

"No one can give a definite answer to that, and it is of no consequence so long as we are prepared for the battle." Then, after a pause, he continued. "Latest instructions are of special importance, relating as they do to windows, doors, and any apertures in walls or elsewhere. Close all doors and windows and examine in particular the lower part of any door. If any space is found through which a mere straw could pass, seal it up completely with wooden planks. When doing the morning cleaning, the windows of one room should be opened, and while one person sweeps, another, armed with a stick, should stand at the ready. Then you should close the windows and move to the next room, where the same procedure should be followed. On finishing the cleaning, the flat should be left like a firmly closed box, whatever the weather."

We exchanged looks in glum silence.

"It's impossible to go on like that," said a voice.

"No, you must maintain the utmost precision in carrying out..."

"Even in a prison cell there's..."

"We are at war, that is to say in a state of emergency. We are threatened not only with destruction but also with epidemics--God spare us. We must reckon with that."

We went on submissively carrying out what we had been ordered to do. We became more deeply submerged in a morass of anticipation and wariness, with the boredom and depression that accompany them. The nervous tension increased and was translated into sharp daily quarrels between the man of the house and his wife and children. We continued to follow the news, while the Norwegian rat, with its huge body, long whiskers, and alarming glassy look, became a star of

evil that roamed in our imaginations and dreams and occupied the major part of our conversation.

At the last meeting, Mr. A.M. had said, "I've got some good news--a team of experts has been assigned to the task of checking the buildings, flats and locations exposed to risk, and all without any demand for additional rates."

It was indeed good news, and we received it with universal delight, the hope being that we would be able to relieve ourselves of some of the distress we had been suffering. Then one day the concierge informed us that a bureaucrat had inspected the entrance to the building, the stairwell, the roof, and the garage, and had pronounced favorably on the large bands of cats roaming about here and there. He had instructed the concierge to be extra vigilant and to inform him of any rat that might make its appearance, be it Norwegian or Egyptian.

One week after the meeting, the doorbell of our flat rang and the concierge gave us the good news that the bureaucrat was on his way and wished to have permission to make an inspection. The time was not convenient, because my wife had just finished preparing lunch, but I nevertheless hurried out to greet him. I found myself standing before a middle-aged, sturdily built man with a thick mustache, his square face with its short snub nose and glassy stare reminding me of a cat. I greeted him, concealing a smile that almost transformed itself into a laugh, and told myself that they really did have a flair for choosing their men. I walked ahead of him, and he proceeded to examine the traps and poisons, the windows and doors, nodding his head in approval. He did, however, find in the kitchen a small window covered over with a wire mesh of tiny holes, at which he said firmly, "Close the window."

My wife was on the point of protesting, but he snapped at her. "The Norwegian rat can gnaw through wire."

Satisfied that his order had been carried out, he sniffed at the smell of food, thus proclaiming his commendation. I therefore invited him to eat. "Only a mean man refuses generosity," he answered simply.

Immediately we prepared a table for him alone, telling him that we had already eaten. He sat down as though in his own home and began gobbling up the food without any restraint or shyness--and with quite extraordinary voracity. Out of politeness, we left him to it. However, after a while I thought it best to check on him in case he might be in need of something. I gave him another helping, and while doing so I became aware of a dramatic change in his appearance. It seemed that his face reminded me no longer of a cat but of a rat, in fact of the Norwegian rat itself. I returned to my wife with my head spinning. I did not tell her what I had noticed but asked her to be pleasant to him and make him welcome. She was away for a minute or two, then returned, pallid, and stared at me in stupefaction. "Did you see what he looks like when he eats?" she breathed.

I nodded, and she whispered, "It's quite amazing, unbelievable."

I indicated my agreement with a movement of my spinning head. It seems that our utter astonishment caused us to forget the passage of time, and we only came to when we heard his voice from the hallway calling joyfully, "May your house ever prosper!"

We rushed out, but he had reached the front door before us and had gone. All we glimpsed of him was his swaying back, then a swift about-face as he bade us farewell with a fleeting Norwegian smile. We stood behind the closed door looking at each other in bewilderment.