

The Great Siege of Antioch

Gerald the Rat

The circumstances of Lady Kathryn having a rat name Gerald. And how it was that with nothing but his help she lifted the Great Siege of Antioch.

The Duke asks a story of the Lady Kathryn

Duke Peter, wiping his beard after his quaff of ale turns to the lovely Lady Kathryn seated to his right. "Lady Kathryn, it would be an honour if you could enlighten us as to the circumstances of your having a rat name Gerald. And how it was that with nothing but his help you lifted the Great Siege of Antioch?"

In which Lady Kathryn sets the scene

"The Great Siege of Antioch? Why, that occurred during my Ottoman Adventures whilst gathering material for my", she laughs as if embarrassed, "some say seminal volume, 'The Breeding of Rats. Part XVIII. The Ottoman Empire'."

"I was travelling accompanied by my third cousin twice removed (and thrice restored), Fergus. Fergus, apparently of Scottish origin, had been my constant companion since childhood and we may have eventually wed, had the Count not had a rather more exotic accent." Lady Kathryn pauses to look archly at the Marquis. "Fergus was, of course, devoted to me and was as handsome as he was intelligent! In other words", she adds in a slight lower tone, "he had a face that resembled nothing so much as a slightly shopworn haggis and the wit of a particularly dull turnip!"

"Still he was not without his merits." Gazing wistfully into the middle ground, Lady Kathryn remembers past events. "His eyelashes were the envy of most young ladies in Hampshire and his amazing affinity with animals, particularly those of the relatively small gnawing variety, was second to none. It was this affinity that made his presence so vital as I attempted to document the lifecycle of the Slightly Better Known Ghost Rat of Asia Minor, as it was renamed after publication of my book."

After delicately sipping her brandy, she continues.

"As I think we are now all aware, the Slightly Better Known Ghost Rat of Asia Minor lives on the island of Cyprus and in the surrounding parts of Asia Minor. After visiting Cyprus, our ship had continued on and we had set up a small camp down river of the Great City of Antioch, Renowned Jewel of the Ottoman Empire. We were travelling rough and our camp consisted only of a basic mess tent, dining tent, temporary horse and camel stables, separate sleeping quarters for myself, Fergus, our servants and the local guides we had engaged, and a single solitary tent to store our luggage. We spent our waking hours tracking the Ghost Rat by foot, imitating its mating call. We knew nothing of the troubles that were beginning to brew nearby." ===== The Doctor wagers on Mouchtenstein =====

"I'll wager," says Doctor Van Barrow, pushing forward a silver coin, "that those troubles were caused

in part by none other than that notorious Prussian zoologist and engineer, Rafeal Von Mouchtenstein, who I believe was another rival for your hand at the time. No doubt Mouchtenstein and the Kaiser had a nefarious purpose in mind for the the Slightly Better Known Ghost Rat."

"That Prussian, good Doctor?", the Duke eyes him suspiciously. "I had heard he was a personal friend of your cousin Baron von Barrow. Is it through him that you know of Rafeal's travels in Turkey and the Middle East?"

The Doctor stiffens.

"I'll thank you not to mention that name in my presence. For all of his uncanny resemblance to myself, the Baron von Barrow is a blackguard and a villain, and most uncouth to boot. However, if you wish me to elaborate on my dealings with the nefarious von Mouchtenstein, and his travels through Turkey and the Middle East, I would be only too happy to oblige."

"Doctor please! No 'e's!", scolds Lady Kathryn. "But, yes, Von Mouchtenstein did lie behind the troubles that occurred at Antioch. Silly man! Surely he knew that, despite his most *compelling* accent, such a course of action could never win me over. I never see him now, of course, but I would be most interested in hearing of your own encounter with him before I continue with my tale."

Involving embraces, mad chenius, and fantabulous devices.

"After several weeks tracking, we were running low on supplies. I decided that Fergus should travel to Antioch to stock up on necessities such as food, fresh water, and cod liver oil (Always so settling for the stomach, I find)." "Bidding Fergus goodbye, I set out as usual the following day but returned to find the camp overrun with soldiers! Standing slightly apart, barking orders in all directions stood Rafeal Von Mouchtenstein. Our eyes met. He strode purposefully towards me and I stifled a small scream as he clasped me to his Prussian breast. Repulsed, I extricated myself from his embrace without much difficulty. Whilst undoubtedly Prussian, Rafeal Von Mouchtenstein is *not* a large man and his nickname refers to more than just his obsession with rodent aided supremacy."

"Gathering my composure, I then demanded to know what he was doing here. 'What *are* you doing here Mousy?', I asked. 'Katherine, my darlink, please do not call me that', longingly he gazed up at me, but I avoided eye contact. 'I haff a cunning plan to vin your luff once and for all! I vill take control of Antioch and finally you vill realise my chenius. My schemes infolging the Kaiser's husbandry yards and, ahem, small rat-sized explosif defices may have failed. But this time, I vill prefail!' His accent thickened as he warmed to his subject. 'We vill surrount da city und demant total kontrol. If zey do not agree, Hamlin will remoof all of zeir rats!' At this point he gestured to a morose looking man dressed in an ill-fitting Prussian uniform and holding a wind instrument that defied description. I could only gasp at Von Mouchtenstein's audacity."

Stroking Gerald, who had finally settled on her shoulder, Lady Kathryn explained further.

"Now, for most cities, removal of rat population will not be looked upon as a particularly serious threat. But Antioch has built a healthy trade in fantabulous rat powered devices. The city itself is powered entirely by rat energy. For Antioch to lose its rat population would be a catastrophe of *immense* proportions."

The Countess makes a wager

"I'll wager," said the Contessa, brimming over with excitement at the unfolding tale, her breath fast and shallow as she pressed a silver coin into Lady Kathryn's hand, "that the morose young Hamlin was not a willing agent in this devilish scheme. I'll wager that he had been pressed into the service of this Mouchenstein out of fear for the honour of his sister who, through a series of unfortunate misunderstandings had accidentally become engaged to be wed to a horse belonging to the crown Prince of England. I imagine that someone as cunning and dastardly as this Prussian Von Mouchenstein had found some way to involve himself and profit from this sorry situation."

Lady Alyssa signals to Sally for a glass of wine before turning to Contessa Barbara, beside her and asking, "Surely, Contessa, you meant she was engaged to be wed to a horseman belonging to the crown Prince of England?"

In which the pitfalls of late night hijinks are discussed

"In a way, my dear ladies, you are both correct", said Lady Kathryn, a gleam in her eye. "Let me explain."

"Von Mouchenstein put his devious plan into immediate action and moved the whole camp into position outside the gates of Antioch - myself included. During the journey I noticed that Hamlin did not defer to 'Mousy' in the same manner as the other soldiers. Indeed he even spoke of 'His Prussian Tiny-ness' when outside of earshot. It was not difficult to convince Hamlin to confide in me and I soon learnt the whole of his sorry tale."

"Hamlin was the third son of a venerable family that had been ridding English villages of their rat problems for centuries. His sister, Gertrude, had recently made a most beneficial match and become engaged to William, a horseman of His Highness the Crown Prince. Their future happiness had seemed assured until a tragic set of events, involving a little ale, his fellow horsemen and some late night hijinks, inexplicably transformed William into a horse! Somewhat to the dismay of her family, Gertrude proved a most faithful lover and declared that she would marry him anyway. All manner of physicians were consulted but to no avail. It had appeared that the family would be obliged to extend the stables until Von Mouchenstein had unexpectedly arrived. He promised William's total restoration - IF the family agreed to aid him in his fiendish designs."

"'But how does he plan to effect the transformation?', I asked Hamlin, perplexed. 'I do not know!'," wailed Hamlin, also perplexed. 'I have spent every night watching his tent, hoping to uncover his plans as he sleeps. But I cannot make head nor tail of his dreams of rats and shape shifting!'. 'Of course!', I cried. 'The Shape Shifters of Antioch!'"

Gerald suddenly appears troubled, perhaps due to the unflinching gaze of the Marquis. "There now Gerald. No need to be afraid of the nice gentleman", Lady Kathryn murmurs, smiling amiably at the Marquis before continuing on.

"I explained to him that the Shape Shifters of Antioch were an old and rather secretive sect that could transform living creatures from one shape to another. These days they spend much of their time supplementing Antioch's rat supply by sentencing criminals and other miscreants to life - as a rat. I was certain that, if we could get a message to them, they would agree at once to restore William to his former human glory and Hamlin would no longer be obliged to aid Von Mouchenstein in his

iniquitous plan. 'But how can we transmit such a message?', he asked somewhat dejectedly. 'The city is surrounded and there is no way in.' I pondered but a moment. 'Fergus!', I cried."

"Fascinating! He was both man and horse! And Gertrude would marry him anyway!" Lady Alyssa eyed Gerald carefully before sitting back in her chair and sipping her wine, now deep in thought.

In which a city is saved... finally!

"As children Fergus and I had often communicated over vast distances using our home firework and distress flare construction sets. We had devised a special code and it was by this means that I meant to contact him inside the locked city gates."

A look of nostalgia passes over Lady Kathryn's face. "Many a child earned the moniker 'Stumpy' after being careless with his home firework and distress flare construction set and I suppose that I was lucky to retain all my extremities. Fergus, of course, was not so lucky but he was already affectionately known as 'Haggis Head' before the accident. Indeed I still prefer to call him that as I cannot stand the name Fergus at all!"

"But I digress. I always carry with me the necessary ingredients to prepare my own fireworks and set at once whittling cases in which to pack the gunpowder and other ingredients. Whittling is not a difficult craft to master, only requiring a sharp knife, a steady hand and the appropriate artistic inspiration. However, in this case the thought of Mousy's continued attention was inspiration enough. He had become particularly irksome since the siege began and had started making snide comments about my late husband Vlad. He never did like Vlad and insisted on referring to him as 'The Wampire'. I never did understand why." Lady Kathryn motions to Sally to bring a glass of water to assuage her thirst.

"But I digress. Again. That night Hamlin and I stole away from the main camp and set off the intricate pattern that would tell Fergus our situation and what was required of him. Mousy was furious when we returned to camp. He claimed that the fireworks had unsettled his horses and his own highly strung nerves (indeed, creating sudden loud noises were often an amusing distraction when forced to spend a long amount of time in Mousy's company). I wondered what he would have said had he known the full implications of our actions. The following day we tensely waited for nightfall and you can hardly imagine our bitter disappointment when no answering fireworks came. We debated sending up another message but decided to wait another day. To our great relief we received a reply that night. Fergus had met with the Shape Shifters and they would perform Williams transformation the very next day. He also apologised for the delay. Apparently he had been forced to resort to illegal means to purchase the required ingredients as fireworks were outlawed within Antioch. Rats are also sensitive to loud noises, you know."

"The next morning Hamlin and I breakfasted as usual and then - much to Mousy's surprise and consternation - hopped astride William and rode away from the camp. We entered the front gate, which was kindly opened for us, and within the hour William had been restored to his rightful shape and I had been reunited with Fergus. Unfortunately Fergus had been transformed into a rat as punishment for igniting illegal fireworks in a confined space. Our reunion was touching, despite the fact that he was meandering around his cage in a particularly witless manner. The Shape Shifters were most apologetic and offered to turn him back to his original shape at once. I did not know that I did not prefer him as a rat, however in the end I thought it best to change him back."

"The people of Antioch showed their gratitude by presenting me with an ingenious rat powered bedside reading lamp, as well a rat to act as both power source and constant and faithful companion. I named him Gerald after my late grandfather when I found out that he had recently been transformed after being found guilty of selling illegally imported gunpowder - to Fergus. I felt his punishment was a little harsh, given that his actions had ultimately saved the city and it reminded me of my poor Grandpapa, who had suffered a similar fate (although he was never turned into a rat and was not possession of fireworks at the time). But that, my friends, is another story."

Exhausted, Lady Kathryn slumps back in need of sustenance.

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