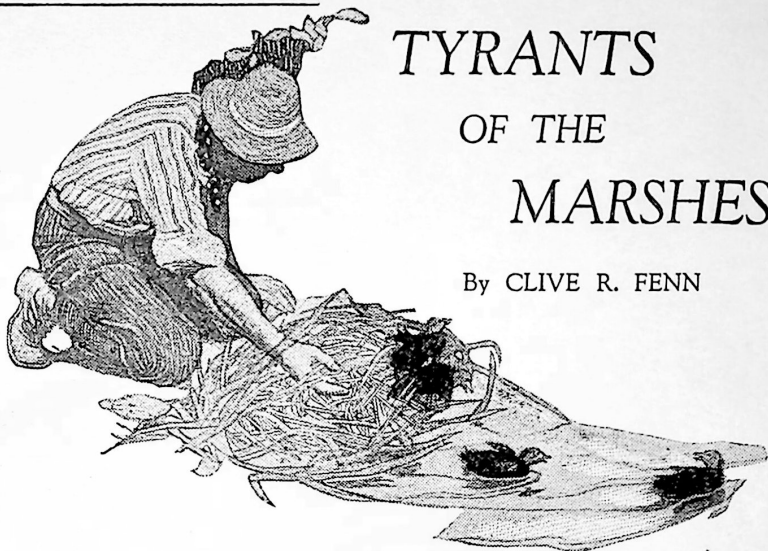


TYRANTS OF THE MARSHES

By CLIVE R. FENN



TRIPINA of the marshes was a moorhen of rather nervous disposition, and she really had some reason for being so. When she was quite young she had escaped only by the skin of her claws, as you might say, from the rats which lived in the dikes.

The rats favoured this part of the world, for they found harbourage in the rotting hulk of an old schooner that had been driven ashore many years before. Its timbers, what there was left of them, lay buried in the tangle and the ooze.

Since those distant times the sea had drawn back for many a mile, leaving a stretch of country which had a strange beauty of its own. It was a land of rough herbage and of deep ditches, of tiny rivers, and wastes of marsh where oddly-tinted flowers grew.

On a clear morning, if you stood about sunrise near the spot where Tripina had her

home in the sedges, you could see the funny-looking little pill-box called a Martello tower, at Revensea, five miles away, while in the other direction was a misty blue on the horizon which was the ancient port of Rye.

Tripina might perhaps have chosen a safer place to live, but she did nothing of the kind. Like the people who lived near a volcano, she trusted to luck. She and her race had always lived in the marshy wilderness, and always would; the place suited them.

Splayfoot is the truant of the family, but he turns up at home when danger threatens—and so redeems himself.

Besides, there was Jake Goodyer, who killed rats. Maybe it was for this reason that Tripina liked him. Jake was the one human being who ever came across that part of the old marsh. He made friends with the water-fowl, and Tripina never felt even a tremor when the big fellow came near the rough nest where she lived with her small family.

Jake was a man who understood a lot about

the marsh. He caught rats because he found their skins of value, and perhaps this was one of the reasons why the birds of that district liked him. They never resented it when he tramped through the sedgy wilderness and inspected their nests.

Tripina had five in family, all promising youngsters who took to the water in proper style.

One day when Tripina was out food-finding Jake came on the little brood in their rough nest and helped them through with their morning swim.

Timothy made the plunge first, squealing like mad; after him splashed Greywing and the others, deeming this to be the adventure of their lives.

But Splayfoot, Tripina's mate, who had to be absent most of the day, did not conceal his anxiety about the matter. Tripina told him not to be so silly. Jake was their friend, and could be trusted. Splayfoot was not half convinced. He pointed out that it would have been far wiser had they made their home farther away in the lonely marsh where even Jake did not go. Tripina told him sharply to mind his own business and keep his fears to himself. She said he would only frighten the youngsters without cause, and also that it was not Jake of whom they need be afraid, but the rats.

"Oh, as to rats, I don't mind them," said Splayfoot confidently. "Just let one dare come this way and I will soon settle his account!"

Tripina merely rustled her feathers, but there was something of scorn in her eye, though she had a certain secret appreciation of her partner's brave words. As to rats, however, she knew the peril, and she looked gratefully at Jake when he passed the little retreat where the moorhen family lived and had its bathing lessons every day.

Then one day the dread thing happened—just what mother moorhen had seen in her dreams as she sat on guard over her little ones.

It was in some respects the fault of Timothy, the over-bold, for he had left the nest early, just out of independence and to show how he was getting on, his intention being to have a

swim before the others so as to brag about his pluck at breakfast.

Now Timothy, like his brothers and sisters, had lived a screened life; he had never heard of rats, and at first he was not a bit frightened when he saw a curious-looking animal streak out from amidst the reeds. He was about to say "Good-morning" quite politely, but there was no time. Romus, the rat, had an edge to his appetite and the little bird was fat.

There was a flash of fur, and then it was over. Timothy did not fly—not much! He gave one shriek, and then the rat, its teeth bared, was upon him, and poor little Timothy lay dead amidst the water plants, while his mother crouched quaking on the nest, feeling almost dead herself at what she saw, but rallying enough to urge the other little ones to keep close to her.

At that frightful moment of agony, thinking of proud and wayward Timothy, who made a point of never doing what he was told, she had completely forgotten her mate. As a matter of fact, he had of late caused her a lot of uneasiness. He had been too long absent on so-called food quests, far longer than business demanded. In her imagination she often pictured him at the Moorhen Club, wasting his time talking over his exploits and so on. She had to run the home and keep things going.

But a moment later she knew her mistake—knew she had been over-harsh on Splayfoot, even if he did like travelling up and down the marshes. That was natural.

Of a sudden there was a whirr of wings, and Splayfoot, flying erect, his legs hanging straight down, came from nowhere as it seemed, dropping right in front of the nest it was his duty to guard.

Tripina gazed fascinated at the sight and felt proud of Splayfoot—proud of the way in which he seized the whole situation, and of the manner in which he faced the old enemy, the rat.

Romus felt he was going to be cheated of his much-needed early breakfast, and he foamed with rage; but before he could snatch up his prey and scamper for safety, Splayfoot was upon him. The rat snapped and bit, then



There was a whirl of wings, and Splayfoot, coming as if from nowhere, dropped down and attacked Romus with a ferocity that the rat found it hard to combat.

screamed with pain as the sharp bill of his antagonist drew blood. Splayfoot was unerring in his dart, and in the moments that ensued Romus had the worst time of his life. He rolled over snarling, fighting to find a way behind the attack. Then knowing that he had lost his prize, he made a bolt to escape.

Splayfoot afterwards said it was nothing, and that as a hunter he would be to blame if he did not know how to deal with a rat; but

Tripina made no reply to these remarks. She felt too sad at the loss of little Timothy and her thoughts went out to him.

When the opportunity came along she told Jake all about what had happened, for he knew moorhen talk, the same as he understood all the life of the marsh. Jake stroked her and assured her that she need not tremble for the fate of the rest of the brood, since the next day he was having a grand hunt right

the whole length of the dike, and he did not intend to miss a single rat. He meant to make short work of the egg stealers and slayers of small birds.

He asked Tripina to keep a still tongue about what was afoot, not even mentioning the matter to Splayfoot, since he might inadvertently reveal what he knew. Tripina promised faithfully and was as good as her word. Besides, with all her cares she was not one to gossip.

So that the rats, Romus included, were taken unawares when Jake descended on them with his terrier and a company of beady-eyed ferrets.

For far too long the rats had kinged it in that part. They had been reinforced by parties from the distant town who had come in after hearing of the fat life revelled in by the marsh rats. Now they wished they had stayed away, for Jake's methods were very sure, extremely thorough, and he was made more eager by a fresh big order for skins.

But his motive in exterminating the rats was not wholly a sordid one, for he loved the birds, and the rats had been tyrants for years, lording it over the rest of the population of the marsh, especially the feathered inhabitants, as if the whole vast area belonged to them alone.

Jake was satisfied with his rat round-up. The whole creek, where the ship had come to ground years ago, was fairly alive with rats who had made themselves snug in the timbers of the hulk. But they had never dreamed of a day of reckoning, and they were badly rattled. Of course, Jake did not rake them all in. Some of the big fellows escaped the ferrets and made a break for the open.

And Tripina was able to bring up her family in peace and comfort and to see them all comfortably settled in the world; so that now, being more at liberty, she can at times accompany Splayfoot on those cheery jaunts through the salt-laden air, above the old spreading marsh where the blue and yellow flowers lend colour to the scene.

THE END

CLASSICS & MODERNS RIVAL EIGHTS



By the Rookwood Rhymester

NOT only do these lads confine
Their various endeavours
To terra firma; but they shine
In races on the rivers.
In springtime how the Classic eight
Delights each young supporter
As oars together penetrate
The green and gentle water

But just as keen, the Moderns, too,
Are eagerly at practice;
They are a nicely-balanced crew
And speedy. But the fact is
The Classics are above their weight
At oarsmanship and rowing,
And always beat the Modern eight
In any kind of showing.

Perhaps through lack of skill and pace,
Or other sundry reasons,
The Moderns haven't won a race
For six or seven seasons.
But this year Tommy Dodd will try
The knock-out to deliver,
And make his House, by victory,
The Cock House of the River.

"They're off!" The Modern juniors yell,
And urge their crew to action.
The Modern boat is moving well,
And proves a great attraction.
They take the lead by half-a-length;
The Classics calmly going
On their way, reserve their strength
For later strenuous rowing.

Two lengths ahead! The Moderns win!
The Classics take their leisure,
Till Jimmy Silver, with a grin,
Begins to put on pressure.
The Classics spurt! Gee, what a pace!
Up, Moderns! No, they've done it!
The Classic boat controlled the race,
And once again they've won it.