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Opening extract from

A Nod From Nelson

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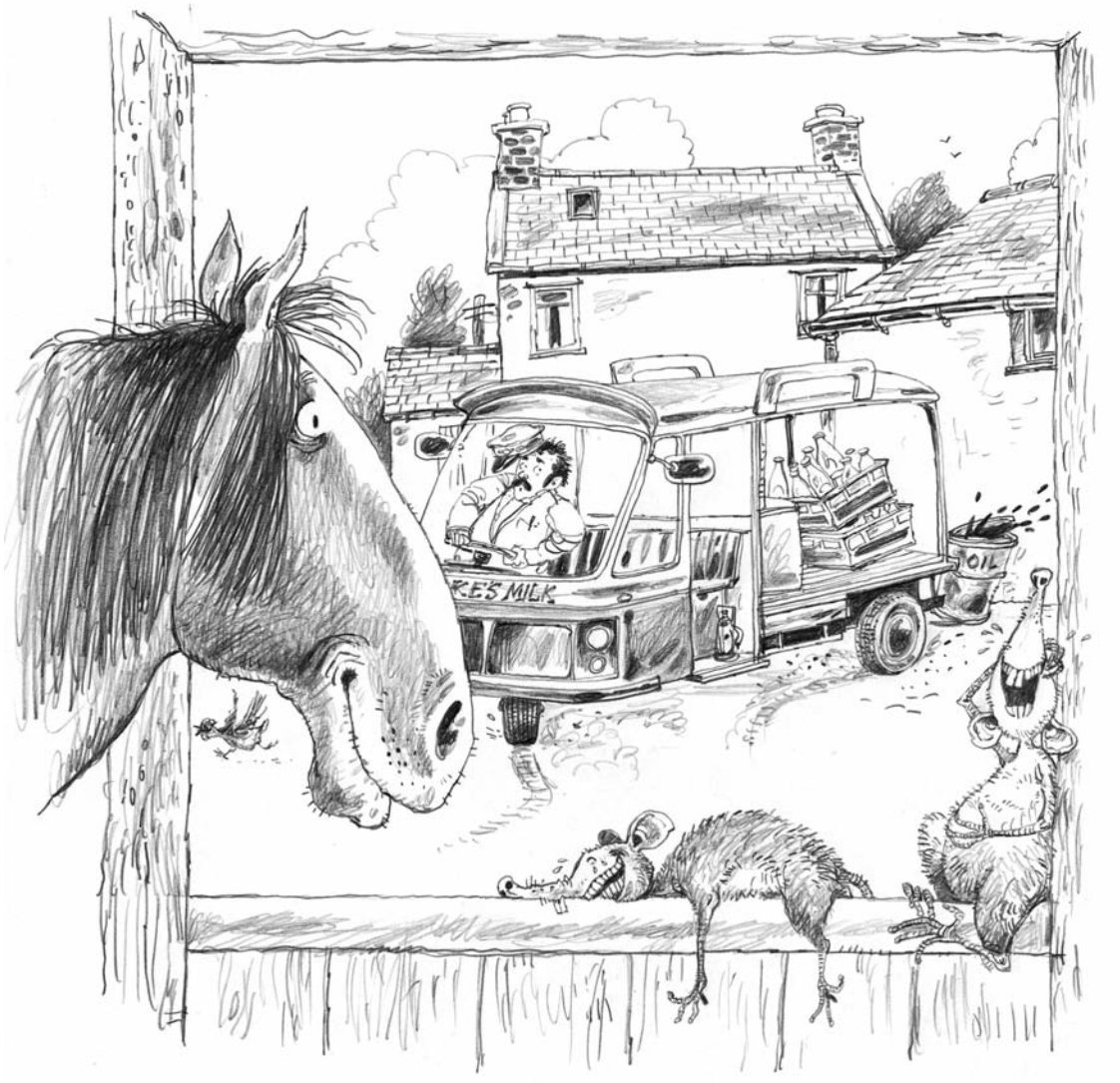


Chapter One

Hello! There you are! I was wondering when you were coming in. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Nelson, Nelson the 'orse . . . sorry, h-h-h-orse. Mammy always told me to pronounce my aitches properly.

Welcome to my stable at the back of the St Mary Dairy in Pont-y-cary, a stable which I share with a couple of rats. Within the old stone walls, we all get along just fine, living happily together under a shiny Welsh slate roof, proof that anyone can stay friends if they try hard enough. Oh, and Cardigan lives next door as well. He was a racehorse – that's why we call him Cardigan – he was a *jumper* you see! Raced against the best, mind you! 'Desert Orchid' (not his real name of course) sent him a Christmas card for years.

Now I expect you're wondering why I'm here. Well, I used to be the last horse in Wales to pull a milk float. Famous I was. But now I've got . . . retirement. Oh, it's nothing serious; the vet hasn't been and stuck needles in my bum; retirement just means eating oats and sleeping lots and doing the crossword, which isn't easy with hooves. It also means that I've got


K.E'S MILK
OIL

time to tell you all the latest news. It's been a real laugh. Come close and settle yourself down, and I'll tell you all about it . . .

It was last Saturday morning – no, Sunday – no, hang on, Saturday, because Cardiff played Plymouth away from home. Mike the Milk – that's my owner – had just taken delivery of Floatie! Floatie is my replacement, a motorised milk float, all bumpers and bits and, get this, *electric*! He runs off a huge battery.

I was giving him the once-over, checking out all those levers and buttons, when the two rats, Rhodri and Rhys, came and balanced on the door beside me.

'Is it working?' squeaked Rhodri.

'No,' I said. 'No, not yet. Mike's gone to fetch a big barrel of oil for the motor.'

With that, Mike staggered back and lifted Floatie's bonnet.

'He's running late!' said Rhys, looking at the big clock that hangs on the wall of the dairy. The hands pointed to ten past five.

'Yes,' I said. 'He's running late and, with all that fussing over the oil, I bet he's forgotten to load enough milk bottles for the round.'

Mike stopped for a moment, scratched his moustache, gave us a little wave and shut the bonnet. Dumping the barrel by the back door of the

house, he jumped in and switched on the engine. Floatie's lights flickered and shone. Mike grabbed the steering wheel but he must have pressed his foot down too hard on the accelerator because, suddenly, Floatie shot forward! All the milk crates rattled alarmingly and Floatie came to a shuddering halt.

Mike spent a long time studying the dashboard before starting the engine again. This time Floatie shot backwards – with a fresh rattling of crates and a clattering of milk bottles.

'Not exactly Lewis Hamilton, is he?' said Rhys.

Mike grinned at us and gave a thumbs-up sign. I waved my hoof, wished him luck and then watched him reverse – straight into the barrel of oil. There was a whacking great crunch and Mike's voice shattered the early morning air. 'Oh, yoghurts!' he said, pressing buttons, flicking switches and scratching his head. He must have finally found the forward gear because, all of a sudden, he was off, hurtling through the gates and into the early morning stillness.

Well, Rhys and Rhodri rolled off the door frame, they were laughing so much. I must admit I was grinning myself.

'How fast does that thing go, Nelson?' said Rhys, wiping the tears from his eyes with his tail.

'Oh, pretty fast,' I said. 'About thirty miles an hour. That's what Mike says, anyway.'

'Wow!' said Rhodri. 'That's really, really fast.'

'Nonsense,' said a voice. It came from nowhere.

We all looked at each other.

'Did you hear someone speak?' I said.

'Yes!' said the rats, their eyes darting left and right.

'Where's it coming from?' I said.

'Dunno,' said Rhys. 'Perhaps we've got rats?'

'Yes,' I said. 'You two!'

'Oh, of course!' said Rhodri, shaking his head. 'There's ridiculous I am!'

The voice spoke again. 'You're all talking nonsense, blithering nonsense. Thirty miles an hour is not fast!'

There was a fluttering and a feather or two, and a thin grey pigeon appeared from the rafters above my head and rested on the edge of the door.

'And good morning to you too,' I said. 'Rather personal in your comments, aren't you? Rather rude, even?'

'Sorry,' he said in a very lah-di-dah voice. 'Speak my mind, don't you know. One has to in Her Majesty's Services. Life and death, that sort of thing, what . . . what!'

The rats looked at each other and then at me. 'Is it Comic Relief?' said Rhys to nobody in particular. 'Is he trying to be funny?'

'Shush!' I said. I didn't want to hurt the pigeon's feelings.

'Thirty miles an hour isn't very fast!' he repeated, taking no notice of Rhys's comment.

'I think it's Comic Relief tomorrow,' said Rhodri. 'That pigeon's just turned up a day early.'

'Now *you're* being rude,' I said. 'And two rudes don't make a right, as my mammy used to say.'

The rats shuffled their paws and said they were sorry.

I cleared my throat and spoke directly to the newcomer. 'Anyhow, who are you?'

The pigeon saluted me with his wing and said, 'Can only give my name, rank and number.'

We all looked at him and waited.

'Oh, right,' he said at last. 'That's what you're waiting for, aren't you, my name, rank and number . . .?'

I began to wonder if I should go back to my nice comfortable straw and wake up again when he'd sorted himself out.

'Pigeon,' he said. 'Flight Lieutenant, 24556695, retired, sir!'

'Oh, right,' I said. 'Welcome to the St Mary Dairy, Pont-y-cary, Pigeon, Flight Lieutenant, 24556695, retired. I'm . . . Nelson, milk horse, 01 572 265486, leave a message if I'm not in.' I saluted with my hoof and the rats giggled. 'And tell me why, Flight Lieutenant, were we talking nonsense?'

'Because thirty really isn't fast . . .' he repeated, puffing out his chest. 'Some pigeons go a lot faster.'

'Not with two hundred bottles of milk and forty yoghurts on their back!' I pointed out.

He looked a little lost for words and was about to open his beak when I said, 'Anyway, what are you doing here?'

'Can't tell you that. Top secret. On a mission. France.'

'France?' I said.

The pigeon looked round nervously. 'Who told you that? That's top secret.'

'*You* just did,' I said.

'Did I?' He slumped down on his little legs and gave a big sigh. 'Oh, rats,' he said and then turned to Rhodri and Rhys. 'No offence, gentlemen! It looks like I'm lost again.' He sniffed and I knew that the little fellow was in trouble.

'Don't worry,' said Rhys. 'You've landed at the St Mary Dairy in Pont-y-cary, where we look after everyone.'

'Even lost pigeons!' added Rhodri.

Something told me that this was going to be a long day, a very, very long day.

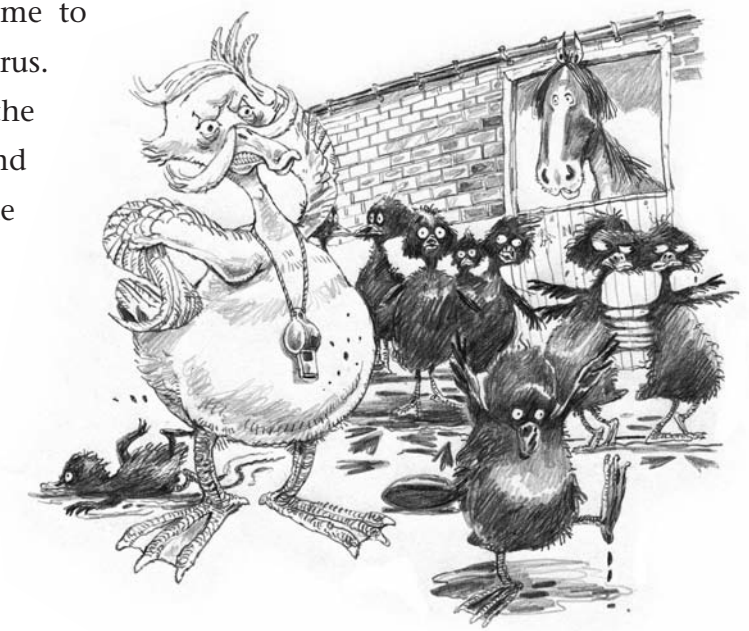




Chapter Two

There you are. I'm glad you're back. I thought for a moment I wasn't going to see you again! I was telling you about Flight Lieutenant Pigeon, 24556695, retired, wasn't I?

I have to say that he was a bit of a potty pigeon and a bit off course, but I felt sorry for him so I said he could stay. He found a perch in the stable and nodded off just in time to miss the duckling chorus. The quacking in the reeds around the pond could only mean one thing. Sir Francis Drake and his team of rugby-playing ducklings were up, and about to start their early-morning training.



The reeds parted and there they stood, Duck Rugby's finest team, the *All Quacks*. They've only ever lost once, to a bunch of sheep, the *Baaaa-barians*!

'Right,' said Sir Francis. 'Three circuits of the pond and no talking to the horse. I want to see work, work . . . work!'

Every morning it's the same. No talking to the horse. He thinks he's better than everyone, does our Sir Francis. He's a right stuck-up duck and there's nothing worse than a stuck-up duck, unless it's an unpleasant pheasant! Now they can be really nasty.

Off went the *All Quacks* for a pre-season warm-up waddle and things went quiet again, well, for about thirty seconds. Suddenly there was complete commotion. I could hear quacking and flapping and Sir Francis's booming voice: 'Look out! . . . careful! . . . it's all over my feathers! . . . what idiot did this?' Honestly, the noise that some creatures make.

Slowly back through the early-morning light came Sir Francis and his ducklings, or rather, should I say 'mucklings'? They were filthy. Even at a distance, I could see their feathers were all spattered in mud. But as the mucklings waddled closer to my stable, I could see it was . . . oil. OIL!

'Some idiot,' spluttered Sir Francis. 'Some idiot has spilt oil all over my training ground! I have just had a very nasty nine-duck pile-up!'

I looked at the state of the feathered forwards and then shouted for

Rhodri and Rhys. 'Better let yourselves into Mike's kitchen, lads. Get some washing-up liquid and quick!'

The rats looked confused. 'Are we doing the dishes?' asked Rhodri. 'Again?'

'No. The ducks!' I said. 'Detergent gets oil off feathers and we need to get that oil off as quickly as possible.'

The rats shot off to find some washing-up liquid. Sir Francis stood there dripping.

'You've had a bit of an oil spill, I see,' I said.

'Yes!' he said, sounding really unhappy.

'*Duckhams*?'

'Very funny,' he said, wiping his bill with his wing and beginning to look angry. 'Who could have done this?'

'Well, I might be able to help you there. Mike has got a brand-new milk float and I think he was filling up with oil just before he went off on his round. Had a bit of an accident with the barrel, knocked it over, backed into it, he did! It must have sprung a leak.'

Just at that moment Rhodri and Rhys came staggering back, carrying a big bottle of washing-up liquid. I told them to stick it over by the stable tap and then, leaning over the door, I drew back the bolt with my teeth. Now . . . please don't tell anyone that I can do that, especially Mike! Mike

hasn't got a clue that I've been letting myself out of my stable for years; he thinks that he forgets to shut the door. That's our little secret, right?

Anyway, the rats put the washing-up liquid on its side by the tap and I went over to help.

'Rhodri, you turn on the tap and, Rhys, when I say . . . *now*! . . . jump on the bottle. Sir Francis, get a duckling and put him under the water.'

Sir Francis waddled off, and waddled back with something small and sticky. It was the outside half! Coated head to foot, he was.

'Right!' I ordered. 'Under the water you go and, Rhys . . . jump now!'



Rhys jumped on the bottle and a squirt of liquid hit 'small and sticky' right on his bill. The duckling shook himself and started to wash.

'Now, mind you dry yourself off properly,' I warned. 'Those feathers

need to be good and dry or you won't be able to swim! OK, Sir Francis, who's next?'

Soon the entire team lay in one big puddle of bubbles. There was squirting and scrubbing and quacking and flapping, and more scrubbing and squirting. They were actually enjoying it and started singing songs . . . rugby songs! Well, some of them were really rude! Disgraceful it was.

'Right, Sir Francis, it's your turn,' I said.

'I don't think there's any more liquid left,' said Rhys, jumping up and down on the bottle.

'Rubbish, there's always a little bit left at the bottom. Let me try.'

I stamped on the end with my hoof and, like a bullet, the top of the bottle shot off!

'Duck!' I shouted, hoping that Sir Francis would understand what he was supposed to do. Stupid really, all he did was turn round, the silly drake! The washing-up liquid hit him smack on the bill and knocked him straight into the puddle of bubbles. To make matters worse, just as he was getting up, what was left of the liquid landed on his head! All the ducklings fell about laughing and that just made Sir Francis even angrier. He got to his feet and was about to open his beak and say something really rude when he started to sniff.

'What is that smell?' he said.

I sniffed; Rhodri and Rhys sniffed; all the ducklings sniffed. I had noticed it earlier but hadn't said anything. I then looked at the bottle of washing-up liquid and read the label . . . 'LEMON FRESH'!

'Oh, no!' I said. 'It should have been unperfumed.'

All the ducklings started to sniff one another. 'We smell like sherbet!'

'We can't run onto the rugby field like this!' said Sir Francis, ruffling his feathers to get rid of the smell and the damp. All the ducklings did the same. They shook and they ruffled and they flapped their tiny wings and, one by one, they all went fluffy . . . like dandelion clocks.

'I don't know about the *All Quacks*,' said Rhys. 'You should change your name to the *Sherbet Dips*!'

It was at this point that a small, but very posh voice came from the reeds and stopped everyone in their tracks. 'Excuse me!'

A frog in a tiny black bow tie was sitting on the bank. 'The name's Pond, James Pond,' he said. 'There's something I think you should know about that oil.'



Chapter Three



It's not often you get a talking frog who thinks he's part of the Secret Service. Then again you don't get a lot of rugby-playing ducks either. But that's the beauty of the St Mary Dairy in Pont-y-cary – anything can happen and everyone is welcome, no matter how crazy they are!

James Pond was a bit of a mystery, I must admit. I had never met him before! He said he had been in our pond for years, undercover; that's why I had never seen him. He seemed quite nice really but what he had to tell me was alarming.

'Have you seen where that oil's going?' he said.

'No,' I said, because I hadn't.

He hopped over to the side of the water and I trotted after him. He pointed a flipper at the black puddle that was beginning to form a little river. 'If my calculations are right, the oil will be in the pond in less than fifteen minutes,' he said.

My mouth fell open. He was right. The water would be poisoned.

James Pond turned back to me. Looking up, he said, 'You look shaken. Just like a cocktail! Shaken, not stirred.'

I was well and truly shaken, I must admit. For a moment I couldn't think of what to do and then it came to me. 'We are going to have to build a dam. If we can stop it reaching the pond until Mike comes home, he can clear it up properly. We need twigs and earth and bits of wood and stones.' I looked for the ducklings and Rhodri and Rhys. 'Come on, you guys. Hurry!'

Within a matter of moments, I was surrounded by ducks and rats eager to hear my plan. James Pond sat beside me, nodding and saying things like . . . 'splendid', 'superb' and 'smashing'.

'Who's the frog?' whispered Rhys to me when I stopped to think for a moment.

'His name is Pond, James Pond.'

'Oh!' said Rhys. 'Is he special, then?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'At least he thinks he is. Personally, I think he's watched too many 007 films.' I changed the subject. 'We'll have to form a queue.'

'Arr, Q!' said James, obviously still thinking about the world of films. 'Great man to work with.'



'Grr,' said Rhys. 'Another one with grand ideas!'

'Quite,' I said. 'Now then, start nibbling at those reeds. Let's get on with forming a queue . . .'

'Arr,' repeated the frog. 'Q, great man to work with!'

'Is he related to the pigeon?' asked Rhodri.

'Perhaps he's got a short memory,' said Rhys.

'Quiet!' I said. 'We'll form a chain: you two, nibble through the reeds and the ducks can drop the stalks in front of the oil. Then we'll have to start scraping up the mud and anything else that can help to make a wall.'

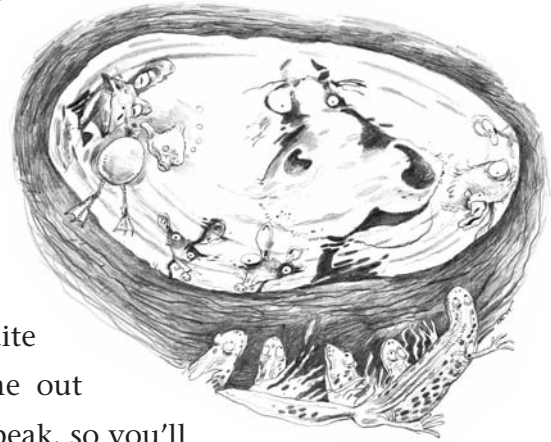
I was hoping that Mike would come back any minute. There wasn't a lot I could do with a pair of hooves.

Everybody started to work. The ducks formed a line and the rats started nibbling at the reeds. One by one, each of the long stalks came crashing down and a duckling picked it up and passed it on. From Prop to Back Row to Scrum Half, it was perfect passing, great rugby practice. Even Sir Francis had to agree.

Meanwhile, James Pond was staring into the water, and tutting.

'What's up?' I said.

'It's the newts. They look very scared,' he said, peering into the depths of the pond.



Newts! I thought. I didn't know we had newts. I stared into the water and there, near the edge, about six inches under some weed, were five little faces. 'Well I never! I haven't seen newts in there before!'

'I'm not surprised. They're quite shy,' said James. 'They don't come out much and, of course, newts can't speak, so you'll never hear them.'

'They're *mute* newts!' I said.

'Oh, yes,' said James. 'But they have lovely little faces.'

'Cute, mute newts,' I said. 'Well I never did.'

'They are very scared,' said James. 'I've tried telling them that they are safe, that we are working as quickly as we can.'

I looked at the growing dam. The ducks were passing leaves and reeds and rocks and sticks along the line and Sir Francis was piling everything up, but as fast as they worked, the oil was seeping closer and closer. 'Tell the newts they are going to be fine,' I said and crossed my hooves.

The oil had reached the first of the reeds and was slowly starting to seep up the side of the mud wall. The ducks looked at each other; Rhodri and Rhys looked at each other; James Pond glanced at his newt friends and gave them a smile. 'Everything's going to be all right,' he said reassuringly.

'Any change?' I said.

'No,' said James. 'They still look pretty scared.'

The oil had reached the mud dam and was forming a big dark puddle. The ducks all moved back from the dam and held their breath. Sir Francis crossed his wing feathers and looked at me. 'What happens if it doesn't work?' he said.

I didn't answer him. It had to work; it must work. Where was Mike when I needed him?

I looked at James Pond again. 'Any change?'

'No,' said James. 'No sign of oil in the water, but the newts are still terribly frightened.'

The oil reached the top of the dam . . . and stopped! We all waited but nothing happened. We waited some more and more nothing happened.

Suddenly the ducks all started to clap and quack. Rhodri and Rhys linked paws and began to dance. 'We've done it!' they cheered.

'Tell the newts they're safe,' I said. 'We've stopped the oil.'

James muttered something into the pond and gave a little thumbs-up sign, well, flipper-up really, as frogs don't have thumbs. 'But they're still scared that something might go wrong,' he said.

'No change there then!'

'No, not really,' he said. 'But then what do you expect? How much *change* can you get out of . . . *five pond newts*!'

He started to laugh. The ducks laughed; Sir Francis and Rhodri and Rhys laughed.

'*Five pond newts*!' repeated the frog. '*Change from five pond newts*!'

I didn't think it was especially funny the first time. 'Look,' I said. 'We need to find Mike and quick. Who can go and get him?'

It was then that I heard the voice.

'Flight Lieutenant Pigeon, 24556695, retired, at your service, sir!'

