

# A Great Escape

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## About the Book

Eric made up his mind. He would go to the pet shop, open the cages and let the little troupe of animals free, to make their own way in the world. And so began A Great Escape.

# A Great Escape

Colin Dann

**RHCP DIGITAL**

For Andy

## Inside the Shop

THE MAN AND the boy were arguing again. The bewildered animals listened to the noise. Ever since the boy had come to the shop to help there seemed to have been disharmony. It had become steadily worse. The animals were used to the old man. He had always tended them and they hadn't the knowledge or capacity to understand that he didn't tend them all that well. They were fed; now and then their cages were cleaned; occasionally the old man would pause long enough to talk to them or even give a brief caress. And that was all they knew about it until the boy had come along. He was quite different.

For a start he was much brisker and more certain in his movements. He spoke in a different way to the people who came into the shop and sometimes took one of the animals away with them. And he spoke to them - the animals - differently too. He spoke to them as often as he could and they enjoyed the sound of his voice. It made them feel relaxed and comfortable. But when he spoke to the old man they didn't feel relaxed and comfortable at all, because the old man didn't seem to like the boy very much, even though they were together all the time. The animals thought the boy sensed this and it was then that the arguing began. It made them tense and nervous. There was an argument going on now. The voices crackled and the noise zipped back and forth across the shop. But, oddly enough, it would cease instantly when another person came in from outside. The animals wished for somebody to appear now. Even old

Auntie, who was the oldest incumbent of the Windmill Pet Shop and seemed to understand human speech (she could certainly make the same sort of noises), squawked edgily from her perch by the counter once or twice.

‘I tell you to leave the cages, Eric!’ the old man was shouting. ‘They’re clean enough. You’re here to serve the customers!’ He gave the lapels of his ancient shop coat an assertive yank.

‘But there aren’t any customers at the moment, Mr Dobson,’ the boy replied. He was taller than the proprietor and he looked down at him with an irritating half-smile.

‘Are you going to do as I tell you or not?’ cried the old man. ‘Because if not. . .’ His grey eyes glinted. His face and bald pate flushed angrily.

The boy shrugged. He understood the implied threat. ‘What shall I do, then, while I’m waiting?’

‘Oh! Go and replenish the water bowls or something,’ spluttered the old man, turning on his heel. He shuffled to the rear of the shop, pulling at his ragged moustache.

The boy scratched his spiky red hair and started to whistle half-heartedly. Then he saw the old man’s steely eye on him and stopped. He began to go around the cages and boxes and glass tanks in order, removing the water bowls and refilling them. Some of the cages were vacant. These were the large ones reserved for puppies and kittens. The last of these had been sold some time ago and Joel Dobson didn’t plan to replace them. His stock of animals had dwindled to a fraction of what had been customary in his shop in earlier days. He had allowed this to happen deliberately. He was sixty-eight years old. He had lost his enthusiasm for the shop and he was winding the business down. The premises needed decorating, the fitments were old-fashioned, the shop was generally grubby and Dobson himself was careless of his appearance. The entire place had a run-down look about it. This was what Dobson and the boy Eric usually

argued about. Eric thought the shop owner was being unkind to his animals, keeping them in squalid surroundings.

Actually the old man was not intentionally unkind. He loved animals and his fondness for them had led him to invest in a pet shop in the first place. He and his wife had run the business quite happily for years. But when Mrs Dobson died suddenly the bereaved man had lost all zest for life, including the Windmill Pet Shop. He had let things slide and the only reason customers still came to his shop was because Eric was responsible for ordering and maintaining supplies of pet food and didn't permit the shop to run short of anything, from meat and dog biscuits to millet sprays for budgerigars and maggots for goldfish. Moreover, the Windmill Pet Shop was the only shop selling pet food in the small country town of Wandle. As far as pets themselves were concerned, however, Joel Dobson had made up his mind that, once all his livestock was sold, he would keep no more. When the last animal went he intended to close down. The only thing was, now that there was only a handful of animals remaining in the shop, he found he could hardly bear to part with them. It was as if he was trying to hold off the day when the Windmill Pet Shop, which he had run for twenty-five years, closed for ever. And that was why Eric argued about the plight of the residue of pets which comprised a hamster, a rat, a guinea pig, a rabbit, a tortoise, a monkey and old Auntie, the grey parrot.

After shop hours, when Eric went home, Auntie was allowed brief exercise flights around the shop. Then the old man would call her to her perch where he would re-fix her chain. Auntie was quite used to this routine and raised no objection. When Dobson retired to his living quarters above, the animals talked amongst themselves.

Their cages and containers were ranged along two sides of the shop, away from the front entrance. The counter was at the back. In the middle of the area were shelves of pet food for every requirement, together with birdcages, fish



tanks, dog collars and leads, medicines and other paraphernalia. Since the premises were small, the animals were able to hear each other perfectly well even if they couldn't see everyone else. On the left-hand side there were several empty tanks once used to house goldfish, tropical fish and terrapins. Next to these, in a dry roomy aquarium, was Pebble the tortoise. He spent most of the day dozing in his bed of straw when he wasn't eating, but later he enjoyed taking part in the conversations. In fact he was usually the one to make the first comment. He would peer through the side of his glass box at his immediate neighbours, the rat Pie and Thrifty the hamster who occupied separate boxes.

'Trouble again today,' was, these days, almost invariably his opening remark.

Pie and Thrifty had become so used to hearing it they often didn't bother to respond at once. Sometimes one of the other animals – Skip the rabbit or Candyfloss the guinea pig who shared a cage on the other side – would answer sooner.

'We expect it now, don't we?' one of them would say. Or, 'It really can't go on like this.'

All of the animals expected the ructions between the man and the boy to reach a climax very soon which would result in one of them gaining the upper hand and dominating the other permanently. They understood nothing of human working relationships. The macaque monkey Spider, whose cage was the largest, widest and tallest of all, would swing with effortless acrobatics from rung to rung of his climbing frame as he listened to the humbler intellects of the pet shop's company. Then he would pause and deliver a pithy comment from his store of superior wisdom.

He was a small monkey about the size of a terrier. His hair was buff-coloured with a darker stripe along the back and a short of crest on the crown.

From the top of his cage he could see the entire shop interior. He could see, too, beyond the shop's glass frontage

to the world beyond, where the land fell away from the hillside on which the building stood at the edge of the town, revealing woods, fields and houses and, most prominent of all, the windmill which gave the shop its name, at the top of a hillock. This windmill was a landmark for miles around. It could be seen by all the animals from some point in their restricted little homes and it was a focal point for them all. Spider was not officially for sale. He was being fostered by the old man as a favour to a friend, the animal's rightful owner, who had gone abroad for a lengthy spell. Dobson had received permission to sell the monkey should the right sort of customer show interest. Otherwise he was to remain where he was. And remain he had – for nine months.

From his position of vantage at the top of his cage, Spider could see the rows of empty cages and pens and boxes which had been fully occupied on his arrival. The vacant puppy and kitten pens were next to Skip and Candyfloss's cage. The monkey was able to assess the difference between the appearance of the shop now and as it had once been and he had formed an opinion. He was sure the old man would rid himself one by one of the small animals, leaving only him – Spider – and old Auntie behind. He dreaded this eventuality because Auntie wouldn't be much of a companion, sharp as she was. The other animals, despite their generally inferior intelligence (except for Pie – he was clever) were more companionable. The trouble with old Auntie was, she had been there too long. She was a fixture of the place, Joel Dobson's own pet, and she couldn't – or wouldn't – think about what was outside the confines of her immediate surroundings. The other animals had at one time been equally unimaginative. But, ever since the boy's arrival, their attitude had changed. They all sensed that he offered them something beyond that which they had previously experienced – something additional to the monotony of their present existence. It was from his manner, his voice, his look that they derived their feeling. It

was a sort of instinctive reaction. So they all hoped that Eric would emerge as the superior of the two humans when the crisis was reached.

Meanwhile, at Spider's instigation, they dreamed of the life that lay outside their little intimate world; what it would be like to sit below the great wide sails of the windmill that seemed to them so like arms flung out, beckoning to them. How different they would feel as they sat there, looking back at that little world of the shop and they tried to imagine what it would be like to make the journey from one to the other.

Then they came to an agreement. Though they didn't understand how it could happen, they decided that if they should ever find themselves in that strange outside world, each would make for the windmill. It was to be a gathering point, and there they would wait for one another.

## The Door is Opened

EARLY MORNING WAS a good time to talk. The animals always awoke at daybreak before old Dobson was around. Candyfloss, the guinea pig, often wondered what had happened to her old companions. There had been many of her kind in the shop at one time. She had cream-coloured silky fur which she was constantly grooming.

‘Where are they now? And what will happen to us?’ she would ask.

‘Better not to ask,’ Skip, the brown rabbit, advised, ‘as none of us has the answer.’

‘Perhaps they’ve gone to the windmill,’ said Thrifty, the golden hamster.

‘Don’t be absurd,’ said Pie, the sleek black-and-white rat, scornfully. ‘They were taken, like all of us will be taken eventually.’ He sat up and washed his whiskers.

‘I won’t be taken! Not me!’ shrieked Auntie, the grey parrot, sidling along her perch and dipping her head at the little animal. ‘HELLO AUNTIE. HERE’S A NUT. HELLO AUNTIE. HERE’S A NUT. HERE YOU ARE OLD GIRL. HERE YOU ARE.’ She mimicked Dobson’s speech in her shrill voice as if to reinforce her assertion.

The mock human sounds always confused the animals. They would sit quite still, fascinated yet puzzled, waiting for Dobson to appear. They recognized the self-same sounds that came from his mouth. If he didn’t appear they felt almost as though they had been tricked. Spider would clamber to the side of his cage that faced Auntie and,

gripping the mesh with his hands and feet, would stare at the bird for minutes at a time without moving. Auntie stared back, rocking her head from side to side and hugging her mystery to herself. Spider's great intelligence and near-human attributes were quite unable to deal with this situation – even to find a clue. Auntie had them all baffled. Only Pebble, who was not very susceptible to the sounds of human speech and whose hearing was not the sharpest, anyway, avoided being fooled.

The shop opened at half-past nine. Eric arrived at nine o'clock. He replaced the stale food in the cages with fresh. If he had time, he tidied the animals' containers and cleaned where necessary. Mr Dobson tried to hurry him, reminding him all the while of opening hours as if he expected a flood of customers to pour through the door the moment it was unlocked. Eric muttered impolite remarks under his breath.

The first customer rarely appeared before ten o'clock. Two or three might follow but it was a trickle, not a flood. Sometimes customers were so sparse you couldn't even have called them a trickle; more a drip.

One day a woman came in with her young daughter who was entranced by Skip and begged her mother to buy him. Her mother was doubtful. The child already had a menagerie of animals. But she didn't have a rabbit and she pleaded incessantly.

'Please, please, Mummy. He's so sweet. Look at the way he hops about. And he's got such lovely eyes.'

Her mother wavered. Joel Dobson, who always dealt with the sale of livestock himself, hovered nearby. But he didn't do anything to urge the sale – Skip was his last rabbit and he didn't want him to go. He had given him his name – just as he had given names to all the others in the shop, the last of their kind. He really hoped the mother would stand firm. But the child was so insistent the mother at last succumbed.

‘All right, all right, Chrissie.’ She turned to the proprietor. ‘How much is he?’

‘Er – that one?’ queried Dobson, as if there were a dozen to choose from. ‘That one’s not for sale, I’m afraid.’

The child looked upset. Eric stood open-mouthed.

‘Oh, I see,’ said the woman, relieved to have the decision taken for her. ‘I’m sorry, Chrissie. Now never mind, dear.’ Tears were imminent.

‘Wh-what about *him*?’ the child whispered, pointing to Candyfloss.

‘It’s a “her”, actually,’ Dobson replied, smiling. ‘And the same thing applies.’

The child began to sob. The mother gathered up her purchases and hastened the little girl away. She felt there might be a scene.

Eric strode over. ‘Why did you say that?’ he demanded of the old man. ‘Of course they’re for sale. Why else are they here?’

Dobson shrugged. ‘I decide what’s for sale in my own shop,’ he answered coolly.

‘But – but. . . .’ Eric spluttered angrily.

‘No “buts”,’ said Dobson. ‘I just didn’t feel like letting them go, that’s all.’

‘That’s unfair; and cruel!’ Eric shouted, his anger getting the better of him. ‘You can’t keep them for ever in those poky boxes.’

‘I can do what I like,’ Dobson reminded him.

‘I-I’ll. . . .’

‘You’ll what?’ snapped the old man.

Eric backed down and marched away, cursing silently. He thought the man should be taught a lesson. It was obvious he meant to keep these few creatures in their cramped quarters indefinitely. A wicked idea came into Eric’s head and he smiled inwardly. It was for the sake of the animals, he told himself. And he began to devise a plan.