

from PRINCE ELMO'S FIRE

Ernest Lockridge

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•2•

I want to catch up with the animals that filled the Pickwick basement. Their coats were light gray and softer than goosedown; a darker stripe covered their spine to the tail's tip. Our slightest breath could part the fur, baring the gray hide. Adult chinchillas grew to the size of squirrels or medium-large rats.

They remained wild in their cages, and hostile. When one of us filled their feedbox with pellets—processed from fruits, seeds, herbs, and moss—they scurried with amazing rapidity around the wire. Agile as giant spiders, they whirled three hundred sixty degrees up the side, across the top, until we finally slammed the gate shut. These rodents, royal chinchillas, were native to the foothills of Chile and Peru. Inca gourmets once prized their meat.

Each pair occupied a separate cage as more or less permanent mates. Interbreeding damaged the stock, and the Breeders' Association required that careful pedigrees be kept. But occasionally things went haywire. Three afternoons a week, Mr. Pickwick, Billy and I descended together into the basement to clean cages. "Valedictorian of my college class!" Mr. Pickwick chortled. "Now look at me!" Cages would stand open while we scooped out soggy, reeking newspaper and straw and stuffed it into cardboard banana boxes to haul outside and burn in the backyard incinerator. We thrust arms amidst the whirling

chaos of small animals, and over the months received painful bites from incisors like those of a small beaver.

Once, as if by diabolic plan, six animals suddenly whirred through the door, then rebounding off our bodies scurried lightly into the basement. They whizzed over the ceiling as if it were floor, snicked our fingers when we lunged and jumped. After a couple of hours, we finally captured them in nervous, bleeding hands. And hastily caged together two males, two females, and a female with a male not her former mate. The paired males became lovers—though at first we thought they were male and female breeding. The paired females squeaked and spat at each other, then settled to glowering from separate corners of the cage—a temporary lovers' quarrel, we said. We did not discover the error until the female chewed her interloping male almost to death, a thousand-dollar pelt half ground into raw meat. We tried, nevertheless, to save him for breeding stock, and during several weeks caged with his true mate, he seemed to recover, even thrive. Then for no reason we knew, he fell dead.

To make sure each rodent stayed where it belonged, Mr. Pickwick bought a pliers-like device which punched serial numbers into the delicate ear; this caused no problem, since ears were amputated from pelts before they were stitched into wraps.

But we had further difficulties. The mated pairs sometimes ate their newborn young. There was no predicting when they might crave such a meal. Once a male killed his mate; by the time we found out, he had already eaten her top half.

Mrs. Pickwick refused to help feed or clean up, and soon refused even to enter the basement. "They're repulsive! I can't stand to *look* at them!"

But I could. And sometimes, alone, at night when I couldn't sleep, I'd walk down, snap on the light, wake them, and peacefully brood upon the silent spinning chaos of fur.

It was here one midnight while the Pickwicks slept that I noticed, sticking through the newsprint inside one cage, a crumpled wad of typing paper. I fished it out and straightened it. Stained with urine and dung, it appeared to be two ripped-apart, unrelated fragments of Mr. Pickwick's manuscript. I read:

... knelt and rested my forehead against the pew in front. From the center of her rose-window above the altar, the Virgin smiled sadly down upon me. My brain throbbed ...

I tore loose the brassiere and pushed my face between her huge, firm breasts. With wild, animal impulse, she grabbed a fistful of my hair and bored a hard, hungry thumb of nipple against my tongue. "Loverman!" she cried. "Ram me with your big, hot cock!"

After more than a year passed, and the rodents had multiplied and, along with them, problems, Mr. Pickwick complained while we cleaned cages, "I don't understand these beasts. I can't control them."

•3•

A bleak, harsh winter passed—then in early spring, on the State University campus, while the season's last snow drizzled from branches and melted into the softening ground, I saw my playground girl grown up. Each day after my high school classes, I hiked across campus on my way home to the Pickwicks'. Gingerbreaded with limestone abutements and narrow Gothic casements, even the largest buildings blended into woods and pasture, the pastoral landscaping of some nineteenth-century genius. Several bucolic wooden bridges crossed a winding stream, at most three feet wide after the thaw.

Leaning on the rail, looking sadly down at her distorted reflection, she stood center-stage on one of these bridges. A well-clipped miniature male poodle, whiter than the bridge itself, sat beside her. She wore a coat of black sealskin, thick and heavy like her own long gleaming hair. I recognized her first by the thin, delicate hawk's blade of nose, its downward tilt, straight, flaring nostrils. When she looked up, filaments of white surrounded her black pupils.

Screwing up my courage, I strode the hollow-sounding ramp. "Hello, Nina."

"You know me?"

Letter to Ernest Lockridge regarding
PRINCE ELMO'S FIRE, from
Mark Schorer

68 TAMALPAIS ROAD • BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA • 94708

July 12, 1971

Dear Ernest:

The date up there isn't quite correct -- it's the 13th now. But I've been reading your novel for the last two days and have lost track of time. It's 2:00 A.M. on the third day, to be exact.

I won't be able to make much sense right now -- and why? I feel all beaten up, crawling out of one of Prince Elmo's brawls, picking broken teeth and bones and whatnot out of myself. For the time being I can't even speak the language: I was trying to say something perfectly pleasant about dinner tonight and out fell this horrible toad of a cliché -- as you now have made me aware -- something as harmless as, "Dear, these plums are really succulent!" See what I mean?

I'm certain that many people are going to think, as I do, that this is an extraordinary novel. I'll have to write you later in a more composed way, but for the time being I can only tell you that no piece of fiction has had me reading with such constant attention for years, if ever. Your inventiveness is inexhaustible.

Maybe it's a great book. Or maybe you've just so undone me by it that I'd like to think that I was in on the making of a great book. Anyway, I'm undone.

Yours,

