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Opening extract from

Nelson at Sea

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I thought that when I retired from pulling the last horse-drawn milk float in Wales, life would get easier, but let me tell you about what happened last Thursday.

Mike the Milk, my owner, came home from his round in 'Floatie', his new electric milk float. He was carrying a large pile of books with him, and whistling. 'Hello, Nelson,' he said in a cheery voice. 'It's time to book a holiday. But keep it to yourself.' And he vanished into the kitchen.

Holiday . . . HOLIDAY? He has never been on holiday before!

I banged a hoof on Cardigan's stable door. The snoring stopped and Cardigan's straw-covered head slowly appeared. 'What is it?' he said, yawning. 'Is there a fire?'

'No,' I said. 'Don't tell anyone but Mike has just come home in a really good mood: he says he is booking his holidays.'

'Cooking a Bolognese . . . yummy,' said Cardigan. 'I love spaghetti. Don't worry. I won't tell a soul. Mike's secret is safe with me. Not a word will pasta my lips.' He started to giggle. 'Pasta my lips . . . spaghetti . . . get it?'

I forgot to tell you that Cardigan is very old and very deaf and, at times, very silly.

'No, no, no!' I shouted. 'Holidays . . . Mike is going on his HOLIDAYS.'

Well, so much for keeping it quiet; the whole stable-yard heard me. The



rats, Rhodri and Rhys, came running from the reeds around the duck pond. Behind them waddled the All Quacks with their trainer, Sir Francis Drake. Flight Lieutenant Pigeon fluttered down from the rafters of my barn and James Pond, the lunatic frog, hopped out of my drinking bucket. I wish he wouldn't wash his flippers in there!

I was stunned. I knew that Cardigan had a mobile phone, but I didn't know that he used the internet.

We all looked at each other. There was a slight pause and then everyone made a mad dash for Cardigan's stable. Ducks, rats, a frog, a pigeon and two horses all crammed in as Cardigan used his computer to find the Pont-y-cary travel agent, Terrific Trefor Thomas Total Travel Tours.

'Right, we've only got a weekend,' said Cardigan. 'So it will have to be somewhere close . . . like . . .'

'Llandudno?' suggested Rhodri.

We all looked at him and he went red. 'Oh yes, Mike is going to be there.'

'Tenby,' declared Cardigan.

'Tenby?' we all said as we crowded around the screen.

'Lovely place,' said Cardigan. 'My father was in a racing stable there. Here, have a look at the pictures of the sea front.'

I must admit that it did look very nice.

'Shall I see if there's a trip this weekend?' asked Cardigan, picking up his mobile phone. 'But first, could you all go outside for a moment? It's getting a bit hot in here.'

We all trooped out and strained our ears to hear what he was saying.

'He's reading out numbers from his card,' said Rhodri.



identical costumes walked out into the yard. What a sight! Rhodri and Rhys were wearing bright-yellow swimming trunks which Mike had made by cutting up the rubber gloves. He had created swimming hats for them too and finally, with some cork from an old floor tile, he had made floats for a pair of armbands. Rhodri and Rhys looked truly 'rat-diculous'.

'Over to the pond and wait by the water's edge,' ordered Sir Francis. The rats dragged their paws to a clearing in the reeds.



'Looks cold,' said Rhys.

'Looks wet,' said Rhodri.

Sir Francis waddled over and cleared his throat. 'Lesson one. Now, I want you to walk into the water slowly, making sure it is not too deep for you.'

Rhodri and Rhys held paws and both dipped their toes in.

'Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!' shivered Rhys. 'Coooooooollllld!'

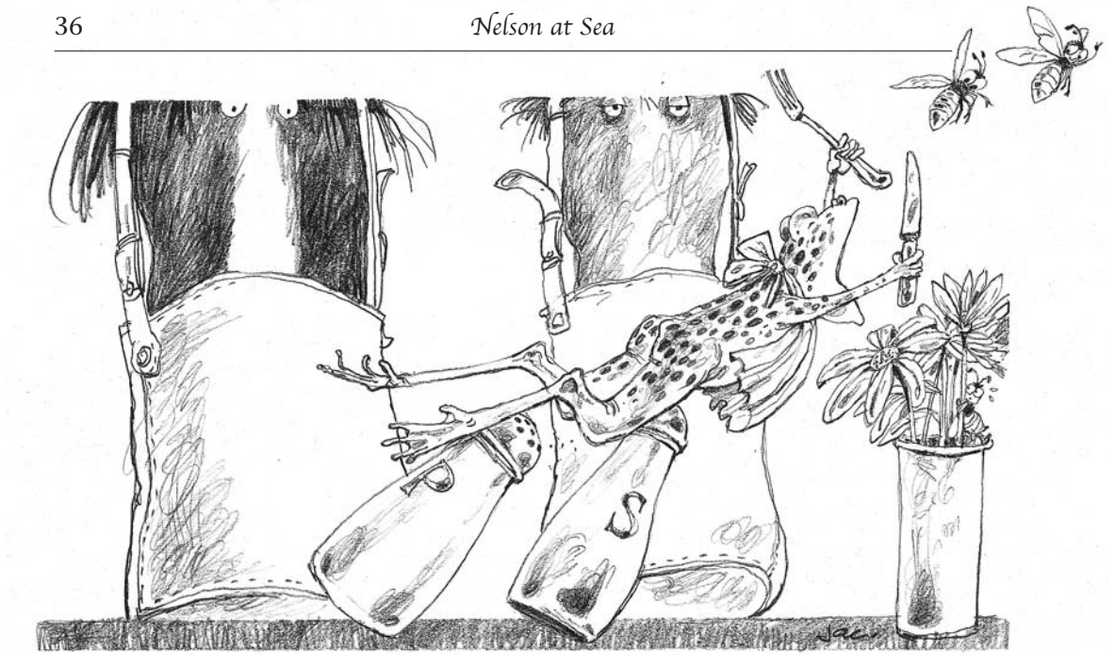
'Weeeeeeeeettttttttt,' shuddered Rhodri. 'I can't do this.'

'It will be all right once you are in,' said Sir Francis.

Rhodri smiled. 'I bet my brother wants to go first.'

'What?' said Rhys just as Rhodri gave him a push.





his manners and introduced himself politely to all the other diners as he hopped over their tables, trying to catch his dinner.

That night we slept very well and next day, after breakfast, we all headed for the seafront. 'What shall we do first?' I asked the group.

Rhodri and Rhys had been looking at some colourful leaflets they had found at the guest house and suddenly Rhodri said, 'Can we visit the superloo?'

'Superloo?'

'Yes, the big toilet, silly!' said Rhodri, showing me his leaflet. 'There is one around here that sticks out into the sea.'

'That's the lifeboat station. Where did you get the idea that it was a toilet?' I asked, looking at the picture.

'It says so!' said Rhys, joining in.

I have to say that neither of the rats can read very well and they tend to make it up by spotting the letters they know. They get very excited if they think they've found something rude.

'Look,' they said. 'Look!'

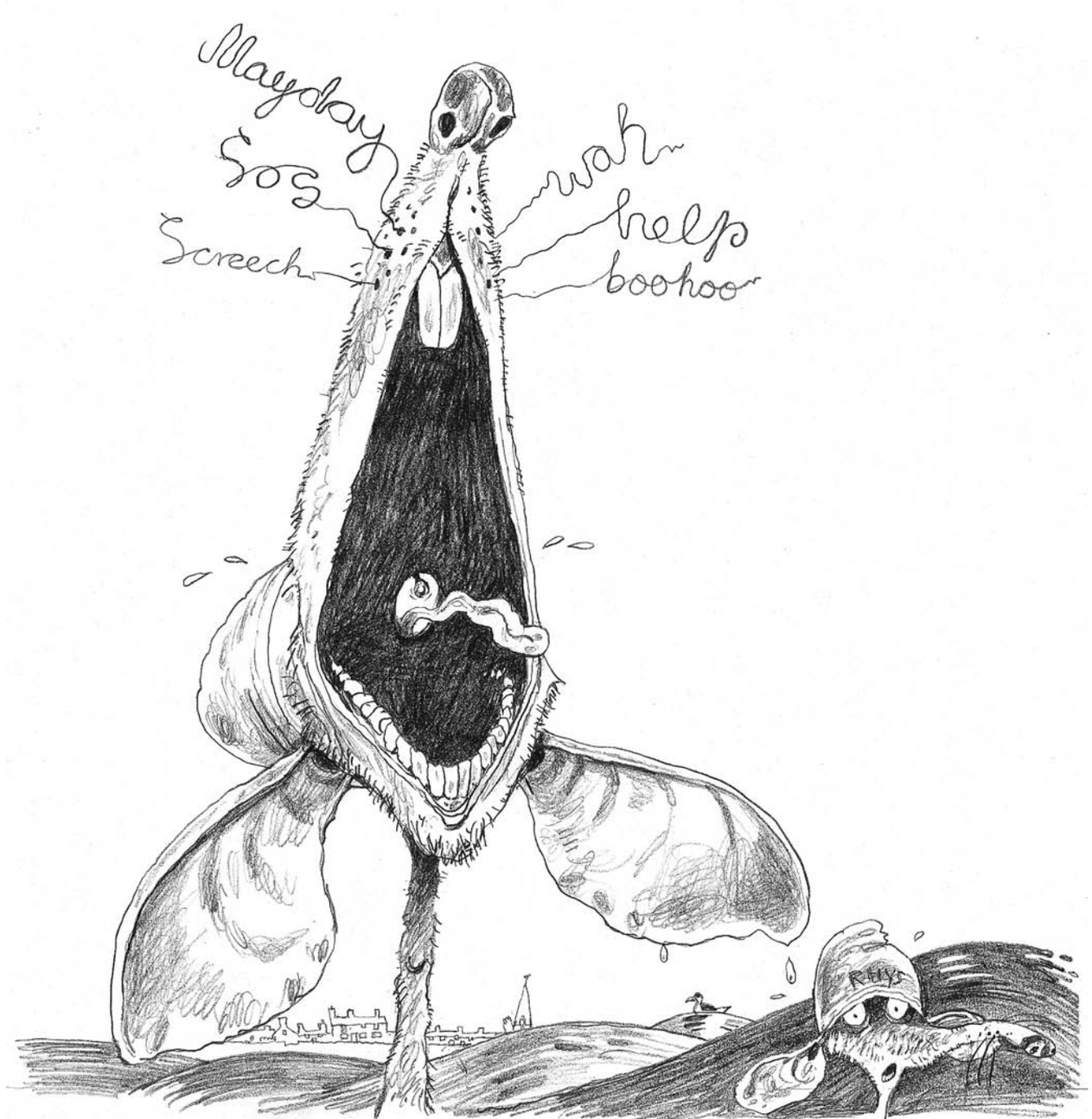
'Hmm,' I replied, looking at them sternly. 'That says Tenby Pier. It's got nothing to do with peeing! A pier is a sort of walkway on stilts. Lots of them were built when Queen Victoria was alive, a long time ago. You can walk right out into the bay and the sea is underneath you.'

The rats immediately wanted to walk along the pier.

'You are a bit late,' I said, handing back the leaflet. 'Tenby Pier closed nearly seventy years ago. The RNLI have a new lifeboat station there now.'

Their little whiskers drooped.

'But there is lots more to do,' I said, 'like . . . like . . . like visiting the seaside sweet shop.'



I looked up at the lifeboat station and started to gallop. I could see that Flight Lieutenant Pigeon was talking to an official-looking man. I thought he might know what to do.

Now galloping on a racetrack is one thing. Galloping on hard sand is another. But, believe me, galloping up a sandy beach is something else, especially for a carthorse. My hooves kept sinking into the soft sand and it took every ounce of strength to reach the lifeboat station. I thought my lungs would burst. I had never run that hard in my life. When I got within shouting distance, all I could do was wheeze and point. 'Rats,' I gasped. 'Ducks,' I spluttered. 'Drifting out to sea!'

Flight Lieutenant Pigeon and his new friend just stared down at me. I was so out of puff I don't think they could understand what I was saying. 'Help!' I neighed frantically. 'They're going to drown!'

Suddenly they saw what I was pointing at. The man reached for something that looked a bit like a gun, pointed it to the sky and fired.

Flight Lieutenant Pigeon's beak dropped open. 'Wow,' he said as a bright white light soared into the air. 'That is some firework!'

That's no firework, I thought, panting. That's a flare and I hope he's covered his ears. Too late. There was a huge bang and Flight Lieutenant Pigeon fell off the railings and fluttered down to the beach.

he continued. 'I can see your skin beginning to dry out, and that's not good.'

'Couldn't we pull him free?' said Rhodri and Rhys for the umpteenth time.

'Will you stop repeating yourselves!' I said. 'We need a proper plan.'

Huw looked at the rats and then at me and then at some rope in the bottom of the boat. 'I've got an idea: *we* could pull him free!'

Rhodri and Rhys folded their paws. 'What a great idea!' they said sarcastically.

Grabbing the rope, Huw tied a large loop at one end. 'If we can lasso this over his tail and tie the other end to the boat . . . I'll stick the motor in reverse and then some of us can push and some of us can pull.'

I passed the rope to the front of the boat and Sir Francis tied it on with a nautical knot. Without being asked, Rhodri and Rhys grabbed the rope in their teeth and dived into the water. Within seconds, they'd slipped the loop over Llywelyn's tail and jumped back in the boat.

Then Sir Francis and the All Quacks fluttered into the water and divided themselves between the front of the boat and Llywelyn's head. 'Get ready!' I shouted. The All Quacks all quacked, Cardigan crossed his hooves, the pigeon crossed his wings and Huw put the motor into reverse.

The engine throbbed, the ducks pushed and the water started to swirl but Llywelyn was still firmly wedged on the sandbank.

'Push harder,' shouted Huw as he increased the motor's speed but still Llywelyn didn't move.

Suddenly the rats jumped back into the sea and joined the ducks. They started to push and push and push and kick their little legs as hard as they could.

Slowly, very slowly, Llywelyn started to move. Bit by bit, he began to slide off the sandbank. 'That's it,' he boomed. 'That's it!'

