

Rafferty Ferret RATBAG



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Ratbag

THE TALE OF RAFFERTY
FERRET & HIS SPLENDIFEROUS
RAT-CATCHING CAREER



1. The Trap

But not the kind of trap you think it is.



afferty was starving. He was also homeless, motherless, fatherless, penniless, and (if he wasn't very careful) on his way to being lifeless as well. But what Rafferty was *not* was brainless, and he had a few plots up his patched sleeves yet, before he fell down in the garbage and gasped his last.

This particular evening it was raining hard, and he was up to his flea-bitten ankles in dirty dishwater, rotten vegetables, and everything else the townsfolk tossed out into the street. He plodded along through the muck, his hands clenched under his armpits for warmth, his filthy clothes and skin getting a rare wash from the wintry rain. Most people were already in their houses, huddled around their fires, eating their suppers. As he trudged down the darkling street, Rafferty imagined those suppers, and his mouth watered.

He could smell the bread and broth, the chitterlings and chops, the garlic and goose, the pigs' trotters and the tripe.

Every house he went by he gazed at longingly, on the chance that someone kindly might see him going by, take pity on him, and invite him in. But no one did, though he was seen by a few lucky children as they peered out from their window shutters, doubtless watching for fathers late coming home. Rafferty went on, wetter than a waterlogged louse on a wet weasel.

Passing the dwellings, he came to the tanneries and slaughterhouses on the edge of town. Here the cobbles were slick with blood and offal from butchered beasts, though it didn't smell so bad, watered down by the rain. The place was at its peak in summer's middle, with animals' insides steaming on the stones, and battalions of flies battling over the blood and gore. On a winter's night like this the slaughterhouses were all shut up, and though Rafferty looked hard for a place he might break into, they all were securely locked and barred. There was no shelter at all.

He went on down past the last houses, towards the muddy fields and the River Crapley, which tumbled from the far hills, gurgled under the town's bridges, then gushed out past the mill to the wide, windy moor. As he neared the river, the rain stopped. He stood under a tree by the stone bridge he had

slept under many a frosty night, and wondered if he might take shelter there again. But the teeming rain had swollen the River Crapley to the tops of its banks, and it had become a furious torrent. There'd be no sleeping under the bridge this night. Rafferty shivered under the first stars and the icy slice of the moon, while a cold wind howled in from the moor on the far side of the water, plastering his sodden tunic against his scraggy frame. His feet were so cold he could no longer feel them. His hose had once had leather soles sewn onto them, which had served for shoes, but the leather had long ago fallen off, and now his feet poked through the ends of the hose, and his knees poked through other holes. In fact, there wasn't much left of either of his two garments, they were so ragged and worn.

Quivering with cold, Rafferty turned left down a crooked path called Mill Lane, that followed the river away to the mill. With its towering stone walls and giant waterwheel turning slowly in the icy river, the mill had a hundred mossy nooks and crannies where a homeless boy might hide. Rafferty shuffled on through the mud, past the miller's house with firelight leaking warm gold through cracks in the window shutters.

Suddenly Rafferty stopped, sniffing. Something had come to him through the blackness. A smell. A delicious smell, a delectable smell – a smell to make his mouth salivate, his heart palpitate, and his honesty evaporate. Honesty had once been a strong part of Rafferty’s character, in the days before he became homeless, but starvation and cold had squeezed the honesty out of him. And right now, Rafferty was very cold and very hungry. So he began to plot. And his plot, this miserable wintry night, was thievery.

He knew that just past the mill was the baker’s house. There the baker and his family lived above the bakery, where they made and sold bread for the townsfolk. The baker had been labouring all that day, and the shelves and tables of the bakery were sagging under the weight of new-baked deliciousness, ready for selling first thing in the morning. Rafferty’s belly ached with longing. He crept past the long shuttered window and the barred door that led in from the street, around to the shadowy back of the bakery, where he knew of a way in.

The back of the bakery was right on the edge of the town, and a small copse of spindly trees separated the bakery and last houses from the bare and windy moor. Between the trees

and moor was the river, which Rafferty could hear roaring as it rushed away on the edge of the moor. It was a dark and desolate place here behind the bakery; a place where people threw their rubbish, and abandoned dogs roamed, and robbers hid.

In the mossy back wall of the bakery there were no windows, but there was something else; in the wall, at the same height as Rafferty's waist, was a small square hole roughly the size of a sow's head, if you didn't count her ears. The hole had a sliding wooden shutter that dropped down from the inside, to keep out the rain. It was the small opening called the Leper Hole. No one else would go near the Leper Hole, on account of its being so dangerous.

The lepers were a band of folk even poorer than Rafferty was. They possessed only two things: the rags they wore, which were torn to shreds to make bandages for their sores and injuries; and they had their Disease. A terrible disease it was, and it made their fingers fall off, their feet wear out to stumps, and their teeth and faces rot. It was dreadful even to look at them. Also, folks believed that lepers were pestilent and perilous, and that you could catch their disease if you just brushed against their clothes, or put your foot where they had walked,

or touched a stone their skin had touched. Everywhere lepers went they rang bells tied to their clothes, warning people to get out of their way. Lepers weren't allowed in the town, but they were allowed here, to the back of the bakery on the edge of town, where the baker's family passed bread to them through the hazardous Leper Hole.

Rafferty stood in front of that hole, gnawing on his lower lip, shaking from cold and fear. He had been through the Leper Hole once before, on another desperate night, and had sworn to himself that he'd never go through it again. He'd had nightmares afterwards for more nights than he had fingers and toes, dreaming that he'd become a leper himself, having caught the disease from the tiny hole he had crawled through. He hadn't got the disease, of course, though his nightmares had been bad enough.

"Rafferty," he said to himself, shivering outside the Leper Hole, "Rafferty, you're in peril of your life. You can starve out here till you drop dead and the crows pick your scrawny bones – or you can go through that Leper Hole and fill your belly full of beautiful bread, and live to tell the tale."

Having encouraged himself mightily, Rafferty went closer

and examined the Leper Hole. Seeing the wooden shutter covering it from the inside, he remembered what he had done last time, to prop the shutter open, and decided to try the same trick again. Looking around on the muddy ground, he found a sturdy straight stick which he broke in two, so that one of the pieces was the same depth as the hole in the wall. Then he worked his fingertips under the sliding wooden shutter that closed the hole, slowly moving it upwards, out of the way, and propped it open with the stick pressed against the side. For a while he stood listening, rubbing his hands together for warmth. No dogs barked, no doors opened: only the uncaring moon saw him, as she sailed through the gossamer clouds. So far, so good.

Rafferty bent and poked his head in the hole, and sniffed. The cosy smell of bread washed over him like warm milk stolen from a cow. Heaven! Slowly, carefully, he worked his left arm and shoulder through the Leper Hole, then his right. It was a tight and painful passageway, smaller than he remembered it. He breathed out to keep his chest and belly as flat as possible, then slithered through until his hips reached the outside edge of the hole.

Inside, in the soft, sweet dark, he leaned down until his hands touched the bakery floor, and he rested there awhile, breathing deeply, sniffing in the divine fragrances. He could almost taste the bread in the warm air, and he poked out his tongue, licking at the smells like a lizard. “Thank you God, and Jesus and Mother Mary,” he said. Then he started wriggling to get his hips through.

That was when the plan started to go wrong. In his excitement he had forgotten about the stick propping open the wooden shutter. Squirming, he accidentally knocked the stick away, and the shutter slid down, hard against his back. He could feel it pressed there, stuck between two folds of his long, loose tunic, stopping his hips from sliding through. Swearing to himself, he wriggled some more. There was no way his backside could slither in now, skinny though it was, not with that solid little wooden door pressing down on him. He decided that he’d have to slither out, replace the stick to prop open the wooden shutter, and start again.

So he tried to worm his way backwards, but his tunic bunched up around his shoulders, blocking the hole completely. Back in he went, grunting while he hung across the tiny window

ledge, half in and half out. He had the bright idea to take off his tunic, so his shoulders could slide out again without the extra volume. So off his tunic came, and he dropped it on the floor inside, and started to wriggle backwards again.

But the wooden door scraped hard on his skin, stuck against the bumps of his bare backbone. The more he wriggled, the more firmly the door came down. Groaning with pain, he writhed back and forth, growing more desperate with every heartbeat. The wooden shutter was heavy, probably to keep out thieves such as himself, and he struggled to reach back, to lift it up out of the way, but he couldn't. It wedged him there, rammed him down, crammed him, jammed him like a weasel in a wily trap.

Furious, he muttered the worst swear words he knew. And waited.



All night he waited, sniffing in the heady, unreachable fragrances of bread and grains. Soon he realised he was not the only one in the bakery with thievery on his mind: from the pitch dark all around came the scampering and scurrying

of tiny feet, and fierce squeaks, and the sounds of famished thieves feasting. He listened, famished himself, his own thievery forgotten in the panic of his unexpected predicament. He listened while he waited, his top half warm, his bottom half freezing in the night wind that moaned in across the lonesome moor.

At some time in the night a dog came and sniffed his feet, and when he tried to kick it away, the dog thought it was a game, and started to gnaw at the frayed ends of Rafferty's hose. When Rafferty kicked again, the dog ran, the tattered fabric still in his jaws, peeling the worn-out hose off Rafferty as he went. When it rained again, Rafferty felt the drops pelting on his naked skin, and realised the full horror of his dilemma.

Hanging helplessly half in and half out of the Leper Hole, his nether regions bared to all the world, he waited for the long night hours to plod past. And, as he always did when he had time to spend, and needed to take his mind off his misery, he talked aloud, and made clever sentences out of words he loved. At least, he thought his sentences were clever; but even if they weren't, they helped to pass the time, and gave him something to think about besides his misfortunes.

“Rafferty,” he said to himself, when he had hung suspended there for two hours, “Rafferty, you’ve got yourself in a right perilous position. It’s a pinch, to put a fine point on it, a plight and a pickle and a predicament.”

After three hours, he said to himself, “It’s also a pain, a precarious place to put yourself, and a serious pitfall in your plot to plunder the bakery.”

After four hours, almost in tears, and shaking so much from the cold that his teeth clattered together, he said, “It’s really, really painful. A painful period in your pathetic, pitiful, poor, deplorable, inauspicious life.”

But even as he thought that, he knew it wasn’t true. His life hadn’t always been this pitiful, plagued by starvation and cold and misfortune. In the beginning, his life had been good. Very good. Almost heavenly, in fact. Because Rafferty had been brought up in a monastery.

For as long as he could remember, he had lived with the gentle monks in their great peaceful home; and he thought he must have been born there, must have simply burst out from among the books and bottles of ink, his surprise appearance accompanied by prayers and the thrilled exclamations of the

kindly monks. But when he was old enough to understand, one of the monks, Brother Barnabas, who loved him dearly, had taken Rafferty out to a seat in the sweet-smelling herb garden; and there, among the lavender flowers and the basil and the bees, had told the boy of his beginnings.

“Five winters ago,” Brother Barnabas said, “a precious bundle was found abandoned in the snow at our monastery gate. It was a babe. A boy, dark of hair and eye, and with a cry in him ferocious enough to give fright to the angels in very heaven. Our beloved abbot, whom you know and love well, decided to keep the lad and raise him here, to help us in our old age. So we did, naming him after the monk who had found him; and here you are, our cherished helper and cheerer-up of our souls. We hope you’ll be with us a long while yet, young Rafferty, and mayhap go to our school here, and learn to read and write.”

“I should like that,” Rafferty had replied. “I’d like to work in the Scriptorium, to copy out books the way you do, with beautiful letters, and pictures in the margins.”

“That would be a splendid work for you, with your love of words, and your aptitude for learning,” said Brother Barnabas.

“Perhaps ’tis time we taught you to read and write. But the students in our school all have fathers paying for their learning, and whether or not you may join them is not for us to decide. There’s a new abbot coming next month, to rule us. His name is Father Ravennus. We shall ask him if you can attend our school. And we must pray that he is like our present abbot, kindly and full of love.”

But Father Ravennus had not been kindly and full of love. In fact, he was full of the opposite: he was full of self-importance and intolerance, was strict and stern and fastidious. Said he, “I do not want a useless boy taking up a valuable seat in our schoolroom – especially a misbegotten wretch with no parents to pay for his keep. He shouldn’t be living here among us. We are not a shelter for homeless beggars; we are a house of God.”

However, because Rafferty’s help was free, and he was an excellent worker, the new abbot allowed the boy to stay and to work out in the gardens, and to sleep on a sack in the garden shed. Which Rafferty didn’t mind so much, except that he missed the quiet company of the monks who loved him. Also, he missed the smells of the monastery, the incense and ink

and ancient parchments. The dodderly monk he worked with in the gardens was unable to speak, so there was no talk there. And Rafferty missed the talk.

The monks were not supposed to talk except when necessary, but for one hour a day they were permitted to talk as much as they liked. That hour was spent sitting around the hearth in the cosy Warming Room, one of the few places in the monastery which had a fire. The monks gathered there at the end of each day's hard work, and it was a time of relaxation and fun. When Rafferty had lived in the monastery he had always joined the monks in the Warming Room, and his evenings there were the happiest times of his young life. Often the monks had read to Rafferty, and as they read they explained new words to him, and made up rhymes so he'd remember the meanings. He grew to love the rhythm and rhyme, the delight and deliciousness of words, and the way they were woven together. But that was before Father Ravennus. When he came, it was just the gardens for Rafferty, and the rough sack in the dirty shed.

The monks had felt sorry for Rafferty, and Brother Barnabas had begged Father Ravennus to let Rafferty help them in the

Scriptorium, where they copied out priceless books by hand, saying they needed his nimble fingers to sharpen quills for them, and to mix the paints for the pictures in the margins of their manuscripts. Father Ravennus relented, and let Rafferty help. But he said that if Rafferty just once ruined anything, or talked to the monks while they worked, or disturbed anyone in any way, he would be expelled. So Rafferty crept about, quieter than a spider, and no one heard anything except the rasping of his razor-edged little knife as he sharpened feathers for quills, and the pouring of paint into bottles as he mixed gorgeous colours of sapphire and amber and green and purple and vermilion. But the monks whispered to him at times, and slipped gifts into his paint-bespattered hands – a slice of beef from the dinner table, a bun fresh from the ovens, a warm tunic, or candles and flints to light the night hours in his shed.

Four years rolled across the earth, and gradually the monks won more privileges for Rafferty – an hour by the fire at night, when they talked and read stories; a bed in a little cell at the end of the long dormitory where they all slept; and one meal a day at their table. Rafferty was happy.

But then, one day, there was an accident.

It happened in the Scriptorium. Many monks worked there, writing out books painstakingly by hand, and illustrating them with glorious pictures painted in parts with pure gold. Each book took many years to complete, and they were valuable and rare. Father Ravennus had forbidden Rafferty to touch them. But one evening, when he was working late, sharpening quills for the morrow's work, Rafferty had caught sight of one of those manuscripts lying open on a table, and had bent over it to examine the beautiful script and artwork. Almost finished, the book was one of the most splendid he had ever seen. Lost in wonder, he had turned the pages, not realising that he had cut his hand as he had sharpened quills, and was leaking blood. Too late, he saw that he had splattered crimson across several of the pages. Panicking, he got a wet rag and tried to wash the blood off, but only managed to smear the paint and ink, and ruin the golden art. It was a catastrophe, for the ruination of even one page was the ruination of the whole book. Immediately Rafferty had confessed to one of the monks, and the monk had wept and told the abbot; then trouble had taken hold of Rafferty by both his ears, and shaken him so hard that his whole world turned upside down.

Father Ravennus had whipped Rafferty, all the time shouting at him. "That book was worth a fortune! It was for the library of the King himself! Five years of work, ruined!" The abbot brought the rod down on Rafferty's back again and again, a furious slash to emphasise each word. "In one – careless – thoughtless – foolhardy – act! You're a fool! A useless – ignorant – troublesome – fool!" Afterwards, he had dragged Rafferty to the monastery gate and tossed him out, right across from the place where Rafferty had been left in the snow nine years before. Father Ravennus had locked the gate and commanded Rafferty never to come back, unless he wanted another whipping.

So a new life had begun. Rafferty had wandered homeless and alone from town to town, and village to village, and suffered two whole years of starvation and uncertainty. He had ended up here, in the little town of Spickernell, on the edge of the unfriendly moor. Turned thief, he stole food and sometimes clothes for survival, sleeping in doorways and behind walls and in nooks and crannies of factories and shops. The thievery pricked his conscience hotly in the small night hours, and he thought of the kindly monks and what they would say

if they knew of his wickedness. But they were not here to say anything, and he was left to his own devices in order to live – and his devices this night had brought him to a fine quandary. He pondered on his predicament, as he hung halfway in and halfway out of the bakery, mourning his vanished monastery life, and wondering what his next move might be, if he could move at all.

But although his body was stuck, his mind was not, for Rafferty had learned a thing or two during his years of looking after himself, and he had got mighty cunning. So he plotted and planned as he hung there, until grey light crept in through the cracks in the large shuttered shop window opposite and through the gaps around the door beside it. It was almost dawn.

And with the dawn came his doom.

But he was ready for it.