

The Ballad of the
LIMEHOUSE RAT

A play by Tim Newton



AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE BALLAD OF THE LIMEHOUSE RAT was written as a solo performance piece, inspired by Henry Mayhew's "The London Poor" and styled on the supernatural lyrical ballads and musical hall monologues of the Victorian era.

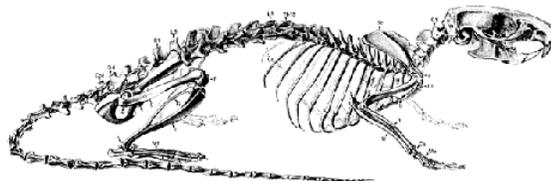
The play was first performed by the author at the 1991 London New Play Festival at the Old Red Lion in Islington, London; scooping awards for Best New Play and Best Production. It went on to win Best One-Person Show at the 1992 Carling Fringe Awards along with Best Soundtrack, commissioned for the piece and written by Joe Young.

Designed by Alice Purcell and directed by Ruth Ben-Tovim, the play toured the UK in 1992-93 and was performed at the Edinburgh and Dublin Theatre Festivals to critical acclaim.

With a running time of just under 1 hour - this accessible drama is well suited to a physical performance and plays well in intimate and mid-size venues.

Tim Newton. March 2008

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A SINGLE SPOTLIGHT.

THE STORYTELLER SWEEPS FORWARD INTO VIEW.

Here's a little ditty for ya!

[SINGS]

Many a time I've seen a rat be poisoned,
And many a time I've seen a rat be dead.
But never have I seen a rat be somewhere in-between;
That's the finest time to see a rat it's said.

When the strychnine and the arsenic convulse it,
And it's thrown into a crazed and twitchin' state,
It tries to find its way back to its nest, or underground,
But the vermin somehow senses it's too late.

(Oh it's too late)

So it drags its swollen body into daylight,
In the 'ope that it can clear its fizzin' brain.
Limp of tail and slow of foot it shuffles into day,
Through a blindin' and confusin' sheet of pain.
So, if you see a rat in this condition, and 'appen to be
carryin' a stick,

Then afford the opportunity to crack its little skull,
It's a winner with the nippers as a trick!

(I'm tellin' you, missus)

Crack it on the noggin with a brick!

(There's nuffin' like it)

Pick it up and stick it on yer dick!

BLACKOUT

STORYTELLER

Welcome, gentle listeners, pray draw close as I impart
The Ballad of the Limehouse Rat and its dark and wicked heart.
Every rat must have a tail, and this Rat's tale is long.
So are its whiskers, teeth, and snout. Its jaw and limbs are strong.
But I will not yet describe the Rat, or allude to its dimensions,
For to do so would be ruinous to the narrative's intentions.

A king is not a king, they say, without a crown or court;
And so without a Where or When, my story stands for nought.
So, subtract from now a century, and you will find a When.
And having gone back thus far, yes? Go back half as far again.
Cast off the trappings of today. Step back with me in time
To the glowing, crowing era of England in her prime!

John Bull danced the horn pipe, Britannia tapped her toes
And shook her bloody trident at the Lion's cowering foes.
Battles won on land and sea, treaties signed for trade,
Patents were applied for, discoveries were made.

Pioneers of industry had not long achieved their dream
To fill this nation's barren womb with a hissing squirt of steam.
And as the puffing prodigy shunted slowly up the track,
It dragged its shouting mother on its heavy, cast-iron back.

Victory and confusion, then, at a time that's widely known;
When Victoria's tender buttocks had first warmed the royal throne.
The When.

The Where? Why man, it's London Town! This famous port of old,
Where ships sail down the shining Thames and the streets are paved with
gold!

For a small fee, you can ride this town, and as you grip the reins,
Feel the beating heart of Empire pump its life-blood through your veins.
Immerse yourself in culture, forget your woes and strife -
When a man is tired of London, then a man is tired of life!

But alas! The life-style of the privileged is not for us to savour.
The educated, well-to-do are an incidental flavour
In the dish I set before you, which I pray you will not waste,
The real source of our nourishment has a far more bitter taste.

'Tis a foul, unsightly creature I intend to now dissect;
So pray, protect your nostrils from the odour of neglect.

Barges, boats and sailing ships of inestimable worth
Frequent the port of London from the corners of the earth.
Boosting trade and industry as up and down they flit,
Sailing for the Empire, on a river full of shit.

But it's an ill wind, as the sailors say, blows no-one any good.
There's quite some treasure to be found if the tides are understood.
Early in the morning, when the water level falls,
Packs of wretched creatures descend the river's walls.

Squelching through the blackened mire the tide has left behind
In the hope that they will come across a valuable find.
Old iron, coal, bones, lengths of rope are carefully collected,
All these items have a worth, and nothing is rejected.

From Woolwich up to Vauxhall, and on both sides of the river,
Expressionless, they search for what its foul banks can deliver.
The old, the crippled, desperate youth, squeeze the river for a living,
Forced up to their waists in shit by a town that's unforgiving.

But paltry little treasures are not all there is in store
When the slopping curtain of the Thames is drawn back from the shore.
Exits from the city drains edge, shyly, into view.
Entrances to gold mines for a brave, resourceful few.

To a special breed of scavenger with wit and dedication,
A sewer's gaping mouth extends an open invitation
To exclusive black-tie soirees, for the people in the know.
Hi-ho hi-ho, with bag and lamp, it's off to work we go.

Here, in the gurgling intestines of the town,
There's a veritable stinking mint of lost coins to be found.
In fetid fluids, crusty waste, the sewer-searchers caper,
Probing in the liquids and the acrid, steaming vapour.

THE STORYTELLER INHALES DEEPLY

There's something in the air down here that gives a body strength.
A life-enhancing property that's hidden in the stench.
No pallid, drab complexions here to fill our souls with pity.
These are strapping, hearty folk that search beneath the city.

But the virtues of the gasses in this pungent atmosphere
Seem also to affect the other animals down here.
The creatures who have made these drains their natural habitat.
In particular, so it's rumoured, one especially vicious Rat.

Even our audacious friends will never work alone,
For drifting in the cesspools they find many a human bone.
Cause of death - uncertain, though there's quite some speculation
That the blame rests with a member of the rodent population.

"The Limehouse Rat", is whispered in hushed, reverential tones
By those who would prefer to keep their flesh upon their bones.

THE STORYTELLER EXITS NERVOUSLY. THE SCENE CHANGES TO
REVEAL THE LAIR OF THE LIMEHOUSE RAT.

THE LIMEHOUSE RAT

I'm a forgiving animal. I am. I really am. If someone bumped into me down here and begged for mercy, then I'd show it to them. I would. I really would. It's just that they're always so busy screaming. Or running away. Or both. Usually both.

HE LAUGHS

Aargh! Whoosh! Back down the tunnel like a rabbit on a track. I love a moving target. It palls me, all this unnecessary violence, but I can't have people finding out where I live now, can I? It'd mean another move, and I like it here, I feel settled, at home; living beneath a slaughterhouse. It has a poignancy, a certain *je ne sais quoi*. No, I don't fancy another move, not at my age. My age. Yes. The rat the people truly fear, the rat that keeps lamps burning through the night and causes anxious glances to the shadows, is getting on a bit.

My body aches the ache of time, my tail weighs heavy on my back and my jaws are stiff in this cold weather. It's hard to gnaw and keep my teeth in trim. Mmmm. Still, they're sharp enough to rip a child's head from its shoulders - and I've still the strength to disembowel a man - that's all you need to keep body and soul together, isn't it?

THE RAT LAUGHS AGAIN.

Two men long - from nose, to tail. A freak, you might say. But I'm sure it's

quite a relief to know that we're not all twelve feet long. That'd be a turn up for the books. We might get a little more respect out of you then. Well, we're vermin, aren't we? So low down in the order of things.

Bollocks! Whenever it was that the creator made you, you can be sure that the very next thing he turned his hand to was the rat. Oh yes, beyond a shadow of a doubt. When you first pulled yourself out of the sweltering sea, we crawled out right behind, still dripping with the sticky liquid of creation. And then of course, the flea, hopping out straight after us, the little twat! Oh come on, the plague wasn't our fault! Well, we all have our crosses to bear.

And in all this time we've lived together, you still haven't grown to like us. Hate the very sight of us. Balk at our very presence in the same room. Still repulsed by a sleek, black rat after all these years. But don't concern yourselves. The feeling's mutual.

HE LAUGHS.

But then I can hardly be regarded as a spokesman for the whole rat race. I am, after all, an exception. A singular exception. But most people come round to my way of thinking eventually. Who's going to argue with a twelve-foot rat?

HE EXAMINES HIMSELF.

Hmmm. A rather fat twelve-foot rat. It makes me idle, living down here. Too many tasty morsels carried down in little waterfalls of emulsifying blood.

HE LEANS BACK AND GULPS SOME FOOD. HE LEANS FORWARD AGAIN, DISSATISFIED.

Though the menu's somewhat limited. I heard the distant squeal of pigs

this morning. Pork again for supper. Ohh, how I yearn for something different. A mushroom, perhaps, or a potato. Or a horse. Oh I must go up. It's been too long.

LIGHTS FADE. THEN UP ON THE STORYTELLER IN THE POSITION HE WAS LAST SEEN.

Let's not then tarry in these depths, as the impatient, rising tide
Is cutting off our exits and trapping us inside.
We'll find ourselves another route that leads up to the street,
Where the ground is somewhat firmer and the air a tad more sweet.

Though to squeeze through this escape route in our present form's unwise.
Our passage will be easier if we reduce in size.
If all four limbs are on the floor, you'll get a better grip.
Sprout a tail for balance and it's difficult to slip.

Hastily evolve more hair for protection from the slime.
Enlarge your ears, bead your eyes. We'll make far better time.
Scuttle through this grating to the safety of the cobbles
For a rats-eye view of London's dock land dung-heaps, and its hovels.

A solitary lantern illuminates the night.
A cheery gas-lit beacon that draws us to its light.
A snatch of song, a snip of mirth escapes beneath a door.
Let's reassume our fleshy shapes and find out what's in store.

A public house! A tavern. A cradle in the dark
To rock away your miseries in a paralytic arc.
The gleeless and the put-upon; the wretched and the grey
Flock in to toast the glories of the terminating day.
There's George, the florid publican, quite happy with his fate,
Selling cups of gin and beer at an unalarming rate.

With us in this corner is Dick, and his mate Jem.
Two impoverished dockers - we 'll be hearing more of them.
And here's Old Mother Trotter, with her basket on her back.
She'll sell you boiled pigs feet as a tasty tea-time snack.

DICK

Where are all your trotters, mother? Did they run away?

MOTHER TROTTER

I hate to let you down, Dick, but I've sold the lot today.

DICK

What? No trotters for me dinner, mother? No pigs foot on my plate?
Oh, what a disappointment, it appears that I'm too late.

MOTHER TROTTER

I've got one in me pocket I was saving to eat later.
Ye can have that trotter if ye like - I'll have a baked potater.

JEM

We wouldn' t take your dinner, ma. Besides, I wanted two.

DICK

Yeah, you sure you haven't got one more? What's that inside your shoe?

GEORGE

Leave the girl alone boys, she doesn' t find it funny.
Let her reach the bar so's I can part her wiv her money.

JEM

No, George, I really want one. I was serious on that score.

DICK

Yeah, I'm real upset that she's sold out. Trot off and get some more.

MOTHER TROTTER

I'm not going back outside, boys. It's not a good idea.

I heard tell that The Limehouse Rat is on the prowl round here.

GEORGE

And what's the Rat done this time, mother? Carried off a dog?

Or did you see its shadow flitting by you in the fog?

MOTHER TROTTER

I heard tell that a baby has gone missing from its cot,

And nothin' but a pool o' blood is left to mark the spot.

JEM

It's started snatchin' babies, has it? Eatin' 'umans, fancy that.

DICK

Yeah. I think I'll do me missus in and blame it on the Rat.

JEM

Tell us how big it is, mother; has it grown at all, at all?

Is its tail still thick as a tree-trunk? Can it leap a ten-foot wall?

DICK

Are its teeth the size o' carving knives? Can you ride it like an 'orse?

MOTHER TROTTER

I've told ye all these things before. You're makin' fun o' course.

But ye won't laugh if ye meet him - then there 'll be hell to pay.

You won't be laughin' when the Rat is cartin' you away.

GEORGE

She's right boys - it's not funny. Lord, it sounds a fearsome beast.
Though I dare say that rat's trotters will provide you with a feast.
You'd make a pretty penny mother, sellin' claws as big as that!
'Ere, come and 'ave another drink. Forget about your rat.

JEM

I'm reminded in my memory, Dick, of a story way back when
You told us - bout some rats and stuff... Oh no, it's gone again...

DICK

You mean the time I had that bet wiv that sportin' type o' toff.

JEM

Yeah! What a bona story! Will you tell it us?

DICK

Piss off.

I ain't told no-one that for years. Besides - it's too upsettin'
You tell it.

JEM

Nah, not me, Dick. I'll just keep forgettin'.
It's not a pretty story, but I'll stand a pot o' beer
If you'll tell it to the ladies and the gentlemen what's 'ere.

DICK (*Considering*)

Nah. Sorry. Since that 'appened I've turned over a new leaf.

JEM

You'll turn it bleedin' back again if you wanna keep your teef.

DICK AND JEM EXCHANGE LOOKS. PAUSE.

DICK

I was in this public house one night, drinkin' ale wiv my last penny.
I'd been cursed wiv ill-luck all the week and work I hadn't any;
When I sees this fella that I knows what catches rats for killin'
So I tips my hat and asks him if he'll borrow us a penny.

Now this 'ere bloke was fond o' sport - a bettin' man was he,
He stood me ale and porter and was friendly as can be.
He looks me up and down and says "Dick - you're a solid sort,
I'll wager that you're not afeared to have a bit of sport."

I thought he meant to have some fun by killin' rats in pits;
You drops a dog in wiv 'em and it bites the rats to bits.
One dog is timed at killin' maybe forty rats or more,
Then a different dog is lowered in to try and beat the score.

"I'm going to hold a match," says he, "there's five shillings to be had
For killing thirty sewer rats." Says I, "That don't sound bad."
When this gent holds a killing, folks come from miles around.
"I'd get involved in that," says I, "but I don't have no hound."

"It's not a dog I want," says he, "it's a man I'm looking for.
To try a dog against a dog? That's no fun anymore.
Now to try a dog against a man at killing rats - that's sport!
Here - have a drink and think on it." So I 'as a drink and thought.

Says I, "Let's see your dog before I say." and checks it's jaws.
It 'ad a fair old set o' teef, and a fair old set o' claws.
Now killin' rats ain't easy work, and thirty rats is plenty.
"Nah, I couldn't kill all them." says I, "But I'll 'ave a go at - twenty."

"Make it twenty-four," says he, "Don't forget there's five bob in it."
But I wouldn't budge from twenty, no. A man has to set a limit.
So we strikes a deal, an' off he goes, to fetch rats an' drum up trade,
While I stayed in the tavern and helped get the rat pit made.

Apple crates was pushed together, barrels, planks o' wood,
It measured about twelve foot across, an' eight foot high it stood.
When he returned at midnight, we'd pulled in quite a crowd.
'E had two sacks o' twenty rats, and their squealin' was dead loud.

Folks stood on chairs and tables so's to see into the pit,
He empties the first sackful in and checks 'is dog is fit,
By smackin' it about the 'ead, til it's eyes is set with rage;
Then he taunts it wiv a rat he 'as in a little iron cage.

He shouts "The betting's on, my coves! The dog is sure to win!"
And while the money's changin' hands, the dog is lowered in.

As the clock struck half-past midnight, the dog got started killin';
Egged on by his master's voice, the hound was very willin'.
It bit the vermin, snapped their necks, its coat was splashed wiv blood,
It ran round like a beast possessed, 'til not one live rat stood.

All the crowd looked at the clock. Fifteen minutes it had took.
Then all eyes turned to stare at me wiv an 'opeful, leerin' look.
"Your turn now, my pippin!" said the rat man wiv a grin,
"Bind his hands behind his back, and we'll put the blighter in!"

The tremblin' dog was taken out, and the pit was made half-size -
See, a man can't turn round like a dog, so you has to compromise.
A fresh lot o' rats was put inside, and bets were laid once more.
I was hoisted up above the pit - and dropped onto the floor.

The clock struck one as I came down, the rats were all a cluster,
I leapt into the squirmin' mass wiv all that I could muster.
I couldn't use my hands, 'cos they were trussed up very tight,
So I grabs a rat's neck in my mouth and chomps wiv all my might.

The first ten or twelve were easy and didn't stand a chance,
But as their numbers lessened, they led me quite a dance.
As one by one I picked 'em off, they started turnin' vicious,
And someone shouted from the top, "Aren't them there rats delicious!"
Bastard!

I wasn't sure the time I took, though close, without a doubt;
I got down to the last one, and 'e really cut about.
This one made me remember him, for he leapt up at my face.
I tried to shake him off me, but was weakened from the chase,
Then someone shouted "Fourteen minutes!", and I flung him to the floor.
I got his head inside my mouth, and the last rat was no more.

DICK SPITS OUT THE HEAD, RELIVING THE MEMORY. PAUSE.

Yeah, well... that's how I came by this 'ere scar what hollows out me cheek.
I was obliged to 'ave the bite cut out, as it festered for a week.
But I won't go in a pit again, not for all them smilin' faces.
It's not the rats what bothers me; I can't stand closed in spaces.

STORYTELLER

The adventure Dick related caused great interest in the beer-shop.
Customers had gathered round and strained to get in ear-shot.
An enthusiastic call came from a number of the men
To make a pit and fetch some rats and put Dick in again.

But Dick would not appease them, no, not even for a bet.
The thought of being shuttered in made him break out in a sweat.
The crowd were disappointed by his apparent lack of willing,
Their lust for blood had been aroused, they were eager for a killing.

A woman's voice upped from the mob, "My bulldog likes the pit -
Let us 'old a dog-fight and 'ave a bet on it."
But few ears in that public house paid heed to what she said.
Each customer was busy killing rats inside his head.

It's not easy to be fond of rats when your house and home's infested.
The black-haired rodents filled the town. The vermin were detested.
Scurrying through the dockside in the early evening gloom,
In warehouses, on stairs, in lofts, in the corner of the room.

Running along rafters where it's hard for man to tread,
Making nests in grain-yards, and underneath the bed.
Gnawing, nibbling, scavenging, slipping underground;
There's scarce a place in London where a rat cannot be found.

Small wonder then the customers were roused to such a pitch,
They hated every flick of tail, and every whisker twitch.
A fever spread among them as they gabbled on the matter,
When an unfamiliar voice cut through the crowds excited chatter.

"If it's a game with rats you want, I'd like to volunteer.
I promise you a slaughter like you've never seed round 'ere."

In the doorway of the ale-house leant a grim foreboding figure,
Shrouded in a yellow fog that had crept in from the river.
The garb he wore proclaimed the man a ratcatcher by trade -
His tunic, black and shabby, his long coat stained and frayed.

Across his chest, a broad hide belt, painted bright and crude
To depict a dozen fearsome rats in venomous attitude.
His wide-brimmed hat was painted too, in a similar rude fashion,
But what he wore around his neck aroused the greatest passion;

'Twas a string of broken rat skulls, some larger than a fist,
So that those who had not seen his work could know what they had missed.
Behind him stood a prentice boy just half his master's size
Who gazed up at the ratcatcher with loyal, adoring eyes.

"Nine and ninety rats I'll kill, if such a number's meet.
Nine and ninety rats I'll slay, and lay them at your feet."

"What a show you promise us." Said the landlord, slowly sneering.
"We can poison all the rats we want without you interfering."

"Poison!" said the ratcatcher. "You lack imagination.
The method that I have in mind requires more dedication
Than simply using poison." His face took on a vicious look
And above his grinning head he swung a sharpened docker's hook.

"Oooh." Appreciative noises were uttered here and there
As the gleaming metal of his hook drew patterns in the air.
"Well then, will you see some sport? Will you see this hook turn red?
Or will you stop you eager cries and turn your backs instead?"

"We'll see the sport! We'll see the sport!" They chanted as though
mesmerised.
And something wicked glinted in the ratcatcher's wild eyes.
"My boy will fetch the rats, " he cried, "if you will make the ring -
For a sovereign I will swing my hook and make it's sharp point sing!
Nine and ninety rats I'll kill, if such a numbers meet!
Nine and ninety rats I'll slay, and lay them at your feet!"

LIGHTING CHANGE. THE PERFORMER ONCE MORE ASSUMES THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RAT.

LIMEHOUSE RAT

Sweet night air. Breathe it in. Taste it. Suck it over your fat tongues and relish the flavour. Dung heaps, chimney smoke, rotten fruit. Harsh voices far below you in the street. A good moon too, a crescent moon, a moon that all rats love. And a full stomach. What more could you want? Scared the shit out of a couple of tarts earlier on. "How much for a fuck, girls?"

HE LAUGHS

Left them crumpled in a pissing heap with one of them screaming so loud I thought her mouth'd rip. They won't be getting mounted for a day or two, I can tell you. A nice moment, but this is no time to relax. There's plenty more to do before I go back down. Every time I come up to the streets I have to work that little bit harder to keep the fear alive. Well, what's it to be..?

HE SURVEYS THE AUDIENCE.

Him..? No. Her..? Y - no. Oh, I hate shopping when I'm not hungry. There must be an old bed-ridden fart somewhere round here, there always is. Must make sure he's married, though, or he might not get found for days. 'Till the neighbours break the door down to find out what the smell is. Plenty of evidence too. A few droppings here and there should do the trick.

HE GROANS IN FRUSTRATION.

If only old flesh didn't taste so foul! I much prefer filling a young, tender body with terror to consuming an old one. The fun I have. Pouncing out of dark corners, seeing their little face shrivel in horror and disbelief. Disbelief! Oh! If only it weren't true! If only I was a dream, a figment of their imagination, a

trick of the light! Reared up above them, leering, hissing, drooling on their heads; I can stretch their artless little minds to breaking point! Such easy prey. And the stories that can follow! They'll carry me around with them for the rest of their shabby lives.

PAUSE

Once, on a night like this, I remember a particularly rewarding encounter. Crouched above a skylight I spied a young boy, at prayer, beside his ragged bed. The old roof creaked under my weight and he drew toward the window with a wondering look. "Angel!" he murmured.

HE CHUCKLES

The irony. I pushed my head clean through the skylight window.

*"ANGEL? ANGEL! THERE ARE NO FUCKING ANGELS, BOY!
I'm the nearest to an angel that you will ever see. Look up, boy!
Look me in my honest eyes, and say your prayers to ME!"*

I felt his fear surge through my bones. Black terror in his pale face. He dropped to his knees in the broken glass, wet with fear, and mumbled through his tiny fingers. I could smell his panic. I listened for a while, his innocence melting away in front of my eyes, then - slipped back into the night. Now there's someone who won't forget me in a hurry. For all I know, he's still there! Hands together, head bowed, too afraid to raise his eyes to heaven.

AGITATED, HE SNIFFS THE AIR.

Fresh blood. Rat blood! And sounds of cheering coming from below. Another rat killing contest, no doubt. Poor, stupid little cousins! It's the price you pay for an easy life. How many will it be tonight? Fifty? A hundred, two

hundred?

I shouldn't let it worry me, I know, but I feel a certain duty to look in. I may know some of their relatives and they'll need to be informed. Though I doubt they'll give a toss. When you've had three hundred offspring, losing a couple of dozen's hardly going to keep you awake at night, now is it?

There's quite a commotion going on. Sounds very exciting! I must have a look at this!

HE LEAPS DOWN INTO THE DARKNESS. LIGHTS UP ON THE RATCATCHER AS HE PREPARES TO ENTER THE PIT.

STORYTELLER/RATCATCHER

'Twas midnight, and the rats did throng, and squeak and scurry in their hole.
All noisome was their rodent song, their eyes burned red in coats of coal.
Beware the ratcatcher, my dears, his hook is sharp, his fury grows.
Beware his vengeance, boys and fear the frenzy in his blows.

Atop the pit the catcher crouched, and gazed down at the rats beneath.
He smiled a little eager smile and hissed between his gritted teeth.
He called his prentice to his side and bid him bind his eyes up tight;
And round his head the young boy tied a black silk scarf to stop his sight.

All the crowd grew deathly silent. Not a sound from any there.
And the squealing of the rats subsided to the hiss of gas lamp, creak of chair.

"How loud a ticking clock can be, when there's silence in the house."
The inn was quiet as the grave. As quiet - as a mouse.

"I can hear them, I can smell them, I can feel their drumming hearts.
You want them dead? I'll kill them for you. I'll rip their frightened souls apart."

He traced the curving of his hook and pricked his finger on the point.
With a mix of blood and spittle then their heads did he anoint.

THE RATCATCHER SPITS INTO THE PIT

"Time to die, my little fellas, time to make your nest upstairs.
Time to bid your friends farewell, and say your little rodent prayers."

He leapt into the thronging pit, his hook held high above his head.
The gleeful people gathered round to see him strike the vermin dead.

THE RATCATCHER LEAPS INTO THE PIT. SLASHING AT THE RATS WITH HIS HOOK - GROWING MORE FRENZIED.

"Hold your breath and count to ten.
Swing your hook, man, swing your hook.
Now slash and spin and slash again.
Swing your hook, man, swing your hook.
He can't see nothin' but he knows they're there.
Swing your hook, man, swing your hook.
Scatterin' dead rats everywhere.
Swing your hook man, swing your hook.
Like scythin' through a field o' corn.
Swing your hook, man, swing your hook.
There's ninety-nine rats wish they'd never been born.
Slice 'em up, man, slice 'em up,
Slice 'em up man, SLICE 'EM UP!"

VICTORIOUS, THE RATCATCHER RIPS OFF HIS BLINDFOLD.

"Oh what joy in the congregation! Merry mood and jubilation!
Pop the cork, break the bread, and pour some beer on the fat man's head!"

And when they've staggered homeward in the early morning light
A hundred beds will creak in brutal memory of tonight!"
The ratcatcher was born aloft on shoulders, plied with beer,
While his prentice sang his praises in old Mother Trotter's ear.

THE BOY

"He's the best ratcatcher ever born! In the country, in the world!
He can track down nests - he'll sniff 'em out, no matter where they're curled.
He can trap rats in a paper bag, and catch 'em by the tail.
(Giz a drink o' beer)
Yeah, he's the best ratcatcher ever born - I never seed him fail.

You see that big skull that he wears? The biggest, round his neck?
That's the famous Clifton Rat, by bloody chuffin' heck.
Clifton Rat, from Bristol, a great big whackin' rat!
Big as a bull-terrier; I seed it kill a cat!

We tried to poison it at first. We laced this piece o' cake
Wi' arsenic and strychnine, but that were a mistake.
It eat it up and walked away like it were nowt at all.
So Jack went up and cornered it and pinned it to the wall!
In't that right, Jack, Clifton Rat? That famous rat from Bristol.
He stuck it one with his docker's hook. Owd Jack don't need no pistol.

MOTHER TROTTER

What would he use though, boy, to catch, let's just suppose,
A rat that measures twelve foot long, from tip o' tail to nose?

THE BOY

Why, that's why we've come back this way! Jack's heard o' such a beast!
'Eard tell o' this 'ere Limehouse Rat what terrorised the East.
But mark my words, old woman, it's all out o' proportion.
You're talkin' - three foot - at most. But it still deserves some caution.

MOTHER TROTTER

Oh, I'm cautious, boy, believe you me. I've seen, wi' these own eyes,
Every inch of four yards long, and four or five foot high.
And I heard he was abroad tonight - snatched a young boy from his bed.
He was seen up on the roof tops. Sucked the brains out of his head.

THE BOY

'Ere! Jack, Jack! She's seen this rat. Tell him what you told me.
Just as big as what they say. As real as it can be.

THE RATCATCHER APPROACHES MOTHER TROTTER.

THE RATCATCHER

What's this you're saying, mother? When did you see this sight?
See this giant, freakish beast that shatters windows in the night?

MOTHER TROTTER

He does more than shatter windows, boy. Shatters heads, more like.
If it's him you're goin' after ye'll need more than that there spike.
Ye'll need a trap the size of Saint Paul's dome. Poison for an army.
Try an' kill the Limehouse Rat? Why, even you'd be barmy.

THE RATCATCHER

When did you see him, mother? Did he speak? What did he say?
Did he make you kneel in broken glass and order you to pray?

MOTHER TROTTER

Well, I only seen him fleetin' like. I don't think he saw me.
He never spoke. Why, rats don't speak. Right eerie that'd be.
But I'll talk no more about it. Lor, it fills my soul with fright.
There'll be no-one in this hostel leavin' here before it's light!

THE RATCATCHER AND STORYTELLER BECOME ONE AS THE
PERFORMER BEGINS THE FINAL CONFRONTATION.

He raced along the quiet street
That echoed to his pounding feet.
Then promise of revenge was sweet.
He filled his heart with that.

"Thirty long and bitter years,
And a thousand stinging tears
Are rooted in my childhood fears,
Where are you, Limehouse Rat!"

"I should have faced you long ago,
Before your twisted curse could grow,
I've come to love this hate I show.
The reckoning is due!"

"These bloodied hands make me unfit
No angel now would question it.
I've lived my life inside a pit.
And all because of you!"

And high above him, something stirred.
The sound of cracking slates was heard.
*"Well, well, well, upon my word,
What is it we have here?"*

And bounding from the rooftop height,
The Limehouse Rat arc'd into sight.
A black-haired angel of the night
That filled his heart with fear.

*"Old friend, what do you have to say,
I stole your innocence away?
Have you come back to make me pay?
Your turn to make me beg?"*

*I may be old, much time has passed
Since we faced each other last,
But my strength is unsurpassed.
I'll suck you like an egg!"*

It seemed the beast grew larger still,
Its eyes burned into his until
He felt that he was drained of will
To raise his arms to fight.

And as the foul creature smiled,
The man once more became a child.
Felt his boyhood dreams defiled
And scattered to the night.

As though he'd stepped into his dreams
That tore his childhood at the seams,
When praying under oaken beams,
He'd heard an angel's song

Transformed into a demon's roar
That shattered glass upon the floor
And filled him with the pain he'd bore
For thirty years too long.

*"If I am killed, what will you gain?
Will my death free you from your pain?
And leave your soul without a stain?
I think not, little one.*

*Your hatred flatters me indeed.
Such loathing from so small a seed.
Black and bitter blood you'll bleed,
You are my finest son."*

He heard the voices of the dead
Ringing in his spinning head,
The boy within him cowered in dread
As the Rat leapt in the air.

And swinging blindly left and right
He swung his hook with all his might.
He felt its sharpened metal bite,
But cried out in despair.

THE PERFORMER FALLS TO THE FLOOR AS THE SEQUENCE
REACHES A CLIMAX.

SILENCE.

Nothing came and nothing went.
He could not gauge the time he spent,
'Til, wakened by the sickly scent
Of death, he raised his head.

No monstrous carcass on the stone,
No prize or trophy to be shown.
The ratcatcher lay all alone.
The Limehouse Rat was dead.

SLOWLY THE STORYTELLER GETS TO HIS FEET AND SURVEYS
THE DAWN.

The dawn crawls home.
Smothering the breathing night for one more day.
And the thick river shrinks.
Treacles back from its stinking banks, slack and grey.

A solitary figure stands on the smooth stone of the quayside,
Watching the mudlarks sift the banks in measured steps against the
tide.

And jutting from the river's bank,
For those who care to look;

Is a string of broken ratskulls,
And a sharpened docker's hook.

LIGHTS FADE

