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The Great Escape

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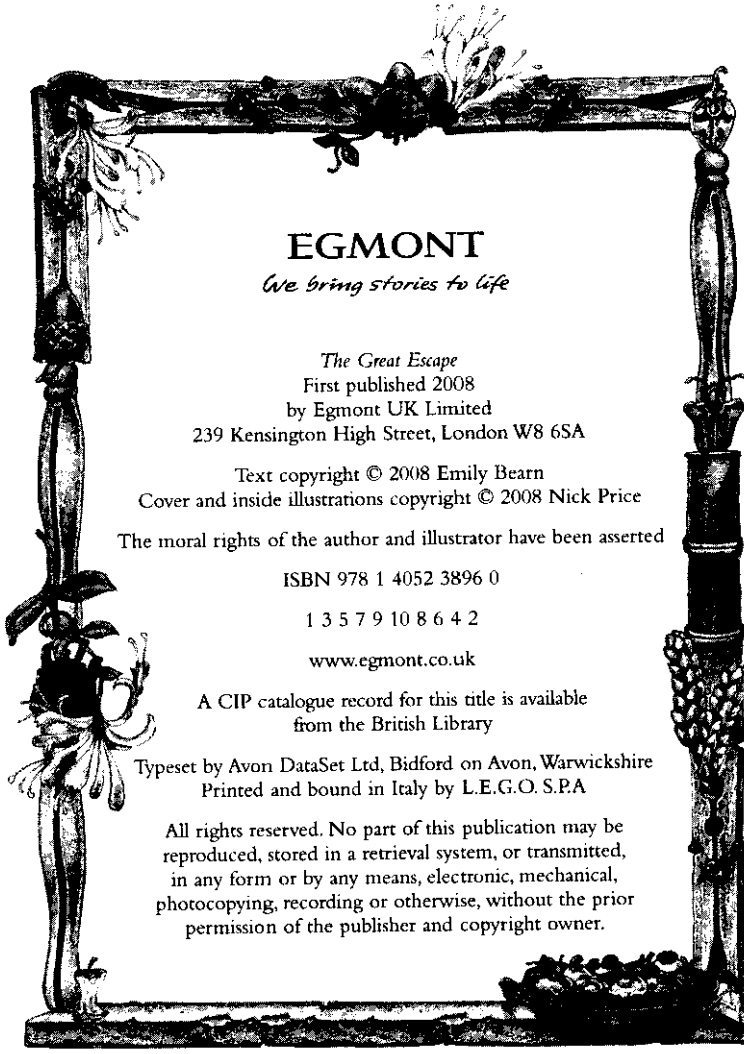
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Published by

Egmont

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The Great Escape
First published 2008
by Egmont UK Limited
239 Kensington High Street, London W8 6SA

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ISBN 978 1 4052 3896 0

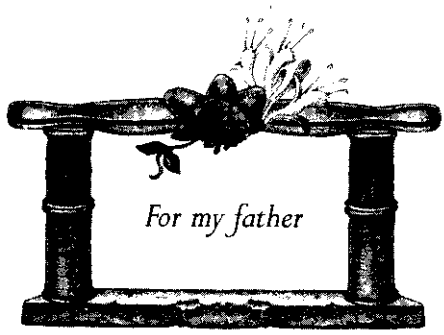
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.egmont.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available
from the British Library

Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire
Printed and bound in Italy by L.E.G.O. S.P.A

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For my father



For Mr and Mrs Nutmouse, of Nutmouse Hall, the day had begun much like any other. Mrs Nutmouse (who was known as Nutmeg, on account of her having nutmeg hair) had leapt out of bed at dawn, and raced downstairs to bustle and bake and clean. And Mr Nutmouse (who was known as Tumtum, on account of his having such a large one) had stayed tucked up under the covers

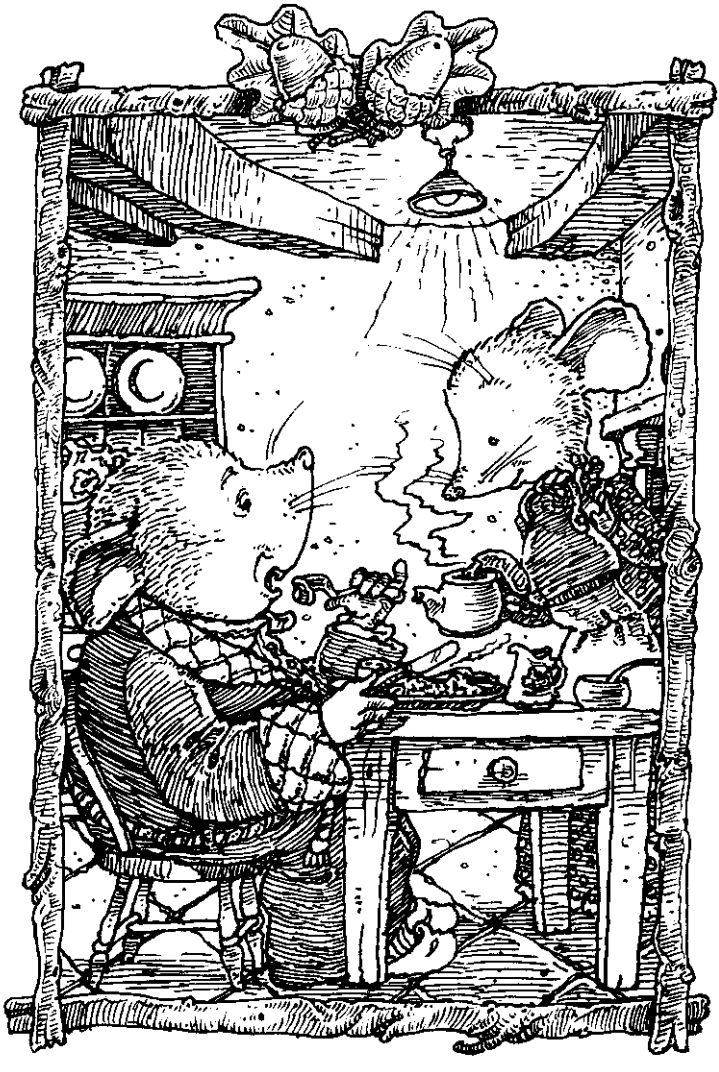
until he heard the bell ring for breakfast.

He tumbled down to the kitchen in his dressing gown. 'Good morning, dear!' he said dozily, as Nutmeg helped him to porridge and toast and scrambled eggs and bacon, and a pancake or two. 'Now, let's see. What shall we do today?'

Tumtum always asked this, even though he knew quite well what the answer would be. For although they lived in a big, grand house, the Nutmouses led very simple lives.

For the most part, Nutmeg spent her days scuttling and bustling in the kitchen, preparing delicious things to eat. And Tumtum spent his days in the library, warming his toes in front of the fire.

So Tumtum knew what Nutmeg's answer would be. 'I think I'll scuttle and bustle in the



kitchen, dear,' she said.

'Good idea!' he replied. 'And I'll toast my toes in the library.'

Nutmeg approved of this plan, so they both settled down to eat, looking forward to another peaceful day at Nutmouse Hall.

But just as Nutmeg was refilling the teapot, there was a loud 'Rap! Tap! Tap!' on the front door.

'I wonder who that could be?' Tumtum asked warily. Nutmeg followed him through to the hall, feeling just as puzzled. The post mouse was the only person who tended to visit at this hour, but today was a Sunday.

Before Tumtum had time to draw the bolts, the 'Rap! Tap! Tapping!' started again. Then they

heard a loud voice on the other side of the door.

'It's General Marchmouse!' announced General Marchmouse, speaking in a very General Marchmousely way.

'*The General!*' Nutmeg whispered, looking at Tumtum in astonishment. 'What on earth can he want?'

'I can't imagine, dear,' Tumtum replied. For it was most unlike the General to visit so early.

'What a nice surprise, General!' he said when he opened the door.

And in some ways it was, for the Nutmouses were very fond of the General. (Who was known to everyone as General, on account of him being rather Generalish.) But in other ways it wasn't, for while Tumtum and Nutmeg were very quiet mice,

the General was an unusually noisy one.

And today he was at his noisiest. He marched into the hall and thumped two leather suitcases on the floor. 'Hello!' he said heartily. 'Would you be so kind as to let me stay a night or two?'

'Why, er – of course, General!' Tumtum stammered, feeling he couldn't very well refuse.

'Good,' the General replied. 'Mrs Marchmouse has gone to stay with her old nanny for a week and I was feeling lonely racketing about the gun cupboard on my own. Now that I'm retired from active service, time can hang a little heavy, you know. So I thought to myself, *How jolly it would be to spend a few days with my dear friends the Nutmouses, at Nutmouse Hall!*'

Tumtum and Nutmeg both groaned inwardly.

There was no hope of a quiet day now.

'What's that?' Nutmeg asked, noticing that the General was carrying a fat silver pole.

'That is a pogo stick,' the General replied proudly. 'The Royal Mouse Army's new secret weapon.'

'Whatever do you mean?' Tumtum asked.

The General looked at him down his nose, thinking him very ill-informed.

'Haven't you read *The Mouse Times*, Nutmouse?' he asked. 'The army is being modernised. The soldiers are no longer going to ride squirrels – oh, squirrels are old hat! From now on, the cavalry will bounce into battle on sleek, silver pogo sticks, just like this. Stand back, Nutty, and I'll show you how it's done.'

Then the General mounted his stick, and started to bounce – boung! boung! boung! – round the hall. Then he bounced – boung! boung! boung! – round the drawing room, and the billiard room, and the ballroom. And so he went on, bouncing all round Nutmouse Hall, knocking into lamps and tables and stuffed cockroaches, and generally making a thorough nuisance of himself.

By the time he reached the kitchen, he was bouncing so high that he biffed his head on the ceiling. He sat down to breakfast feeling quite dizzy.

'We mustn't let him out of our sight for a minute,' Tumtum whispered to his wife. 'We don't want him giving us away.'

Nutmeg nodded anxiously. Any mouse



visiting Nutmouse Hall had to come and go very carefully, for it was a secret house, which no human knew about. It had been built long ago in the broom cupboard of a scruffy cottage called Rose Cottage, which was lived in by two scruffy children called Arthur and Lucy Mildew, and their even scruffier father.

None of the Mildews knew they had a broom cupboard behind their kitchen wall, because there had always been a big wooden dresser hiding the cupboard door. The Nutmouses' front gates were behind the dresser, and they were forever creeping in and out across the Mildews' kitchen floor.

But the Mildews had never seen them, because Tumtum and Nutmeg crept very quietly.

And they did most of their creeping at night.

At night they crept all over the place. They crept into the larder, and into Mr Mildew's study, and sometimes they crept up to the attic, where Arthur and Lucy slept, and did all sorts of helpful things. Nutmeg darned the children's clothes, and tidied their satchels, and polished their shoes with a mop; and once Tumtum had mended the wings on Arthur's model plane.

Now and again, the children and Nutmeg wrote letters to each other, which they left on the chest of drawers. But the children had no idea that Nutmeg was a mouse. In one of her letters she had told them that she was a fairy – so that's what they thought she was. The Nutmouses knew that Arthur and Lucy must never learn the truth. For some

humans have funny feelings about mice, and think they shouldn't be allowed in the house.

And imagine what the children would think if they saw the General bouncing about on a pogo stick.

'We must keep him constantly entertained,' Tumtum whispered to Nutmeg. 'Then he might just forget about this pogoing nonsense.'

'What would you like to do this morning, General?' he asked jovially, turning to his friend. 'We could have a game of chess!'

'Later, perhaps,' the General replied, dabbing scrambled egg from his whiskers. 'First I shall go exploring. The broom cupboard's not big enough for a mouse on a pogo stick. I want to have a bounce around the Mildews' kitchen floor, and see

if they've left any good pickings.'

This was not what Tumtum wanted to hear.

'Now, look here, General. I don't think that's wise,' he said. 'You'll only draw attention to yourself. And besides, the Mildews never leave good pickings. They eat horrible things like tinned spaghetti. That's why we have our food delivered by the grocery mouse.'

'Well I'd like to try tinned spaghetti,' the General said carelessly. 'Anyway, I won't be gone long. Just a quick breath of fresh air, and I'll be home in time for tea.'

Tumtum looked stern. (He did not often look stern, but when he did he looked very stern indeed.)

'General, so long as you are our guest, Rose

Cottage is out of bounds,' he said firmly. 'Now please promise me that you will not set foot outside the broom cupboard. We've thirty-six rooms here in Nutmouse Hall – surely that's enough for any mouse to bounce about in.'

'Oh, all right then,' the General muttered – for Tumtum did look rather fierce. 'I promise. I shall pogo around here instead.'

As far as Tumtum was concerned, the matter was closed. For a promise is a promise, after all.

But General Marchmouse found this particular promise very hard to keep.

The General was a mouse who craved adventures, but since retiring from the army he'd found them in increasingly short supply. He was starved of danger – and he had a feeling that by

pogoing around Rose Cottage he might finally find some.

And yet he was a mouse of honour, so of course he could never go back on his word. That would be out of the question.

Huff! How tiresome to have to stay indoors! he thought crossly, helping himself to the last rasher of bacon. He was still full of energy, so when breakfast was over he mounted his pogo stick again, and started crashing about in the ballroom.

'Bullseye!' he cried, as he went smack-bang into a marble statue. He made as much noise as possible hoping that Tumtum would get so fed up he'd let him go. But though Tumtum could hear the racket from the library, he said nothing, which made the General even more frustrated.

'Come on Nutmouse. Surely it wouldn't do any harm if I went out for a few minutes?' he began, as they sat down to a light lunch of earwig pie. But Tumtum would not back down.

'I have already made my feelings clear, and I have no more to say on the matter.'

The General glared at him – then he finally let the subject drop.

But after lunch, when Tumtum had disappeared to the library, and while Nutmeg was bustling in the kitchen, the General found himself wandering into the hall, with his pogo stick tucked under his arm. He stood there awhile, looking longingly at the front door. 'You gave your word,' the Generalish side of him said. But the adventurous

side said, '*Go on!*'

And so on he went.

He crept out of the door, then tiptoed towards the Nutmouses' front gates. He let himself out and fumbled his way through the cobwebs underneath the dresser. Then he marched out into the kitchen, feeling a delicious thrill of adventure now that he was out of bounds.

It was a foolhardy time to set out, for it was broad daylight, and someone might easily have spotted him. But the General could hear Arthur and Lucy outside, playing in the garden. So he assumed he would be safe.

'I'm king of the roost!' he cried, bouncing gleefully across the kitchen floor.

He had visited Rose Cottage several times

before, and he knew exactly where he wanted to go. He bounced into the hall, then, gritting his teeth, he bounced up the stairs and on to the landing. Then he stopped suddenly, hearing something clattering in the study.

He hopped across the carpet and poked his nose under the door.

Inside, Mr Mildew – who was an inventor, but not a very successful one – was sitting on the floor, amid a sea of tiny wires and twisted bits of metal. He was trying to invent a mechanical frog that could be programmed to catch flies in its mouth. But like most of Mr Mildew's inventions, it was all going wrong. And as a result he was pounding his fists on the floor in a hopeless rage.

The General watched for a moment, then he

turned around and bounced across the landing, until he was standing beneath the steep flight of steps leading to the attic. He flung his pogo stick on to the bottom step and heaved himself up after it.

I'll have all the toys to myself, he thought excitedly, as he huffed and puffed his way upstairs. *I'll make castles out of building bricks, and tie up the teddy bears! Oh, lucky old me!*

But even the fearless General Marchmouse might have hesitated a moment had he realised just what sort of adventures were in store.