

The Legacy of George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

THE LEGACY OF GEORGE THE HAMSTER

Recorded, Translated and Compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith
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Dedication

To the hamsters of the world - and to everyone who has the heart of one. May our legacy always be passed from one generation to another, that hamsters yet unborn may benefit from the testimony of the Truth.

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A Human's Introduction

Since the publication of the first book, I've received much correspondence from members of the Public, stating in no uncertain terms that I'm mad to write stories about rodents. But, if they'd only read the book for themselves, they'd see that it isn't me who writes them - I've never claimed that honour!

It's the hamster who composed them!

It just goes to show who're the people struggling with reality...

Others have asked me if I might, perhaps, teach them to converse with their own pet hamster but, as I've explained, languages aren't my strong point and it's much better to buy one of the specially formulated 'Learn Hamster' courses that are available on cassette or CD.

Some are better than others, I admit, but as no sponsorship was received from any of the companies concerned before publication (and I wrote to a fair few), far be it from me to say which ones are the best.

Before briefly overviewing each of the sections covered, I should thank all the people who made the last book such a success, who responded to the world's first hamster-penned volume when they heard of its escape onto the bookshelves.

Without you, this second book wouldn't have been possible (or necessary).

Requiem for a Dead Hamster

It is, perhaps, not the wisest thing to do to 'kill off' the central character in the opening line of your second book. But that's the way of hamsters, sometimes - just when they seem to be on the verge of something great, they pop their clogs and there's nothing anyone can do about it.

And that's the problem with being honest, too - George really *did* die at this point.

Just when we thought he might come out with a great new work, he grew old and passed away.

But that wasn't the end - I wonder why we ever thought it would be?

Almost as soon as he was gone, strange things began to happen in the garden, rodents appearing to us and passing on to us what can only be described as a hidden side of George which we'd been oblivious to.

This is what this series is about - written by myself and my wife, we've tried to faithfully reproduce what was related to us in successive weeks as we came to terms with our loss, realising all the while that there was more to George than we could ever have imagined.

A musical score is also available of this work.

The Hamster History of the World Volume Four

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There was *never* a Volume Four although, as you'll discover, it certainly appears as if George had planned to do a fourth compilation of Hamster Histories shortly before he died.

As I noted in the introduction to the Appendix of the first book, I discovered a hamscript late on during the editing process for that work and was graciously allowed to include it in anticipation of what might be lurking amongst the various writings I'd kept to one side since George's death.

I couldn't have imagined then what wealth of information I was about to retrieve when I embarked on intensive research into the legacy of our beloved rodent.

I have chosen to give the reader individual introductions to the short stories as provenance is both extremely important to the scholar and interesting to the lay person.

Here the reader will find a very unusual Lone Hamster tale, another Furlock Holmes mystery and a few stories from earth's past that mention human heroes in a light that has never yet been shone.

I also discovered some rough notes concerning a twentieth century rodent detective named 'Hercules Peanut', a first century BC Roman centurion of the fourth legion who went by the title 'Julius Cheddar' and a statesman of the following century known as Broccolus Maximus.

I decided not to include any of those notes here - and none of these seem to have ever been developed into full stories.

I'm sure that, given more time, hamscripts that can be traced back to the paw of George the Hamster will continue to surface and I will endeavour - along with a host of other experts in this field - to identify the authentic writings, bringing them to the reader's attention in subsequent volumes.

From Russia with Nuts

This is, perhaps, the most bizarre of writings.

After George was buried, we decided to buy a pair of male Russian hamsters that we called Arlev and Hakeem. For a reason that they took with them into the grave, they never appear to have learnt to write, but dictated stories to my wife and I during the time of their stay.

I also added dialogue that I transcribed from tape recordings made of the discussions we had.

But the stories they left behind break with convention, dealing as they do with other creatures rather than simply hamsters. Here are stories about hedgehogs, frogs as kings and mountaineering mice - stories that we felt the world was not ready for when it was first compiled (perhaps it still isn't?).

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Many years later, two more hamsters - Yafa and Rab - decided that they didn't like the 'human touch' in a predominantly rodent work and set about editing and improving the text (I have retained their comments in the text in a few places where an amendment to the text proved impossible).

Although this work is placed here in the order in which it was composed, it didn't see the light of day on George's web site for a great many years.

Appendices One and Two

Finally, I offer to the reader two appendices.

Firstly, the very first articles that George ever dictated to me, prefaced with the original introduction by Dak the hamster when the Rodent Weekly bought the rights to publish them in October 1999.

These might seem a little 'primitive' now but they show the lines of thought that George was pursuing. They also serve as a good introduction to Dak who will appear in a third volume at a later date (if this book sells well enough).

Although these have been extensively researched and analysed, this is the first time, I believe, that they've appeared in their entirety in one volume. Researchers have generally had to refer to a multitude of books in order to read them before, but I'm grateful that everyone who had a legal interest in these have waived their right to allow them to be published.

And, secondly, a transcribed interview with George that took place after the release of 'An English Hamster in Paris' (see George's first book). This shows George in a much more 'normal' light than his literary works can ever do.

I had been given certain questions to ask George as many were intrigued by who he was - in much the same way as people who listen to music like to know the characters of the musicians who play.

It certainly gives some insights into George's ordinary, everyday life - if, that is, *anything* George did could ever be understood to have been 'ordinary'.

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Acknowledgements and Thanks

Because these are predominantly George's works or works inspired by him, he should really be writing this section. But, as he's no longer around, I know that I must take it upon myself to thank the people who I know George would expect me to.

Firstly, from the dim and distant past...

When 'From Russia with Nuts' came out, I thanked Steve Hamblin for reading the hamscript and giving my wife and I his honest opinion.

I also extended George's paw to Steve and Catrin who were continual encouragements to George and myself throughout these works - and to people like them who've fed back their enjoyment of what had been released so far (and that goes to everyone who's been so gracious as to contact me since the first book's release).

And, finally, Stuart, Sara and Alice who lived next door throughout the writing and who were extremely understanding when they discovered us late one night walking around the garden with torches 'in search of our nest of wood mice'. Thanks for not calling the Police.

I've dedicated a few stories in Volume Four of the Hamster History because these people have provided either encouragement or inspiration for the completion of the work. Many think that working on George's hamscripts is simplicity itself but, sometimes, it can be like wading through treacle - once you've finished, the wood shavings stick to your paws and you can't get them off no matter how much you groom.

Thanks for being the person who removed the treacle...I mean the one who dealt with the wood shavings that...what I mean is, er...no, I'm afraid that the analogy breaks down there. Just 'thanks' for the inspiration and encouragement.

George's stories all have meanings - unless specifically noted - although some don't. You can tell the ones that don't because you can't extract meanings from them. Some people still *have* gleaned meaning from the non-sensical ones, however (you know who you are, Liz, and why I told you that you need to increase the strength of the medication).

Lee H Smith

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Requiem for a Dead Hamster

REQUIEM FOR A DEAD HAMSTER

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

Part one - The end

George died on 14th September 1993.

He had lived about 2 years 8 months.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with George and his individuality, for those of you who have never before received or read any of his many short stories, I'd better say a few brief words about his life - a potted history, so to speak. I have gone into this at length elsewhere.

George was a very distinguished literary hamster who began communicating with us shortly after we bought him from the pet shop. He produced six short articles for a local church that we were attending at the time and followed it up with eighteen stories released in the three volumes of 'The Hamster History of the World'.

Then came a couple of works that surprised both Kath and myself. It appears that George, unbeknown to us, smuggled himself on board our hand-luggage when we went on holiday to both Paris and the Isle of Mull. His diary of experiences were produced under the titles 'An English Hamster in Paris' and 'A Tail of Two Hamsters', the latter we sent out as our greetings card in 1993.

He probably produced more than this - George was one who frequently surprised us with both his cunning and intelligence and I wouldn't be dumbfounded if, twenty years from now, we come across a great work of his in some far flung corner of the universe.

But that was all in the past.

In the present, the *now*, George was lifeless.

At first, Kath and I made sure that he was, indeed, dead. After all, George had, as previously mentioned, escaped to stowaway on board our hand-luggage on a couple of known occasions and we were extremely suspicious that the total lack of movement in his nest was due to the fact that he'd planted yet another 'hamster-lookalike' in order to fool us into thinking that he was fast asleep while he ventured into uncharted regions.

Then, when we realised that this was no decoy, we tried to revive him. By that I don't mean that we gave him the kiss of life (or any other similar medical procedure) as he'd been dead a little while and all such efforts would have been futile. No, we were concerned in case George had gone into hibernation as hamsters often do - especially as they grow old when small changes in temperature can send their body rhythms into weird sequence.

We tried heating him up in front of the fire but there was no movement. We touched a drop of whisky to his lips to revive him but, sadly, nothing. George was as extinct as the proverbial dodo.

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So here we were with a dead hamster on our hands.

It was indeed fortunate that we'd discussed the matter a couple of months before so that, now the day had come, we knew exactly what to do.

Kath and my mother had come up originally with the clever suggestion of turning George into a hamster-skin rug for the carpet directly in front of the living room fire, his face preserved in a fixed snarl. But George had not been pleased with the proposal and, given more thought, we realised that the rug would have looked like a pimple on an elephant.

What had been in the back of *my* mind for a couple of weeks was to mount George's head on a plaque and hang it over the front door as a welcoming gesture to visitors. This also proved to be disliked by George who pointed out, quite sincerely, that it would probably have the effect of either causing our friends to flee for their lives or to forever regard us as loonies.

Other suggestions developed over the weeks - such as turning George into a sporran, a shaving brush and a pipe cleaner - but all such possibilities were flatly rejected by him.

In the end we decided, rather traditionally, on burial (cremation was out as we computed that it would take eleven hours at gas mark 9 to complete and this would mean that we would have to miss a meal - something that George was not happy for us to do).

As George had always been associated with sunflower seeds while alive, we determined that, even in death, we should remember him this way. We resolved to use some of his supply and plant them above his grave so that, when spring and summer came, we could remember his life and work.

George was most pleased with the suggestion and complimented us on the plan that would not only remember him but that would provide food for the wildlife in the surrounding area.

Even in death, then, he would bring forth new life.

Part two - The funeral

George was buried on 15th September 1993.

We chose a site in the garden that would get a plentiful supply of sunshine and dug a hole a foot deep in which we laid George in a 'sleep' position.

Covering the hole up to about an inch from the surface, we scattered a good handful of sunflower seeds onto the bare earth and concealed them with a mixture of loose soil and peat.

We weren't that sorrowful. It was a fact of life that death happens and George had always kept reminding us with phrases such as 'Before I go the way of all hamsters...' and 'You do realise that we don't live long lives, don't you?' and even 'It won't be long til I die now - I can feel rigor mortis already beginning to set in'.

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He was always real and faced up to what was inevitable with a simple acceptance that confounded us. Yes, we were actually surprised by his attitude - he didn't try to pretend that it might never happen, but did his best to prepare for it, whether that was in planning his own burial or in seeing in his death a chance for the wildlife of the area to benefit.

I must admit, though, that George had got a little eccentric in his old age - I was never quite sure whether to put it down to humility or senility. For example, when visitors used to come round to see the famous literary genius of whom they'd read so much, he refused to hold an intelligent conversation with them and preferred to act as if he was a normal, pea-brained rodent.

At first, it caused us embarrassment. We'd invite friends to come and meet him but, after I'd introduced him to them, he would give a quiet squeak (which had no meaning in hamster-tongue) and then pretend that he'd smelt a juicy piece of food in the wood shavings and would begin digging to try and find it.

One thing it did do was to take the attention off himself - people even started attributing the writing of the stories to my wife and myself as they thought we'd made the whole thing up.

'Hamster that can talk and write?' they'd say. 'Be real, Lee! George is a literary character of your own imagination!'

If only they'd known the truth!

And, instead of people idolising him, they began to see that it was the Truth conveyed that was important and not the channel through whom it had come.

As George used to tell me after they'd gone home either angry at being seemingly 'wound up' or disillusioned because they'd put their trust in a rodent that communicated with humankind:

'It's the Creator that's important, not me! You must understand that, Lee! I'm one of a billion billion rodents that's existed since the dawn of the world.'

I guess that he was right - put things on pedestals and they tend to fall off and let us down. George was always at pains to make it known that there was only ever One who wouldn't fail.

I quietly reflected on his life as I crouched down, levelling the soil and removing any pebbles or pieces of brick that I found.

Kath had already gone and was preparing tea, I could hear the sound of plates being rattled and of pans being placed on the stove.

'Fifteen minutes,' she shouted.

'Okay,' I replied. 'I'll be there in a couple of ticks, I'm just finishing off.'

I returned my gaze to the task in front of me and instantly had that strange feeling that I was being watched.

'Don't be silly,' I told myself 'you're imagining things.'

But the feeling remained.

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I looked around the garden - nothing.

Over the hedge - the neighbours weren't even out.

I shrugged my shoulders, picked up the trowel once more and flattened the soil.

It was then that two black, shiny eyes met mine.

There, underneath the hedge, was a hamster - not George, certainly not George, it didn't even remotely resemble George. For a start, this rodent was female. Second, this hamster was alive and moving.

She began grooming, removing a piece of offending soil that had stuck to her when I'd flicked it into the hedge.

Sitting up on her hind paws like hamsters do, she stared at me again.

'Are you one of the deceased's owners?' she squeaked.

I must admit that I was shocked! Though, on reflection, I guess that I shouldn't have been - if one hamster could communicate with humankind, it had to be possible that there were others.

'Er..yes.' I replied in the best dialect of hamster-tongue that I could voice.

'Now let me see' she began. 'You must be...' and she took a long, hard stare at me, trying to guess whether I was Lee or Kath. She mumbled a rhyme under her breath which I managed to overhear:

'Lee is male and Lee is tall.
Kath is female and she's small.
With whiskers full, Lee's like a cat,
While Kath has skin much like a bat.'

Then she squeaked loudly, 'Yes! You must be Lee!'

Though I didn't mind being compared to a feline, I wondered how Kath might take the thought that this hamster compared her to a bat.

'What was that rhyme?' I enquired. 'Where did you learn it?'

'It's one of George's,' she squeaked proudly. 'He taught it to us so that we might be able to differentiate between you after he'd gone.'

'George? You knew George?'

'Oh yes. He was one of the leading hamsters in the community.'

The word hit me like a wet sponge.

'No, you must be mistaken,' I objected, 'George didn't live in a community, he lived alone in a Rotastak hamster unit in the living room.'

'No, no. *You're* the one who's mistaken - you never knew what George got up to when you were both in bed asleep at night. We held hamster community meetings in your front room.'

This left me speechless, though not for long - I'm never speechless for very long. Ask my wife.

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'You mean that George was a leading member of the local hamster community here?'

'I think that's what I said, yes. Am I squeaking too fast for you, or can you understand me well enough?'

'Fine,' I said. 'I'm just a bit slow to realise that George had a private life that we knew nothing about.'

I sat quietly for a couple of moments while I let the truth sink in.

'You must tell me more about this,' I said.

'That's why I'm here. George told me to come and see you after he'd gone the way of all hamsters.'

'Would you like to come in the house?' I asked 'I've got plenty of fresh fruit and seeds.'

'That would be wonderful.'

I picked her up in my hands, but allowed her to poke her head out from between the cracks as I marched toward the house.

'You didn't tell me your name,' I questioned.

'Oh, sorry. It's Harriet,' she said. 'Harriet the hamster.'

I pushed the back door open and shouted, 'Kath! Kath!'

'What is it?' she said.

'Look what I've brought in for dinner.'

I opened my hands to reveal a very motionless hamster.

Kath let out a gigantuous shriek of horror. 'No!' she shouted. 'You can't eat George! That's...that's cannibalism!'

'Calm down!' I spoke in gentle tones. 'This isn't George, this is a hamster I've just met in the garden.'

Kath stared at the bundle of fur that sat up on its rear paws and greeted her with, 'Hello, Kath, my name's Harriet the hamster.'

Kath looked at Harriet, then me, then at Harriet again.

'Hello,' she smiled, 'would you like a piece of carrot?'

Part three - The move

'Tell us about this "community",' I asked Harriet.

She was halfway through the carrot so she quickly nibbled it to a size that was small enough to pouch, then stored it away out of view.

She licked her lips to remove any moisture before she replied.

'There's not much to tell. It's a community of hamsters much like any other community of hamsters. There are some leaders and some followers - George was one of the leaders, of course, ever since he began living where you used to be.'

'"Used to be"?' It was Kath's turn to throw a question at our rodent guest.

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'Oh yes. When you first brought him back from the pet shop we knew that he'd be one of the leading hamsters of the community - he had that certain...' she searched for the right word, '...that certain something, you know.'

We both nodded.

'In fact, if it hadn't been for him we wouldn't have moved with you to this broad place that you're in now.'

Kath and I looked at one another in puzzlement. I finally managed to put the confusion into words. 'You mean that you all travelled over here at about the same time we did?'

'No,' she corrected, 'we all travelled over here *with* you.'

'No, no,' Kath shook her head, 'you must be wrong. There were certainly no hamsters with us when we moved or we'd've seen them.'

'The same as you spotted George when he travelled with you to Paris a couple of years ago? And how about his trip to Iona? You knew he was with you then as well, I suppose?'

We were certainly stumped for an answer, we decided to let Harriet continue.

'George had called an emergency meeting about two weeks before you moved out to this place. When I say "emergency" I mean that it wasn't scheduled as they normally are, and special messengers had to travel the length and breadth of the area to invite all the rodents to attend the meeting that evening in your front room...'

I had listened patiently up until that point but felt that I had to interrupt to prevent Harriet from making an utter fool of herself.

'Listen Harriet,' I said calmly but sincerely, with an air of authority that surprised even me, 'We evacuated George to our friend Catrin over five weeks before we moved - he couldn't possibly have been there like you say.'

Harriet laughed loudly, grooming herself rapidly as she reeled from side to side with mirth.

'George evacuated?' she giggled. 'Don't be absurd! How do you think he got to Iona if he hadn't been in your house when you left? George was a master escape artist, no question - I was always surprised that you never once suspected.'

'Then how did he manage to do it?' Kath asked.

'Ah!' and she held her paws up in the air. 'You never ask an escapologist how the trick's done!'

She paused a moment before continuing, 'Now may I proceed with my story about the move?'

'Yes, by all means,' we said in unison.

The light clicked off.

The door shut firmly.

Lee and Kath ascended up into the cosy snugness of bed.

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George popped his head out of the hidey-hole and surveyed the living room scene, lit up by the yellow glow of the street lamp cascading down through the curtains.

It was pretty much as it had always been except that a few more books than normal lay strewn about the floor, a couple flagged with bookmarks at relevant passages that had been of particular interest to his now departed owners.

A pile of correspondence lay immediately under the sofa which provided a slightly elevated platform from which he could address the community that was shortly to arrive.

Where were they?

He heard the floor boards creak as his owners jumped into bed.

'They really must go on a diet soon,' he thought, as the first twitching nose appeared in view, sniffing that the coast was clear to enter.

George squeaked reassurance and the rodents filed in one by one to fill the room with a menagerie of differing sub-species. Each brought their own food, gathered from the surrounding area the previous night, and piled it on one side to await the communal meal that always followed these meetings.

George rose to his paws and began his address:

'My fellow-rodents,' he surveyed the multitude of faces that gazed into his dark black eyes and remembered the good times that they'd shared together.

'My *dear* fellow-rodents,' he began again. 'It seems that my owners are quite serious in their plan to move from this area and I feel obliged, being their most beloved pet, to go with them.'

George was stating nothing new. They'd already realised that his intention was to travel west to fresh territory and they weren't in the least surprised by this statement - but what he said next *was* new.

'We have lived in this region long enough, my friends, it is time for all of us to move on into something better, something greater - a place where the land will sustain more of us, where we can expand our community to new limits.

'Therefore, I called this meeting to implore you to come with me and settle down in this good land that my owners are going to.'

There was a loud ripple of approval that passed through the crowd but the mood was by no means unanimous. An elderly field mouse, seated near the front of the gathering, rose to his feet and addressed the crowd.

'Fellow-rodents,' he complained, 'if it were only a matter of solving the problem of the journey then I would be in agreement (even though that problem would be hard enough to overcome considering our present numbers). I would say a hearty "Let's go!". But what George doesn't realise is that this "good land" that he speaks about is beset with problems that, as some of us have calculated, would present disastrous consequences should we move in without growing stronger first.'

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He gestured toward a group of rodents that sat halfway from the door and, rising to their feet, they began to take up the elder's speech.

'It's as our brother field mouse says,' the youngest squeaked with eyes wide-open as he continued the story. 'We went to look at this "good land" that George speaks about and, having eventually managed to get there after three days and nights without food,' the community gasped at such a ghastly thought, 'we arrived to walk the breadth and length. And do you know what we found?'

The multitude of rodents didn't really need to be told for, by the way they had injected a mournful note into their trembling voices, it was pretty obvious what they'd discovered.

'It is indeed a good land,' they began, 'but it is also a land of rats...'

A ripple of muffled squeaks spread throughout the community while a group of female rodents at the rear fainted and had to be resuscitated.

The field mouse raised his voice to be heard above the hubbub of noise. 'And not only rats, but rats the size of cats who towered over us like giraffes and elephants. And they thought that we were earthworms, we were so small in comparison...'

'...And then there were the hawks,' a second continued, 'swift and ruthless, they catch everything that they swoop on and there's nothing that can escape from their gaze. They miss nothing that scurries along on the ground.'

The entire left-hand side of the crowd began to shake violently with the thought that their little ones might be an easy prey for such prolific predators. They were extremely concerned for their own safety, too.

'But don't forget,' a third lowered his voice to have the community strain their ears to listen before squeaking loudly to induce fright, 'don't forget the foxes.'

The field mice leapt into the air as one rodent, squeaking fearful noises that panicked the dormice to run about the room wildly like headless chickens in search of their beaks.

Hamsters turned to one another asking, 'Would George bring us into this land? It can't possibly be "good".'

George the Hamster rose to his paws once more and motioned with his hand for silence. The noise gradually subsided as they saw he was ready to speak a second time.

'It *is* a good land,' he began. 'If it wasn't a good land, would there be very much life in it?'

The hamsters nodded their agreement.

'Besides,' he continued. 'you forget what this land was like when I first came here. It was a land that presented us with problems that none of us had ever faced, obstacles that we never thought we'd overcome in all our wildest dreams, barriers that looked as if they'd never be torn down. *But we overcame them!* And we will overcome *everything* that stands in our way!'

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'No matter that we've not known these difficulties before - we are well able to subjugate any enemy that raises its head against us.

'Fellow rodents, don't let this opportunity pass you by! This door that's opened before us may not swing this wide again and it's up to us to enter in to all that lies before us!'

The meeting fell strangely quiet. George's exhortation had captured the vision of many, while others had dismissed it as a 'famous last word'.

After a few moments George began his final address. 'I can see that many of you are not convinced,' his voice was saddened by the hardness that had descended on some of those he'd most admired, 'but it's only right that those who want to move on into this new land should travel with me soon when Lee and Kath leave.

'I don't pour scorn on you, my friends, if you choose to stay. But time presses on and there is so much to plan before we can be assured of the success of our move - search your hearts and decide on this matter. Those of you who will journey with me away from this place, come back tomorrow and we will begin to map out our strategy...'

'...and so it was that a hundred and fifty three rodents (most of whom were hamsters, though there were not a few dormice amongst them) pledged themselves to move on into this good land,' Harriet concluded.

'Well?' I asked after a long pause. 'Is it a "good land" like George said?'

Harriet smiled and held her paws out wide as she said, 'It's bigger and better than all our wildest dreams. There's more fruit, more food, more room, more everything than there was in the other place.'

'And what about the predators?' Kath asked.

'There are some,' she replied, 'but there are some everywhere. There were some there and there are some here. But because there are more predators here, there are more places to hide from them and more opportunities to defeat them.'

Harriet looked at us both serenely and apologised for having to leave when there was so much more that she wanted to relate. But she assured us that she'd be back when she had more time to tell us what George had wanted us to know.

I remember lying down to go to sleep that night and saying to Kath, 'You know, when George died I thought that that was going to be the end of the stories. But it feels like this is just a new beginning...'

INTRODUCTION

We met with Harriet intermittently over the next weeks whenever she popped in from her busy schedule with the community.

Or perhaps I should say that *she* met with *us*.

After all, we didn't go out of our way to find her (and, even if we had, we probably wouldn't have been successful). It was always Harriet who made her appearance like an actor from the wings who dramatically enters the play to say some immortal words before disappearing once more from the audience's view until another opportune moment.

We learnt a great deal about George and about the community as a whole, though there just isn't the space to put all to paper - some of it was very enigmatic, anyhow, and we don't fully understand what she told us.

The following lines are about those meetings and the stories that she related. We have tried to keep them in chronological order but, occasionally, it's seemed best to transpose the odd story in order to make it flow better.

This is Harriet's work, not our own. Though we have worked quite hard in committing these words to paper, the content and inspiration has been entirely hers and we've tried to remain as true to what was said as possible.

THE FIRST MEETING - THE ZOO

Harriet cleared her throat with a shrill squeak before standing upright on her two hind legs and projecting her voice across the space to where we were sitting.

It was a simple poem, though charged full with meaning, and we watched and listened intently to each squeak and squink, each inflection and mood change, each movement of the eye and gesture of the hand:

'The hamsters' day out at the zoo was a laugh.
They saw chimpanzees, hyenas, giraffes;
They saw all the beasts locked up in their cages;
They saw all the keepers collecting their wages;
They saw all the humans who'd just come to see
That choosing their movements was the meaning of "free".'

We both applauded as she drew to a close. Harriet closed her ears (the frequency of hand-clapping has an adverse affect on hamsters' hearing) and curtsied.

'Was that one of George's?' Kath asked.

'Oh yes,' she replied, 'one of the many that he never got round to committing to paper before he died. He used to recite them when the community met to share their food each evening - that's how we all came to learn them off by heart. But,' she said sadly, 'you really had to hear George speak them to appreciate how good they were.'

'Nonsense,' we both reassured her, 'you recited it beautifully.'

'Thank you.'

'Tell me,' I began, 'was that written from one of George's researches that he was always doing?'

'No, no,' she smiled warmly, 'that was written from first hand experience. A lot of his stories were, you know, that's what made him so respected as being a perceptive rodent. There were very few occasions that he wouldn't gain wisdom from the situations that he found himself in.'

'But it speaks about a zoo,' Kath ventured. 'George never went to the zoo.'

Harriet looked at us knowingly, 'Well, he certainly didn't go on his own cos some of us went with him. It was quite cold, too, that day. I remember George telling us all to wrap up warm for when we jumped out of your sandwich box as it was a very chilly...'

'Our sandwich box?' we said together.

'Oh yes,' she didn't appear to mind being interrupted in mid-sentence - perhaps she'd planned it this way to see our reaction. 'Do you remember the time you went to London Zoo with friends of yours for the weekend?'

We both nodded.

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'Well, that was when we all went with you. There were some in the community who were directly related to the hamster exhibits down there so we decided to kill two rats with one stone and make a mini-break of it. Numbers were limited, it's true, but seventeen of us managed to make the journey down with you to where you were staying. From there we decided, because of the space, that it would only be wise for eleven of us to stowaway on board your lunch-box when you went to the zoo that Saturday.'

I could tell by the way Harriet looked at us that our faces must have been a picture so she continued.

'It was really all *very* funny,' she giggled. 'Do you remember seeing the hamster collection and remarking to Kath that one of them looked like George?'

'Er...yes, now you come to mention it, I do. It was only an observation, though, I didn't think...' I stopped in mid-sentence.

'Yes,' Harriet said, 'it *was* George. While the normal exhibits were spending the day with their relatives, George and the others took it in turns to pretend to be the specimens that the people had come to see, little realising what they were witnessing.'

Kath was intrigued. 'And what did he do with the time when he wasn't pretending to be a part of the exhibits?'

'Now that's what I wanted to tell you about,' she squeaked. 'George travelled the length and breadth of the zoo talking to the various animals that were there. It was very illuminating...'

'I'm bored!' said the bear. 'Nothing to do except splash about in this lukewarm water!'

George listened intently, trying to sympathise with his furry friend.

'I remember the days when we'd run free across fresh mountain streams and catch salmon from the surging current. That was far better than eating this loathsome food that we get presented with. Look at it!' He held it up for George to sniff at - it certainly didn't increase one's appetite.

'Freedom is a high price to pay for safety,' he continued. 'Even though we're safe, cared for, protected, what I wouldn't give for half an hour to run round as I chose and feel once more the coolness of the mountain forest air!'

The bear hung his head low, closed his eyes and slumped his shoulders forward.

George felt a little out of place. After all, although he was always presumed to be captive by his masters, there wasn't a time when he could ever say that he'd been 'caged' with no place to go if he so chose.

Perhaps he felt the call for freedom which came from the beast's heart.

Perhaps he just imagined it.

Nevertheless, he turned round and left the cage as quickly as he could excuse himself, explaining to his host that there were so many different animals to visit that he needed to be going on his way if he was to see them all before his owners were to leave.

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George felt drawn to the tigers but he stayed only a very small amount of time. When they started reminiscing about hunting game and hearing the crunch and crack of bones between their teeth, he decided that he'd best flee for his own safety into the quieter cages of the apes where a friendly rodent would always be welcome.

'Hello,' the chimpanzee shouted, 'do you want a ride across the bars of the cage?'

Before he had a chance to object, he was grasped securely, lifted and placed on the ape's shoulders while he swung backwards and forwards at tremendous speeds that sent his heart racing.

'Is this what you normally do?' George asked.

'It's what we normally do *now*,' replied the chimp. 'There was a time when we lived free in the trees of the forest, a time when we took pleasure in hunting for our daily food. But that's all gone, now, ever since these bars became the boundaries of our experience!'

George wished that he hadn't asked.

He tried to change the subject quickly. 'Still, there're plenty of other apes to play with - and I'm sure that these bananas are the best that money can buy.'

The chimpanzee grunted a response. 'If you like bananas, I suppose they are but, personally, I prefer variety in my diet. Just look at the weight I've put on since I've been here, will you? When have you seen an ape in the wild as fat as I am?'

George had to admit that his guest was a little overweight, but he truthfully hadn't noticed it until it'd been pointed out to him.

'Bananas in the morning, bananas in the evening, bananas at supper time! But freedom meant that there was always diversity in our diet, a change. Each and every day was new and different because you never knew what was going to happen next.'

George could've done without this diatribe, he was beginning to feel as if his day out at the zoo was being personally marred by the ones he'd come to enjoy meeting.

At the earliest possible moment he headed for the sheep pen.

'If anyone,' thought George, 'is able to accept the way things are, then it'll be the sheep.'

He found them on the far side of the zoo taking the regulation afternoon siesta in the hazy sunshine.

'Hello,' he said, 'my name's George. I'm visiting the zoo today...'

'Today? Today?' said the sheep. 'You should think yourself fortunate that you don't have to live here permanently! Here, look at this!'

The sheep raised herself up onto her legs and groaned with fatigue.

'Come over here a minute,' she said as she led him away to a small trough near the shed. 'There! Look at that!'

George stared blankly at what lay before him and couldn't work out what the sheep was getting at.

'It's only a pile of straw,' he ventured, 'just like...'

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'Exactly!' bleated the ewe. "'Only a pile of straw" - do you realise what it's like to have to eat straw every day of your life?'

'Well, no, I don't actually.'

'No variety, no change - nothing but this stupid straw! I remember the days when we used to run free.'

The sheep stared into the far distance imagining a time that she'd been told about, though she made it out to be her own experience. 'A time when we'd eat the good of the land and roam wherever our feet would carry us in search of lush pasture. A time when we could drink deeply from fresh water that settled in hollows after the sky had rained upon the earth.'

'But now,' the sheep paused, 'now all we have is *this*! Am I baaamy to want the freedom I once knew?'

George couldn't answer. In fact, he felt decidedly ashamed, even condemned. He'd hoped that he could rejoice with his fellow creatures about the wonders of being alive, but all he'd discovered was a group of animals who bewailed their lost freedom.

He exited from the sheep pen and was wandering back to complete his time as a hamster exhibit when he saw a strange sight.

At first, he didn't realise what he'd seen, but within half a dozen strides or so, his eyes informed his brain, waking him up to the potential of the event.

A zoo keeper had entered the bear's cage to feed him, bringing some more salmon and fresh water that he swapped with what was left from the old batch. But as he exited the cage he did what he'd probably never done before - he forgot to lock the gate behind him!

There was the bear fast asleep and totally oblivious to the fact that he was free.

George waited for the keeper to move far enough away to the next animal den before scampering over to the bear to declare to him loudly, 'Bear! Bear! You're free! The day that you've hoped for has come! Wake up! Wake up! You're free!'

The bear opened his eyes to see George standing on his nose shouting wildly at him, 'You're free! You're free!'

'Mmm...what?' his head was still a little muzzy as the reality of what was being said came to his understanding. 'I'm free? What do you mean I'm "free"?''

'The keeper!' George struggled for breath as he'd run over so fast to wake him. 'He's left the cage door open! You can reach out and take your freedom.'

The bear stared at him intently, then at the door that allowed a two inch crack of light to shine through. He rose to his feet, George still perched high up on his nose, and sniffed towards the opening.

'No,' he said, 'no, I can't.'

George looked at him puzzled. 'Why not? Isn't this the day that you've wanted to come? The day when you can avail yourself of freedom?'

The bear began to shake.

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'But how could I cope out there?' he said. 'Here I have all my needs provided for me, but there,' he pointed, 'out there, what will become of me?'

'Bear, you won't get another opportunity like this one! You can have your freedom *today* if you want it, you only have to reach out and take it!'

The bear looked at the gap once more and shook his head - George had to hold on tight to avoid being thrown off.

'No,' he said, 'it's not that I don't *want* my freedom, it's just that I'd have to leave behind everything that I have here if I'm going to receive it. How could I leave behind my half-dead tree, the water that I play in and the food that I eat? How could I forsake this way of living that I'm so used to, to venture out into...into that world out there that might not give me anything?'

'But that's the whole point of freedom!' George said. 'Freedom is leaving behind those things that restrict you even if you feel secure in them and venturing out into the great unknown. You were meant to be free, my friend, and to live as you were created to be. And now, *now* you have that opportunity!'

The bear slunk down onto his side and closed his eyes.

'If only the decision was as simple as you make it out to be,' he growled.

George sighed with frustration and watched as the small, grey-haired keeper rushed, as fast as his legs would carry him, to the open door and securely bolted it from the outside.

'The day of freedom,' thought George, 'has passed you by, my friend. You could have been free...'

'...and, as George told us later when we were all safely home, the bear had even exercised a degree of freedom in his decision to stay captive - but it wasn't a decision that brought him into a fuller experience of what should have been his.'

'Yes, that's right' I said. Then, slightly changing the subject because I was intrigued, I asked, 'How many hamsters did you say were stowed away in my lunch box?'

'Eleven in all, but they weren't all in *yours* - there were four of you, remember?'

I thought long and hard, trying to work out just when the opportunity had arisen for them to get on board. At the sandwich-making stage? No, surely not - they'd been put in the fridge to keep over night and I couldn't see how a bundle of rodents could survive that long in a chilled atmosphere.

But the boxes came directly out of the fridge and into our bags and they were most definitely empty. Besides, the bags hadn't been left unattended for any great length of time that entire morning, so just when *had* that opportunity arisen for them to hop on board?

My face must have shown signs of strain on it for Harriet began to chuckle.

'You'll never work it out, so don't try,' she squeaked. 'Now, please excuse me, I must get back to the community before the evening meal.'

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'Yes, of course,' we said and, in an instant, she was gone.

THE SECOND MEETING - THE GOLF COURSE

'Are you going to get another hamster now that George has snuffed it?'

Anne and Tony are two of our friends who don't have the ministry of tact (we've changed their names in order to safeguard their identity and to prevent us from being sued).

They came round shortly after George's demise, attempting to 'lift our spirits' as they thought we'd be grief-stricken by his departure. They sat facing us in front of the window alcove with a full-length curtain hanging on either side.

'Pushing up the daisies now is he?' they said.

'No,' I replied seriously, 'the sunflower seeds.'

They found this funny and continued laughing for a full thirty seconds before simmering down into another assault.

'How long did it take you to bury him?' Anne inquired.

I was just about to tactfully answer (for I knew what was coming) when Kath jumped in and said just the thing I dreaded. 'Lee took ages. He wanted to make sure everything was just right.'

'Ages?' Tony had a smile forming on his lips, 'You're supposed to wait til they're dead before you bury them, aren't you?'

Both he and Anne guffawed loudly almost spilling their cups of tea.

Of all the people I could have done without visiting us it was this couple. They had the ability to change any party into a funeral and any wake into a comedy show. Their sensitivity to a situation could be compared to telling a famine victim that even if he was fed he would probably die of indigestion.

Just then the curtain moved, which was strange as neither of our guests had touched it. Perhaps it was my imagination.

A couple of moments later it happened again, my mind now diverted from the conversation as the couple continued to drone on.

Then, from where the curtain hung over the window sill, a small pink nose appeared, sniffing whether the way was clear of predators.

Harriet emerged into both Kath's and my view as she trotted joyfully across the flat surface, taking her seat directly behind our two guests.

My mouth dropped open and I'm sure that my face must have drained of all vestiges of life. Kath was equally gob-smacked and broke off her conversation abruptly so that both Anne and Tony thought that we'd seen something of interest through the window.

They turned to witness this event when their gaze met Harriet's who, by this time, had realised that we weren't alone and had frozen to the spot to try and avoid being spotted - unfortunately, it didn't work.

'You've had him stuffed!' Tony shouted out in surprise, putting out his hand to lift up what he thought would be a solid ornament.

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'Don't touch the ham...'

Barely had the words left my mouth when Harriet, realising that this human intended picking her up, gave a defiant hamster war cry and sank her teeth into his hand, returning to a 'stuffed' position immediately afterwards.

'YOWWWWWW!' Tony screamed as he jumped to his feet in pain, a warm stream of blood trickling down his arm. 'That hurts!'

Anne got up and tended her injured husband while Kath and I went about mopping up the tea that had cascaded over the full length of the floor.

'You could have been a bit more careful,' I said dryly, 'you've spilt your tea over the carpet. Do you know how much this is a square yard?'

'What about my finger?' Tony complained, 'Your hamster almost took my finger off!'

'Hamster?' Kath said, thinking very quickly, 'That's no hamster - that's a fly-catcher made in one's likeness. We picked it up in a novelty store, do you like it?'

Kath and I couldn't help looking at one another and grinning while Harriet continued to do one of the best impressions of a stuffed rodent that I've ever seen.

'Look at my finger!' Tony winced, 'Look how deep the wound is!'

'You must admit,' I said tongue-in-cheek, 'that if you'd been a fly you would've been dead by now. It's very effective, isn't it?'

'Think of it positively,' Kath continued, remembering how they'd consoled us over the loss of George, 'it's a good job that you don't play the guitar or you would've been out of action for weeks.'

Anne and Tony made their way out into the kitchen and ran water over the wound. Kath and I followed at a respectable distance, mopping up the blood from off the carpet.

Tony's index finger positively glowed with pain and his face was marked with lines of distress. Even though he tried to speak, the words just didn't come and Anne wrapped her handkerchief round the wound, apologised for having to leave so early in the evening and drove Tony to the hospital.

I remember saying to him as he got into the car, 'Tony, good will come out of this, I'm sure.'

And Kath responded with the consoling prophecy, 'Perhaps the Lord is saying to you that it's time to refrain from pointing the finger?'

I could see that he was unimpressed, but we said it with that much sincerity that he had no answer to give.

As the car went out onto the main road, we were already re-entering the living room to confront Harriet.

'You could have been discovered!' we said. 'Be more careful when you appear!'

'Sorry,' she squeaked, 'My sense of smell isn't what it used to be. I was sure that there was only you and Kath here.'

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'Never mind, all's well that ends well - you just rescued us from a very unproductive evening.'

'Can I get you something?' Kath asked. 'We cut open a couple of melons for our guests but, now they're gone, you're most welcome to some.'

'I'd love a piece,' she squeaked, 'I have a lot to tell you this evening...'

Harriet finished grooming the last vestiges of watermelon from her lips, paws and fur, and settled back comfortably into the downy cushion that was placed on the settee directly opposite.

'I think I'm right in saying that one of your favourite walks begins at the entrance to Lindrick Dale and continues via an old disused quarry through a farm, along the canal and through another quarry before returning to the starting point on the main road.'

'Yes, that's right,' I said. Kath nodded.

'Well, a very short journey away from one of the paths, there's a golf course where, at the rear of the fifteenth hole, a community of hamsters live. Now it was these rodents - though specifically the leaders of that group - who contacted us to request George to travel over to them to share about our developing community in the rural town where we were.'

'But how do you know that it's one of our favourite walks?' I enquired. My mind was a little slow in working. In fact, I hadn't heard any of the previous sentences she'd spoken, it was as if my brain had stuck on her first words.

Harriet ignored my question and continued, 'Now the distance from where we were was quite a way for a hamster so George, with his usual economy, decided that it was much better to hitch a lift with you both than to try and cover the distance himself.'

'Time forbids me to tell you the ins-and-outs of how he stowed away aboard your shoulder bag, or how he both exited and entered it shortly after you began and ended your walk.'

We both groaned. After all, we were both intrigued at how easily George seemed to have been able to use us as transport and we were hoping that on least one occasion Harriet might let it slip how it proved possible not just once but time after time after time.

Harriet raised a hand in apology and lowered her head.

'These are all things that are irrelevant to the experience that I'm about to relate...'

George the Hamster peered out from the fern covering and watched as his owners disappeared into the distance. He took a quick sip from the nearby stream and stretched his cramped paws back into life before deciding to begin his short journey eastwards to the rear of the fifteenth green.

He hadn't journeyed far when a loud chirp made him come to an abrupt halt.

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It certainly wasn't the sound of a predator. Rather, it had that certain ring to it that was reminiscent of an attempt at being threatening.

He peered through the undergrowth slowly, trying not to make any sudden movements, knowing that the slower he moved, the more likely his approach was to be tolerated.

'Oh, sorry,' cheeped the bird, 'I thought you were an adder.'

In front of him sat a tree sparrow circled within twigs and leaves for a nest, incubating eggs and protecting them from harm.

It was a common enough sight at this time of the year, only the location of the nest made it somewhat of a puzzle. You would have thought that a tree sparrow would have chosen to make her nest in the canopy high above, not on the floor of the wood where she'd be open to far greater attack.

George decided not to ask directly, but skirt round the issue and hope that the conversation came round to the subject - with a little prompting.

'My fault,' George began, 'I'm a stranger to these parts. I'm not used to seeing a sparrow sitting on a nest *on the ground*.'

The sparrow seemed to ignore the emphasised phrase but tweeted gleefully, 'Come over and see this wonderful egg that I'm hatching.'

'Parents!' thought George. 'Why is it that parents the world over think that their egg is always the most beautiful one that's ever been laid?'

The sparrow moved over as he approached, though she still half-covered them, guarding them with a certain healthy jealousy.

'There!' she said proudly, 'What do you think?'

George began to fulfil the pleasantries, 'They're the most beau...Golf balls? You're trying to hatch golf balls?'

'They're not golf balls!' she chirped indignantly, 'they're eggs!'

He rubbed his eyes and brought them back into focus.

'No, they're golf balls. Believe me, they're golf balls.'

'They are *not* golf balls, I'm telling you, they're *eggs*!'

'Let me show you by tapping the case.' George put out a paw to rap the exterior, but the sparrow, protective of her charge, shot her beak out and pecked a warning.

'Predator!' she shouted. 'You're a rat in disguise come to steal my eggs!'

'I'm *not* a r...'

'Oh yes you are!' and she pecked him on his soft body. 'You *rat*!'

'I'm *not* a r...Ow...I'm not a r...Ow, don't peck me!...They're golf b...Ouch, that hurts!'

In the end, George fled with the sparrow's words still ringing in his ears as he raced away from that part of the wood.

'Rat! Rat! RAT!'

'A sparrow hatching golf balls?!' thought George. 'Whatever next?!'

It wasn't long before he found out.

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As a Magpie swooped toward him, he dived for cover and remained motionless until he was sure that it lost sight of him. Actually, it hadn't seen him at all, it was just that he was in the attack path as it swooped in to pick up something that it'd spotted from high up in the trees.

There was a rustle of leaves as the Magpie descended to the ground, then a frantic chirping as the tree sparrow that he'd just met, tried to fight it off.

'Let go of my egg!' she shrilled. 'Go pick on someone your own size!'

But the magpie was aloft, with a golf ball in its beak, cawing approval as it descended to land in a stony clearing that lay a yard or so away from where George was hiding.

The magpie carefully placed the ball onto a firm rock, elevated himself up to his full height and brought his beak down onto the hard shell, trying to break through into the yolk.

George winced with the thought of the pain while the bird winced the reality of it.

The bird tried a second time - though with a bit less ferocity - then gathered the ball up into its beak and flew vertically some eight or nine feet, positioning itself to be directly over the hardest rock in the clearing.

He let go suddenly, intending what he thought to be an egg to smash onto the hard surface below but, instead, it rebounded directly upwards.

The magpie, who by this time was descending rapidly to guzzle the food, met the golf ball halfway down on its ascent and it shot past him at such a speed that the bird flapped erratically, stalled and crash-landed on the stony floor below.

Dazed, George heard him squawk, 'Rats! It must have been hard-boiled!'

George scampered away while the bird was recovering and made his way hurriedly towards the back of the green where the community were awaiting his arrival.

'Greetings!' the welcoming party squeaked as he entered the burrow. Many rodents rushed forward with some floral arrangements and placed them over his head as a sign of goodwill.

'Greetings!' he responded. 'Boy, oh boy, you won't believe the things I've just seen!'

The hamsters were concerned. 'What things? Is there danger?'

'Oh no, not danger. Insanity, yes, but not danger.'

He groomed himself before relating the incidents. The community laughed loud, then louder, then creased up with tears rolling down their cheeks as he continued his tale. Even George found it hard to control himself at a couple of points and had to pause to catch his breath before continuing.

When he concluded, one of the leaders explained. 'You've just met mad Max the magpie,' he squeaked. 'He's an absolutely nutty bird. Thinks that throwaway tees are hedgehog spikes!'

'The other bird you met was Squidgepot the tree sparrow. Every golf ball she ever finds, she builds a nest round and tries to hatch it. We've tried talking to her but, in the

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end, we had to give up cos she absolutely refuses to listen to reason. We even went to the trouble of rolling another ball that we found in a different part of the wood to where she was so that she could see that her "egg" and the ball were the same thing, but all she did was accuse us of nest-stealing and cradle-snatching!

'Honestly,' he concluded, 'these animals just live in perpetual unreality! We're the only sane ones around here!'

They all laughed heartily until the humour subsided, whereupon a rodent came from the rear of the welcoming party and motioned with his paw.

'George, please be our guest at the community feast. It's not often that we have rodents who are as honoured as you, so we've broken into our special reserve and have laid out a meal of apricots for your enjoyment.'

'Apricots?' George smiled warmly. 'I love apricots!'

The party entered the large underground cavity where a simple napkin lay covering the festive meal. George took his place at the head as their honorary guest, said a few short words to those gathered before him and took his seat to a round of applause.

The serving rodents scampered over to the napkin and grabbed it firmly in their paws at the four corners. The community awaited, with eager longing, the unveiling of the apricots that had been saved for just such a special occasion.

As the rodents lifted the covering from the food, the community squeaked with pleasure at what lay before them - but when George saw it he went pale with horror.

For there, in the midst of the community, was piled a collection of pale yellow golf balls.

THE THIRD MEETING - THE BARN

I saw Tony a few days later in town as he sat on a park bench with his finger outstretched on the armrest to support it while he ate his lunch time sandwiches.

It had been covered quite professionally by the hospital (or, at least, I presume it was their handiwork) but, even so, the padding inflated its size so that the two fingers it was between were splayed outwards to allow for the room needed.

I would have gone over to see him and shaken him firmly by the hand but time was going on and I had to be back in the office.

The following week, Harriet appeared again late one night in our living room while we were both reading. It had long since gone dark and the side light cast shadows across the floor towards the front door.

'Hello, folks!' she squeaked. 'Is the coast clear?'

We both caught our breath from the shock and laughed.

'Apart from us both having heart attacks, everything's just fine!'

'Good, good!' Harriet ran over to the cushion that we always now kept propped up by the leg of the easy chair, climbed on and reclined lazily, making the softness support her weight by wriggling herself into a hole.

'I've been all over the house already to check that there's no one else around - I couldn't show myself yesterday cos you had guests all evening, but I heard you say that you needed a night in tonight.

'The community's already got enough food for the week so we're all having a few nights' rest - well-deserved, too, we've worked ourselves crazy to stock up our reserves when the food's in such short supply.'

'Why didn't you say?' Kath butted in. 'Get some of your community to come and take some of George's old store - we've not had a chance to get rid of it yet.'

'Er, no, they wouldn't do that. They're rather proud, you see - wouldn't take anything that doesn't come "the way a hamster normally finds it". But,' she smiled, 'if I tell you where to hide it in the garden, I could always lead them there as if by chance.'

'Fine by me, name your place.'

A brief description was given and, after we'd located it in our own minds, we changed the subject.

'Tell me about this community,' I began. It was a question that had been echoing in my mind for a couple of days ever since I'd re-read some of the literature I'd bought when we'd first got George. 'How do you manage to live together? All the experts I've read say that hamsters are solitary animals.'

'You mean Syrian hamsters are supposed to be solitary animals,' she corrected me, 'Russians positively love each other's company - but, yes, you're quite right about our variety, we're loners.'

'Then how do you "get on" together?'

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

'It's not easy,' she stared off into the distance a moment before continuing, 'but we just *do*.'

I looked at Kath hopelessly. It always seemed like she'd answered the question, but we never really understood the answer she gave us.

'Perhaps hamsters are on a different plane to us,' I thought.

'Don't you ever fight?' Kath asked.

'Oh yes, frequently, but there's rarely ever any harm done - it's all pretty playful stuff.'

'But what about those things that annoy you in the other animals. Do you just tolerate them for the sake of your unity?'

'Oh *no!*' she squealed loudly. 'Most certainly *not!*'

Kath and I both jumped. Harriet's voice had changed quite dramatically in a few short seconds, but she returned to normal to explain.

'That would be "unification" not "unity". There's a world of difference between those two.'

To both Kath and I the words sounded the same, so at first we failed to understand what she meant, but after another question she offered to explain.

""Unity" is what you get when there are many animals that are all the same. Like when hamsters live in a community or, to a lesser degree, when other rodents (apart from rats) join with us. We're all the same species at heart and we fundamentally behave in the same way.

'But "unification",' a cold shiver ran the full length of her back, 'is a bad word with us. It's compromising who you are so that you can try and be united with a species that isn't the same as your own. It means that you have to refrain from being what you are and try and bring about a unity that never has existed and never will exist.'

'But we all must "give and take", Harriet, what's wrong with "unification"?'

""Give and take" *within* the species maintains the unity, but "give and take" outside the species tries to create something that doesn't exist and will never exist.'

She stopped squeaking quite abruptly, then smiled.

'I remember a story that George once told us about "unification", would you like to hear it?'

'We're all ears,' we said in harmony.

'Funny,' said Harriet, 'you look as if you've only got two each...'

Eleven mice and the same number of cats sat down in a small area inside the farmer's barn to commence their first historic meeting of the Animal Unification Committee.

Perhaps that last phrase doesn't mean very much to you, the reader, so I'd best explain the aims of this organisation before I go any further with my story.

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The Animal Unification Committee is the name given to any group of species or sub-species who decide for whatever reason that they want to be united with another completely different species or sub-species.

The aims and goals of each 'committee' may differ according to the objectives of those present, but the ultimate target of all those that come together is to break down barriers that exist between different animals in order to make them one.

In this case, the two species concerned were the cats and the rodents (in the shape of the house mice).

You may, perhaps, be wondering just what would make these two groups desire a working agreement that would join them together as allies and colleagues-in-fur, but it is indeed strange sometimes what prompts two almost total opposites to attempt a unification.

'Fellow rodents and felines,' a leading house mouse began to squeak but, before he had a chance to continue, another interrupted him.

'You can't use those terms!' he objected. 'We're supposed to be breaking down barriers! Those labels keep us apart and don't make any progress towards tearing down the wall of separation that exists between us.'

The leading mouse thought deeply for a moment then spoke to the group of animals gathered before him. 'Well now, what do you want to be called? What name is inoffensive to both our species?'

The first suggestion put forward - 'The Whiskered-faced ones' - was considered to be too clumsy by most of the animals and the second - 'The Furrers' - had to be rejected on the ground that, for a house mouse, it was extremely difficult to pronounce.

The third - 'The Groomers' - met with purrs and squeaks of approval and the subsequent vote showed that all ten house mice present had opted for this label.

There was only one abstention on the cat side and this wasn't due to dissent but to an old feline named Tom who was taking an afternoon nap and didn't manage to wake in time for the raising of the paws.

'Dear Groomers,' the leading mouse began again, 'we are gathered here today to participate in the joining together of two different species, to make history together.

'From these humble beginnings I'm sure that an audible voice will echo throughout the realm of animalland to unite all creatures everywhere under one banner, to remove the compulsion for them to be labelled by species and to be fully integrated into a working unity.'

There were purrs of approval throughout the barn, the cats' eyes gently closing and opening again to affirm this last statement. The mice, too, were in full agreement and all nine of them squeaked contentedly while twitching their noses in the air to signal their approval.

The leader continued.

'Groomers, it is time for us to work out the common ground that exists between...'

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A cat burped loudly which temporarily diverted his mind from the matter at hand, but he regained his composure very quickly and repeated himself as if nothing had happened.

'Yes, it is time for us to lay the foundation down that will be the cornerstone of our unity. Let those among us who have something to contribute rise to their paws and squeak or purr purposefully.'

So saying he sat down at the feet of a large black and white cat that had a bell securely fastened to its neck. Indeed, it had been at this cat's insistence that the meeting had taken place at all, the initiative for this unification lying solely with him.

But it had been far from one-sided as all the mice for some time had wanted to call a truce in the war that had existed between themselves and the felines since before anyone could remember.

The barn fell silent for a few moments, the eight mice feeling so comfortable as they lounged on the cats' warm fur that the purpose of the meeting seemed to ebb and flow in their minds along with their desire to curl up in a ball and snooze.

Another cat burped (or was it the same one?) as a tortoise-shell elevated herself to her paws and addressed the crowd.

'Groomers,' she purred softly, 'it is, indeed, a great privilege to be here with you tonight to be one of the founder members of this Unification Committee that I am sure will sweep across the face of this land that we live in.'

The mice were listening as intently as they could, but each of the seven could see very plainly from where they were laying that a thin piece of string was hanging from her mouth.

'Very strange,' one squeaked to another close by. 'I don't remember that when we first met her - where do you think she got that stuck to her?'

'Beats me,' came the reply, 'but if we're going to be united with them, we'd better do the right thing and remove it.'

As she ended her speech, curling to the ground softly, one of the mice rushed over and reached up a paw to pull at the string as the crowd purred and squeaked.

'Here' said the rodent, 'let me help you!'

The string came away well enough - only the string wasn't, at all.

The cats began to eye one another worriedly as the mouse came to the realisation of what he was holding in his paws.

He looked round the barn at the other pairs of rodent eyes that stared at his now ashen face. He began counting to himself, 'One..two...three...me, that's four...'

A face appeared from below a paw, '...five...'

He repeated the number in his mind.

'Five.'

His mind was puzzled.

'Five?'

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He counted again.

'One.. .two...three...and me, that's four...'

He stopped at four.

'Where's five?' he squeaked aloud.

'And where's four?' purred the cat above him.

'And three?' growled another.

'Yes,' said one cat, 'that meeting was a splendid success!'

'Absolutely,' purred another. 'The mice have become fully integrated into our lives.'

'That's right,' the one behind miaowed. 'They've lost their own identity in order that they might gain ours.'

Another cat burped.

As they strolled off to find a warm quiet place to snooze, one of them was heard to say, 'Now which other species do you think we might win over to our way of thinking?'

'Have I made my point?' concluded Harriet.

'Yes, most certainly,' we agreed.

I looked at the clock which showed it to be just gone eleven.

'So much for an early night,' I thought.

I turned towards Harriet. 'Please excuse us, but we really must be getting to bed. We have a lot to do tomorrow and we need to be up early in the morning.'

'Ah yes, of course,' she jumped up onto her paws and walked across the living room carpet. 'I keep forgetting that you humans are awake during the wrong part of the day. I'll see you when I next get a chance, and,' she turned towards Kath, 'don't forget to put that food out for us in a couple of days' time, will you?'

'It will be there.'

'Thank you. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

NOT QUITE A MEETING WITH HARRIET

I feel that it's necessary for me to outline the last few weeks of George's life as it will serve as a fitting introduction to the following poem.

We had known that George was unwell for a while - all the tell-tale signs of old age were there like sleeping more often (twenty-three and a half hours instead of the usual twenty-three that we came to expect from him) and not eating as much. He also wasn't running around his compound with his usual lemming-like speed and he often left juicy morsels alone that would, at one time, have been hastily devoured.

A few weeks before his demise, while I was cleaning out his nest compartment (I tried *not* to clean him out during those last days as I knew that, if I was as old as he was - relatively speaking - then I wouldn't want someone to keep changing *my* bedclothes), I found a piece of writing that George had scratched with a sunflower seed shell onto his Rotastak wall.

I hurriedly copied down the characters so that he wouldn't know that I'd discovered it and, in some spare time that evening, I set about translating it into English.

It read:

'My writing paw is sore
I will lay my pen to rest,
Though while I live I will write more
And make the last my best.'

At first, it appeared to me to be a meaningless piece of doggerel that George was often coming out with, hamscripts of which I would continually find amongst his old soiled bedding that I'd throw out each week.

But it all fell into place a few days after his demise when I set about cleaning out his nest compartment for the last time.

It was then I discovered a very long hamscript written on shred after shred of nesting material and stuck, with some hamster spit, to the sides of the compartment.

'More silly rhymes,' I began to think until I noticed that the verses seemed to flow together and develop a story as they progressed vertically downwards toward the floor.

I now completely forgot about the nest cleaning and hastily set about translating what I've set out below for your perusal.

I believe that I'm right in saying that this is the last literary composition that George ever undertook and completed before he 'went the way of all hamsters'.

The four-line verse that I'd found previously must have referred to this hamscript that he'd been working on. George's determination to press on to be a better writer than ever before - even when he knew that the day of his death fast approached - was truly amazing and something that I would never have believed was possible in a rodent.

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

In the deep recesses of a darkened wood,
Where the foxes prowled and the great oaks stood,
There once was a rodent who never should've
Walked the ground of old planet earth.

Wherever he roamed there was a foul-smelling stench
Whether high in the trees or low in a trench.
You could tell when a branch was permanently drenched
With the foul-smelling fume of rat.

A nose to the ground would reveal his smell.
There was no mistaking what was plain to tell.
If you filled your lungs you didn't feel too well
'Cos the smell got right up your nose.

This odious rat brought disease and death
That came with his presence and came from his breath.
Who he targeted next you never could guess
But you hoped that his prey wasn't you.

Then out of the east came a bold young ham
Who went by the name of Fearless Sam
And he came to the forest to take his stand
'Gainst the foul-smelling rat of doom.

Weeks went past but the rat wasn't seen.
All the animals said how the wood seemed so clean.
Then faintly at first came a whiff so obscene
That they knew that the rat had returned.

He had been on his hols for a fortnight or so,
But he hadn't left word where he'd planned to go.
It was a truthful word that the beasts didn't know,
Though they'd hoped that he'd left them for good.

The ham and the rat stood face to face,
Each standing tall and fixed to the place.
The rat gave a snarl and the ham's heart raced,
But the ham stood his ground ne'ertheless.

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'You challenge my right,' said the rat to the ham,
'To rule in this wood with a forceful hand.
Know you will die you ill-fated lamb!
But the ham stood his ground ne'ertheless.

'I've lived in the forest and they all know me -
A harbinger of death and envoy of disease.
So show some respect - get down on your knees!
But the ham stood his ground ne'ertheless.

'You're a weak-willed mouse! You were left by your dad!
You're a wretched example of what it means to be glad!
Your do-gooding life can't destroy my bad!
You're a weed! You're a pig! You are scum!

The ham had been silent, he'd just held his peace,
But if you'd looked in his mind you'd've seen he was pleased
For he saw the defeat of death and disease,
As the price had already been paid.

'You come with such strength,' said the ham to the rat,
'Yet I am so weak and I'm feeling so flat.
You come with such power, with a venomous attack.
Yes, I know that you're stronger than I.'

Then Sam took a breath and he spoke the rat's name,
'O how foolish I'd be if I played your game.
Not on your terms but mine is how you'll be slain,
For the vict'ry's already been won.

'The death that you bring has already been died;
The grief that you bring has already been cried;
The love that you hate has once been supplied;
And the vict'ry's already been won.

'Now there is light where there once was a stain;
Now there is joy where there once lived pain;
In all of my loss I find all that I gain;
And I'll fight you with what has been done.'

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The rat lost his smile that had beamed from his face,
And he took one step back - then two - then he raced
Away from the ham to a safer place,
For he knew that the ham wouldn't lose.

The forest was cleansed, the smell disappeared,
Love made its home and hope replaced fear;
And the beasts all laughed with joyful tears,
As a new smell pervaded the air.

THE FOURTH MEETING - THE INSCRIPTION

'I don't know if I should tell you this or not,' squeaked Harriet. 'It wasn't one of the things that George specifically told me to relate to you after his demise.'

We listened intently to what she was about to say, expecting to hear a magnificent revelation that one only knows if you're 'on the inside'.

Harriet scratched behind her left ear with her paw then shuffled about on the cushion that sat in the middle of the room before continuing.

'Now,' she lowered her voice in case there were any listening in to our conversation, 'when you went away on your holidays last year during summer, George stayed in the house for the entire week.'

She stopped abruptly and returned to grooming her wet fur (it was raining outside and she'd got soaked in the mad dash across the yard to the house).

'Was that it?' I thought. 'Was that the sum total of the revelation that we're so privileged to receive?'

But, there again, perhaps that *was* quite a statement. After all, the implication was that George *hadn't* stowed away on board our hand luggage. He *hadn't* escaped from the house that we'd left him in.

'Yes,' I concluded, 'perhaps that *is* quite an extraordinary piece of information.'

But Harriet continued, there was more. 'As you know, George was none too well and we all felt that he would be best to take it easy while you were away. That's when it happened...'

'What happened?' Kath asked.

'Not so fast, not so fast! First, I must tell you what George didn't instruct me to inform you about.'

Again, she flicked a drop of rainwater from her fur onto the cushion and sniffed at it to see if it was edible before returning to her discourse. 'Now, as you know, you arranged for the next-door neighbours to look after him. Yes?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'And they agreed to feed him every night?'

'Yes. But I don't see...'

'You will in a moment. George was most grateful that they'd agreed to look after him, so he composed a poem for them and left it out for them to find when they came in that first evening.'

'What?' I said. 'But they'd've thought that I left it out!'

'What does that matter?'

'They'll probably be convinced that I'm a loony!'

'If they weren't already certain about it then it most certainly would have been the nail that sealed the coffin lid,' Kath pondered aloud.

Before I had a moment to say anymore, Harriet began:

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'Thank you Sara - Thank you Stew - Thank you Alice, too.
Thanks for coming o'er this week and for giving me my food.
I really am quite old and grey and sleep more than I play,
So I shouldn't be much trouble through the night or in the day.

My owners, as you know, have gone away to have their hols,
But my time here all by myself will never turn out dull.
For I've escaped from many lands - even this compound -
So watch your feet when you come in - I could be on the ground.

Please feed me fruit and feed me veg and other things besides.
I'm sure Lee's left a list for you - so let that be your guide.
But apricots - and melons, too - are two of my favourite foods.
Then come peppers, coconut and grape - I don't like citrus fruits.

Lettuce is a must always for from it I get water.
If you're questioning its presence then put it in you oughta.
Carrots help my teeth to wear - I need this every day.
I don't need qumquats, neither swede, neither any hay
(but the odd dandelion leaf wouldn't go amiss).

Finally, I'm very old and now I'm very frail.
My body has seen better times - my eyesight's begun to fail.
I waddle round my compound where once I used to dash.
They used to call me (lovingly) the 'hamster turbo-flash'.

I'll try to keep on living, I'll try to keep alive,
I'll try to keep on breathing and not curl up and die.
I'll try to be the best old ham that you have ever kept,
Cos at looking after me I'm sure you're all very adept.'

'But that last rhyme's awful!' I complained. 'I wouldn't have written that at all!
'It's not that bad for a hamster,' Kath retorted. 'In fact, I think the neighbours
would have been most pleased when they found that you'd written a po...'

'Me? Me?' I complained. 'I never wrote a poem at all, it was George! I've a good
mind to go right round there now with Harriet and get her to explain this whole affair!'

'I'd love to see their faces,' she smiled.

'This is no joking matter! Your own husband is implicated as being a loony by a dumb
animal and all you can do is find it amusing!'

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Kath tried to stifle a laugh but it didn't work. Harriet tried less hard to suppress her giggles.

'Well,' I said after a long while, 'I guess the damage is done now. One day I'll look back on all this and find it mildly amusing.'

'And, until then,' Harriet began, 'let me tell you about George's time in the house alone...'

Zabrus tenebroides is not your regular run-of-the mill beetle.

It's a species that's exclusively vegetarian and is usually found in fields and meadows where it can cause havoc by nibbling the tops off valuable cultivated crops.

But as to it being a meat eater - well, forget it. This beetle wouldn't harm a hamster even if it met one and, being only about three quarters of an inch long, it's hardly likely to take a big chunk out of one even if it did try to savage it violently.

However, Lee and Kath didn't know that and throughout July they'd been appearing in the front room (where George was housed) in increasing numbers.

Lee, being a bit of a softy, would scoop them up in a receptacle of some description and throw them outside safely for them to (eventually) find their way back in via the chimney, bringing their friends along because of all the fruit and veg that was available in George's food bowl.

What Lee described as a 'plague of carnivorous beasties' to most of his friends was, in fact, only about five beetles in total who kept reappearing via the chimney into the front room.

George really didn't mind their presence. Besides, beetles are such small creatures that they never once posed a serious threat to his food supply and he enjoyed their company when both Lee and Kath had long gone to bed.

The community, too, used to race them against one another to see which was the fastest. A simple grass reed attached to their body which contained a small ear of some cereal or other that overhung their pincers was enough incentive for them to make off at some quite amazing speeds all over the living room carpet.

By using the empty toilet roll tubes that Lee used to leave out in George's compound, a track could be constructed to give each a fair chance in the 'Beetle Olympics'.

Incidentally, sometimes Lee used to find the rolls half-chewed and blame George for it, but it could have been anyone of a dozen or so hamsters who had to gnaw their way into them when the beetles refused to co-operate, hiding themselves away from the racecourse.

George told the community that, once, a beetle had taken refuge in the soft warm bedding of his nest and was still there when Lee had come to clean the cage out. Bits of bedding got thrown everywhere - not deliberately - but because what he thought to be a sunflower seed had legs on and ran up his arm.

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Nevertheless, if Lee had only known that they were herbivores he would've seen them in a different light and wouldn't have tried to remove them from the house.

But why am I telling you all this?

Well, Sabber the *Zabrus tenebroides* has got a lot to answer for. It was this beetle in particular that caused George a real headache when Lee and Kath had left for their holidays.

It was George's eyes, you see, that were giving him trouble. After all, he was getting on a bit by then and if it had been possible for him to wear spectacles he would have done, as his impaired vision seriously hampered his scholarly work of deciphering, translating and editing newly discovered hamscripts.

For those of you unfamiliar with that last word, I'd best refer you to George's definitive academic work on the subject as space does not permit me to expand on the following fairly brief definition that a 'hamscript' is the hamster equivalent of a manuscript - a copy of some text or other - whether ancient or modern, in good condition or poorly preserved, received complete or fragmentary.

Poor old George!

His eyes just wouldn't focus well enough for that close-up work that was such a necessary part of his studies.

The current hamscript under inspection was a fairly old one as they go, which meant that its edges were torn, there were frequent smudges induced by the saliva from the hamsters that had carried the text from place to place in their pouches, and parts of letters were missing - sometimes even whole words had been accidentally ripped off.

Every piece of data had to be carefully weighed, sifted. The hamscript had to be studied, restudied and reread. Thought had to be put into the reconstruction of the text so that the original could be arrived at with as much certainty as possible.

In this present case, George knew that there were other extant hamscripts under the scholarly supervision of one Dr LS Leaf, a hamster of particularly superb judgment when it came to reconstruction and interpretation of texts.

Writing a lengthy but brief synopsis of his current work on the subject, George concluded with a plea for help:

'Lett [this was the professor's first name], my friend, I'm writing to you to ask you to be my eyes in this matter.

'While I know that you would willingly forward me the other extant hamscripts of the relevant text, I'm afraid that my eyes wouldn't be up to a careful scholarly study.

'I therefore presume upon our friendship and ask that you might relate to me the condition of these other hamscripts. Specifically, I need to know the

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condition of the inscription cited above [not produced in this short extract],
whether it is better preserved than the one in my possession.'

Hastily dispatched via a field mouse who waited on George in those last days, the letter arrived within the day and a reply was sent with equal speed to arrive the following evening.

'George! George! Wake up!' the breathless messenger cried in his ears. 'I've just returned from the professor. Here's your reply!'

The field mouse placed the note beside him and rushed off back to his family.

'Can't stop now!' he shouted. 'Just had triplets! Be back later!'

George lifted the sealed envelope into his paws and opened the reply, unfolding the material it was written on.

He began to read:

'The...'

George squinted, contorting his face at the same time to try and get the words into focus.

'The...'

He struggled again to see the words but failed to comprehend the writing.

'No good,' he mumbled, 'I'll have to wait til the field mouse gets back. I can't even read a simple message anymore!'

George wearily settled back down into the warm nest, closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

He was woken by the field mouse a short time afterwards.

'George? What did it say?' he squeaked excitedly. 'Is it significant?'

'It's over there,' he replied. 'I've been waiting for you to return - I've not been able to make head nor tail of it. I think my eyes are getting worse! You read it, if you please.'

The field mouse lifted the note into his trembling paws and read out loud:

THE PIG IS
A DONKEY
WITH SEVEN
EARS

Yours
Lett

'The what?' said George.

'It says "The pig is a donkey with seven ears"!' he repeated.

'It can't do, that doesn't make any sense! Let me have a look!'

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George examined the note carefully, though he was still unable to make out more characters than the first word.

'This looks like what you brought back,' he began, 'but there was more to it than this. Look here! There are holes in the material between the letters that can be read. This has been chewed!'

'I didn't, honestly, George. It wasn't me.'

'Ah ha! Just as I thought. Look at these marks at the edge where it's ripped!'

The field mouse examined them in detail, then sniffed at them deeply to confirm what his eyes testified to.

'Oh no!' he recoiled in horror. 'A beetle! A beetle has chewed the material! We've lost the letter...'

'Not so fast!' George interrupted. 'The only type of beetle around here is Sabber and he only eats veg, but...' he paused awhile, deep in thought, '...I've known him rip my bedding into shreds for the sheer fun of it - I don't think I'll ever understand their species as long as I live.'

He stooped down and picked up a small shred of material that lay at his feet.

'An "e",' he squeaked. 'This must be part of the note. See, here, the rip matches, it goes on the top line before the "pig".'

He read it out. 'The epig...is...Mmm. Still not enough. Look around the nest compartment, there must be more fragments.'

The field mouse put his nose to the ground and sniffed for the same smell. It wasn't long before he exclaimed, 'Found one!'

'What does it say?'

"Smudge the document copy". I know a "Smudge the cat" but that doesn't make sense, does it?'

'Not on its own, but it will if we can put it into its context, into its correct position.'

George matched it in with little problem. It was surprising that, even though he struggled to distinguish certain words and phrases, in other seemingly more difficult tasks he excelled.

'There!'

```
THE EPIG          IS
A D ON KEY
WITH SMUDGES EVEN
EARS      THE DOCUMENT.
COPY
```

'That still doesn't make sense!' complained the field mouse.

'It will if we find more fragments - keep looking!'

One by one the fragments were found, George examining them each with precision, matching torn threads and proposing numerous readings before the document was fully completed.

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It read:

THE EPIGRAPH EXISTS BUT
FADED ON KEY HAMSCRIPTS,
WITH SMUDGES EVEN ON
THE TEARS OF THE DOCUMENT.
YOUR COPY'S BEST.

Yours
Dr Lett S Leaf

'There!' squeaked George. 'A splendid reconstruction even if I say so myself! That's the difficulty with fragments, my friend, they never make sense until you can obtain the complete picture. If we'd've settled with the way we first read it, our conclusions as to Dr Lett's answer would have been non-sensical but, as it is, we can be confident that we have the complete picture.'

'Oh yes,' the field mouse said observantly, 'even though the first meaning made sense, it didn't mean anything in context, did it?'

'That is precisely my point,' smiled George. 'Context is important. Leave important parts out and you fail to arrive at the correct meaning. It's the sum total that's our objective in interpretation, not selective concepts that stand alone...'

'Of course' squeaked Harriet, 'not all the times you left him on his own were that interesting. Why, sometimes he decided that, just to relieve the boredom of it all, he'd have to stowaway on board on one of your frequent day outs.'

'Eh?'

'He never...did he?'

'But that's another story and one that I haven't got the time to tell you about...'

THE FIFTH MEETING - THE ARTICLE

'Perhaps you could throw some light on this letter we received a few days ago?' Kath said.

'Well, I'll try,' squeaked Harriet, 'but I'm not sure it will mean anything to me if it's from a human hand.'

'We've already discussed the matter,' I said, 'and we both agreed that if you can't then no-one can.'

Kath held up the letter for Harriet to sniff but the scent meant nothing to her, neither did the colour of the envelope smell familiar.

'It's addressed "To George the Hamster" and then the usual street names, town and postcode. It's also quite strange in that it was sent airmail from the USA and marked "Private and confidential - not to be opened by person(s) unauthorised in the affairs of that most eminent rodent".'

'Oh,' squeaked Harriet in a tone that seemed to suggest to us that she hoped that it wasn't what she thought it was.

'Inside,' Kath continued, 'is a letter from an archaeology magazine - looks like quite a famous one judging by the quality of the paper that it's printed on...'

'Oh dear.'

'...and it reads "Dear George, thank you for your most illuminating article that we've passed round the office for all to read. Yes, I think that our readers will be most interested in your thesis..."'

'Oh no.'

'...and we look forward to receiving subsequent articles from your paw at a later date. I enclose a cheque for \$150 being the fixed fee for the article as per our payment rates. Assuring you of our...blah, blah, blah".'

'Well,' I said, breaking the silence, 'what do you make of it?'

'Search me!' Harriet raised her paws in the air and looked innocently at us both, 'but if you ever find out then let me know, won't you?'

Kath and I were not convinced. Behind that saintly gaze and that halo of honesty there was something very fishy that she knew about but was trying to cover up.

'Your roses are coming on a treat, aren't they Kath?' Harriet changed the subject. 'I was just remarking to the community the other day that those petals are some of the reddest I've...'

'Could we come back to the matter at hand, please? Something tells me that you know very well what this letter is all about!'

Harriet looked worried.

'Er...well, yes. Sort of. Well, when I say "sort of", I mean "Yes, a bit". No, okay, I didn't think you'd believe me - I think I know *exactly* what this is about. But we warned him before he sent it that it wasn't a good idea - a product of his old age we said, a

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work of his eccentricity that should never have seen the light of day. But, oh no, George wouldn't listen to us and he sent it just the same, regardless of our opinions.'

'But what's it all about?'

'Mmmm...you promise not to be angry?'

'Yes, promise,' Kath said.

There was a silence.

'And you, Lee?'

'Is this something he made it look as if I wrote, again?'

'Oh no!' Harriet insisted. 'No, it's all to George's account, honestly.'

'Okay, then. I promise.'

Harriet took a deep breath and began the explanation.

'Well now, where do I begin? Okay, to put it simply, George used to read those archaeology magazines that you used to have sent to you and he always used to get upset about the debate on the Dead Sea Scrolls. It wasn't that he disagreed (or agreed) with what was written in the articles, but he was angry that the contents of cave thirteen were always being ignored. Why, the cave isn't even mentioned *once!*'

'Cave thirteen?' I repeated. 'There's only eleven, isn't there?'

'That was George's entire point - the thirteenth cave was the scrollery of the hamsters. Or, at least, there was evidence to show that it might possibly have been. But the magazine just ignored it totally, like it never existed.'

'So George decided to write an article about one of the fragments that was found there and its relevance to hamster history. What you received from the States must have been the reply.'

'But what does it say in the article?' Kath asked.

'Well, I'm not very technically minded so I wouldn't do it justice if I tried to relate it but,' she smiled in a way that made us know that what was about to be said would be a suggestion that we would take up, 'as you can understand, George had to produce his article in English. So he used your word processor to put it together.'

'That means it should be on one of the discs, Lee, shouldn't it?'

'Theoretically, yes. Only, there's no file name on the records that I haven't put on there myself.'

'Well, yes,' squeaked Harriet, 'but then George knew that you'd be suspicious if you found a file that you didn't recognise. So he tacked it onto the end of one of the ones that you set up. I think it's "Dot-1". Does that ring a bell?'

'Most certainly,' I asserted loudly.

I rushed upstairs and recalled the file.

Yes! There it was!

I gave the word processor the command, inserted the paper and - zap!

The hard copy was produced in a fairly short space of time while I tried to read the text as it emerged from the printer.

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DOES FRAGMENT 13Q8a PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF A COMMUNITY OF HAMSTERS AT QUMRAN?

by George the Hamster

Let me take you back to 9th September 1953 and to an extract from the diary of the now famous archaeologist and palaeontologist Professor L Leaf:

'...The cave was so immense that upon entering I immediately felt dwarfed by its breadth and height. We spent almost two hours investigating the cave until my colleague stumbled upon a remarkable find.

'There, in the dark recesses of a hidden walkway between two large boulders, were tiny footprints encrusted in the sand that lay on the floor. I ran across to peer into the torch light only to realise that these were indeed rodent feet - hundreds and thousands of them, running in differing directions but generally descending to a large cavern that we had yet to investigate...

'...As we hesitantly played "chase" we emerged into an area where there were innumerable amounts of tiny fragments of what appeared initially to be papyrus with Greek characters written in early Alexandrian script...' (1)

It is now over 40 years since these fragments were discovered and most of the papyri have been published along with reconstructed texts, but one fragment in particular, 13Q8a, was dismissed when photographs were originally released as being a product of a later author than that of the scribes who wrote the other fragments of cave 13. (2)

However, with new evidence available and research completed, it is my firm belief that this fragment was not only written before the Roman army under Vespasian and Titus advanced upon Palestine c.66CE, but that it also affirms the original hypothesis of Professor Leaf that it relates to the existence of an ancient community of hamsters in the Judaeian desert. (3)

There are four main reasons that point to this conclusion, not one of them in themselves can prove this without reasonable doubt, but collectively they bear witness to this truth.

Let me take them one by one.

1. Stratigraphical evidence

By this term we normally refer to the deposition levels that artefacts were found in but, with regard to piles upon piles of scroll fragments, the term is used to refer to the layer of papyri in which it was discovered and, more specifically, to the texts of the fragments that were both above and below it.

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Here we should note the significance of the positively identified texts that occurred first *above* 13Q8a:

'...unclean to you a[mong the] swarming things that sw[arm upo]n the earth: the weasel, the *mouse*, the g[reat liz]ard...' Leviticus 11:29

and then below:

'...[in the midst, eat]ing swine's flesh and the abom[ination] and *mice*, shall come t[o an end to]gether...' I saiah 66:17

In both cases, the Greek text follows almost identically the Septuagint (LXX) version of the Old Testament so that identification was rendered very easily.

Again, in both cases, the generic term for a rodent is used, which certainly *could* have reference to hamsters as part of that species. Of course, it doesn't *have* to refer but, as we will see below when we look at the textual evidence, it seems an adequate conclusion when 13Q8a is reconstructed.

2. Dating evidence

The original carbon-14 date for this fragment yielded 100CE +/- 100 years = between 0-200CE. However, since the discovery in the fifties, new, more accurate, procedures have been developed and, around six months ago, I obtained permission for a small part of the papyrus to be removed for fresh dating at the laboratories of the Free Rodent University in Seattle.

The results were astonishing!

Far from pushing the date further away from 70CE, they strengthened the case for it to be dated *before* the Roman conquest of Palestine. Their method yielded the date 60CE +/- 25 years = 35-85CE.

I have already written to the current owners of fragments 13Q7c and 13Q8b (the papyri that adjoined 13Q8a) requesting a fresh and independent C-14 date.

So far, there has been silence, but should these also yield a similar date, then it would be difficult for scholars to push 13Q8a to have to be completed after the Roman conquest of Palestine in 66CE.

3. Historical evidence

There are a number of ancient sources that specify the existence of hamsters. Some of these, admittedly, are in badly preserved manuscripts so, for sake of allaying any accusations of being controversial, I won't use those instances here.

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Of the textually well-preserved, I first mention the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus who, in 'The Jewish War', at the beginning of his description of the last days of Masada, is translated as saying:

'The fortress was Masada, occupied by the Sicarii, under the command of an influential man called Eleazar...' (4)

But let's take a closer look at this word 'Sicarii' for it is, indeed, a strange word. No one is quite sure just how this word should be translated and various suggestions have been offered ranging from the quite impossible (etymologically speaking) 'black-eared dingle bat' (5) to the ridiculous 'fat-bellied marsupial of northern climes' (6).

Scholars, meeting at a seminar in the mid-West recently, produced a paper which concluded that this unusual word:

'...indicates a small nocturnal rodent similar to, if not the same as, a hamster.'
(7)

In the annals of Rome also, Vespasian (the commander-in-chief of the advancing Roman armies described above and who returned home to become Emperor) in his acceptance speech is recorded as saying:

'Friends, Romans, countrymen - Lend me your ears.
Hamsters, voles, field mice - Give me your paws.
For I have come to triumph o'er many foes,
And that unequalled rat shall lick the dust some more.' (8)

As if this weren't enough, the Mishnah makes mention that:

'...it is a blessed task to study the Torah; but better still when a disciple studies with a perceptive hamster who can reveal the true meaning of the scroll...' (9)

So, you see, although many scholars would argue away the possibility of a community of hamsters at this time in history, there is sufficient written evidence to show that hamsters were not only known, but regarded as integral parts of Roman *and* Jewish social and cultural life.

4. Textual evidence

But what does 13Q8a really say?

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Leaving *all* the above evidence aside, what does the text of the fragment in question speak of?

There is little doubt as to the actual letters, most scholars only trying to discredit the fragment by assigning it a late date.

The text reads $\tau\omega\nu\ \alpha\mu\sigma\tau\epsilon\omicron\zeta$ which transliterated would be 'ton hamsteos'. To all Greek scholars it is quite evident that this is the genitive and, as such, has to be translated 'for/belonging to the hamsters'.

It seems quite incredulous that a minority of competent scholars have proposed meaningless dissertations and papers to insist that certain characters cannot possibly be what they can plainly be seen to be!

Conclusion

We have conclusively shown that 13Q8a speaks of hamsters and that of necessity it must be dated *before* the advance of the Roman armies of 66CE. We have also satisfied ourselves that, far from being a supposed 'unknown species', hamsters were well-known at that time period and were referred to in major literary works.

We have only to re-emphasise the original theory as put forward by Professor Leaf way back in the fifties, namely that, a community of golden hamsters (for this is the variety commonly attributed to this area) existed in the Judaeen desert, ekeing out an existence alongside some peculiar and obscure human sect that dwelt there.

The existence of their own scrollerly also shows us that these were not primitive and illiterate rodents but sophisticated hamsters who had a civilisation of their own long before modern man ever came to realise that golden hamsters existed in and around Syria.

PAWNOTES

1 - 'Scampering around all over the Judaeen desert: a diary of discoveries 1952-53', Professor Lett S Leaf, Sunflower Seed Press, pages 241-3.

2 - '13Q8a: An enigma in the desert', Art A Rat, University of Hamburg. 'Intrusive fragments: a definitive study', Mandy Warvole, from an article in 'Rodent weekly', June 1957.

3 - *Ibid*, pages 257-62.

4 - 'The Jewish War', translated into English and available as a Penguin classic in the UK.

5 - Quoted in 'Great etymological blunders of the twentieth century', Professor Lett S Leaf, Sunflower Seed Press, page 126.

6 - 'Marsupials in history: on the trail of the bouncing llama', Doctor Kanga Hoppity, University of Sydney Press, pages 37-9.

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7 - 'Etymological difficulties: a brief summary of developments on Greek vocabulary',
The Board of the Mid-West Seminar on alphabetical anomalies, published by the same.

Paper 4 - 'Sicarii: some further thoughts'.

8 - 'The annals of ancient Rome. Volume 3: the induction discourses of the
emperors', translated by Daphne Watts, University of old Hamtonians, page 327.

9 - Do you really think I'm serious about this quote?

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Harriet sat before us as we both proceeded to read the article and inwardly digest it.

'Well,' I began, the suspicion in my mind finding expression in the words that I was about to utter, 'I have this strange uncontrollable feeling that this is a wind up.'

'A wind up?' Harriet sounded shocked, almost horrified. 'Whatever gives you that idea?'

'For one,' I said, 'there isn't any obvious meaning to the article and that was *most* unlike George. He didn't write for writing's sake but with each story that he committed to paper came a teaching that was discernible even if it was sometimes a bit hidden.

'Then there's the whole subject matter,' I continued. 'Cave thirteen, indeed! I believed you for a while there, Harriet, but the reason the cave isn't mentioned is because it doesn't exist!'

Harriet smiled, then laughed.

'But why did he write it?' Kath asked.

'Boredom, I guess,' she squeaked, 'and perhaps more than that. It's quite true what I told you about George reading your magazines, but I'm afraid the rest was a little bit of invention on my part.

'However, George did laugh at the ridiculous logical reasoning that often pervaded the articles. He also remarked at all the long and complicated words that they consistently used and wondered if anybody really understood what was being said.

'So he decided to write an archaeological report in similar language that *looked* like the real thing and *read* like the real thing but which was a total fabrication from beginning to end and see if he could get it accepted by the scholarly world.'

'And he did.'

'It certainly looks like that, doesn't it?'

'I wonder who's the bigger fool?' Kath concluded. 'George for writing it? Or those who readily believed it - for swallowing the information wholemeal and for not first testing the content?'

THE SIXTH MEETING - THE PEANUTS

For Janice Speddings

'Little birdies see them run,
Bouncy, bouncy, every one.
Watch them race and watch them stop,
Hoppity, hoppity, hop, hop, hop.'

Excerpt from 'The Rodent Weekly' (volume 12 number 7)

'A number of weeks ago I squeaked to you about the subjects of "unification" and "unity".'

We both nodded. It was an evening that was particularly memorable, though not quite as vivid as the day Tony and Anne came round.

'Well, it will serve as a fitting background to the following episode from the community's life, though I hadn't really intended telling you all that stuff until now.

'This story is about a real life dilemma that faced the rodents who were already over here before we came. I know it could've been avoided but that's the whole problem with "unity" - you have to allow a good deal of freedom to individuals or else it becomes "unification". And you know what I think of that subject!'

Again, we both nodded and smiled knowingly. We'd rethought our attitude towards these two items over the weeks and we now felt, more than ever before, that we had a good working knowledge of them.

'This is about one of the...' Harriet cleared her throat to emphasise the caution with which she chose her next words, '...more simple hamsters amongst us. He joined with us shortly after we'd settled in the land, you know, though it was the others who warned us about him.

'He's still alive today. Hasn't changed much, either. His name is Batza...'

Batza the hamster was a greedy rodent - lazy, too.

In the annual stock-take of stored provisions, a half-eaten peanut could always be traced back to him as the culprit while, during the community's playtime when hamsters ran about wildly, Batza could always be found in a secluded part of the nest where downy feathers (or some other such luxury) took the weight of an over-sized and overweight sleepy hamster.

The other rodents, for Batza's own good, used to send him on reconnaissance missions for food as far away from the nest as possible where they knew there was little or nothing to eat, hoping that by having to give more time and effort to the search he would expel more energy and lose weight. However, all he did in the end was to curl up in

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a ball until it was time to return to the nest with the advent of the sun each morning, downing vast quantities of food during the communal meal.

So, having realised the weaknesses - not in their own attempts to help but in Batza - they rearranged their food patrols so that he was always in view of at least two other hamsters who would keep a close eye on him while, at the same time, forage for food.

This new arrangement worked perfectly, even though Batza became increasingly suspicious that on every occasion he thought he was alone and rolled up in a ball to sleep, another hamster would trip accidentally (or so it was made to appear) over his huge frame with a 'Whoops! Sorry, Batza, I didn't see you there! Have you found any food yet?'

'No,' came the reply, 'not yet. I was just...er... just examining this item here...' and he would lift up the first thing that came to paw to illustrate, '...to see if it could be used as food by us.'

Then he would begin foraging once again under even closer supervision.

On one occasion, his bodyguard recoiled in horror when Batza, grasping at whatever lay in front of him, lifted up an adult stag beetle between his teeth, its jaws snapping ferociously at him while spitting obnoxious fumes into the air. Fortunately, he didn't pouch it as he had with other items in times past.

This set up worked remarkably well. Even when his guards disappeared out of sight, they could still keep in touch with his whereabouts using their remarkable sense of smell. If they ever got suspicious that he'd lost his struggle with consciousness, they would track him quickly down by scent, accidentally stumbling over him as I've already outlined above.

Yes, all went well.

Until, that is, that fateful day in autumn.

Autumn is a beautiful season.

Once-green leaves transform entire forests into contrasts of red and yellow while the sky grows eerily more yellow and white with each approaching day of winter.

For most animals it's both exciting and threatening. Exciting - because there's such an abundance of newly ripened fruit and nuts that have been unavailable since last year. Threatening - because as the daylight grows shorter, the provision of food steadily declines until creation undergoes a dormant cycle before the herald of spring.

The hamsters knew what was required of them. Each night they frantically collected as much food as they could both find and carry, storing it away underground in the community's stockpile so that, during the hibernating months, there would be no need to exit their burrow into the freezing winds of winter in search of food.

Batza found himself assigned to two hamsters who had been given charge over a piece of ground near to human occupation where there was a chestnut tree currently shedding its seeds over a wide area. Being on a hill, they would often roll a fair distance

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from the trunk and end up in various unusual places, some of which took a great deal of thought and work to extricate from their surroundings.

This fateful day in autumn found Batza both unduly tired and ravenously hungry as the sun sunk below the horizon and the rodents split up to cover their territory.

Having located the tree trunk, the three hamsters radiated outwards, sniffing the ground while keeping their ears attentive for the possible approach of predators.

Further and further they found themselves apart, while Batza's hunger and tiredness grew to intolerable limits. The other two hamsters, it must be said, were partly to blame for what was to happen next. The first one was too young to fully appreciate the complexity of his fellow-rodent's problem, while the elder chose to ignore the tell-tale signs such as a drooping head, heavy eyes and frequent gnawing on grounded branches. All these were signs that Batza was in need of a great amount of attention.

Whatever the reasons, the fact is that he found himself isolated from the pair as he wearily came to an old brick wall that stood in his way. It was both too high to climb over (even if he had had the energy) and too long to walk round.

As Batza contemplated his next move, whether he might return to the tree-trunk to take a short nap, a rare but familiar smell activated his interest.

What was that smell?

Ah yes, a peanut!

He took a long, slow sniff as he pointed his nose the way from which the smell came.

Yes, it was most definitely a peanut!

Having suddenly found a delicacy indeed, he allowed his legs to move on automatic pilot, pacing slowly until he came to a narrow crack that lay at the base of the brick wall where it joined onto the pavement.

Batza sniffed the hole to make absolutely sure, then looked round to confirm that he was alone. Slowly - and quietly - he tried to push his way into the hole but found it too small to enter. Had he been the normal size for a rodent, it wouldn't have posed any great problem, but his overweight frame made it look like a marshmallow was being pushed through the eye of a needle.

He tried once more, flattening his head and body into as thin a form as he could. Breathless from the effort, he went to pull himself out but found that his head was stuck. He couldn't withdraw it for his ears acted like wedges that stood upright and prevented escape.

Having realised his dilemma, Batza knew that the only way out was to force his way in. With a massive heave and a shove (a cross between wobbling flab and flexing muscle), he pushed his way forward into the hollow below ground level like a bar of soap escaping from a pair of wet hands, taking a few minutes to recover himself before remembering the reason he'd come.

The peanut!

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In fact, there wasn't only one!

How or why they came to be in that hollow was not his concern - he paid little regard to philosophical or mathematical problems. His only objective now was to eat, then sleep. And that is exactly what he *would* have done had he not heard the sound of approaching paws. His two bodyguards were sniffing him out at an alarming speed.

Batza looked at the peanuts with longing, then despair. In a few moments the hamsters would find him and his hope of a feast and long sleep would disappear into thin air.

Or would it?

Batza pouched the entire hoard of peanuts, pressing them as flat as possible into his pouches, as the elder hamster poked his nose through the hole.

'Batza? Batza? Are you in there?'

'Yes,' he squeaked. 'I thought I smelt some food'

Then, thinking quickly, he added, 'I came in to investigate.'

'Come on now. The other rodents have found a pile of chestnuts on the far side of the field and they need our help to carry them to the store.'

'Good!' thought Batza, 'I'll be able to seclude these peanuts away in my bedding on my first trip back to the nest!'

Without a moment's hesitation, he jumped upwards to ascend through the hole but found his increased width prevented him. You see, because he'd pouched so many peanuts in the food sacks located in his cheeks, his head was no longer small enough to fit through the hole that offered his only means of escape.

He tried once more, this time slowly, but it still wouldn't work. No matter how distorted he made his face become, or how ferociously he scratched the ground with his paws, there was just no way he could get through.

The solution may seem simple to you, the reader, but I can assure you that it never once crossed his mind to lay aside his hoard of peanuts so that he could escape. Batza wanted them all for himself and couldn't disclose the contents of his pouches in case his two fellow-rodents insisted on taking them back to the community's store there and then.

The two hamsters realised his dilemma and one ran for help. Soon, a large number stood around the opening staring into the hole where two big, worried eyes stared back.

They tried everything they could think of to get Batza free.

Gnawing round the edge of the hole proved useless. Being a crack at the base of a brick wall, the rim was made entirely of cement, a material too tough to yield to their sharp teeth.

Burrowing inside the hole didn't work either for the same reason.

Finally, five of the strongest hamsters got behind him and shoved with all their might, trying to force him through a hole which, they reasoned, had been large enough for him to get in through so why not large enough for him to get out?

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But it was all to no avail.

Leaving one hamster as guard over the opening, the others scurried off to the far side of the field to bring in the fall of chestnuts before first light approached, discussing amongst themselves how to solve their colleague's dilemma.

Meanwhile, under a brick wall, a very worried hamster could find no rest. Sleep fled from him. His hunger had also been transformed into panic. And all the while it never once crossed his mind to lay aside the weight that prevented his escape.

It was just as well, then, that even now the other hamsters were formulating a cunning plot that would free him from what threatened to be an early grave.

Janice Speddings, a young mother of two children, thought nothing unusual as she brushed the rodent hair off the front seat of her automobile before settling down comfortably behind the wheel. The car roared into life as she turned the key in the ignition and accelerated away from home to take part in a meeting many miles distant.

Positioned in the hole underneath the wall were many hamsters, crammed into the tiny space along with Batza, while a handful of rodents had hid themselves in the green foliage across the road to help if anything should go wrong.

Each hamster had been briefed knowing exactly what to do when, in a few short hours' time, they anticipated the return of the Jetta.

The hamsters in the car were not having an easy time of it. The jerky steering and fierce braking were rolling them around the hollow underneath the front seat.

Fortunately, a momentary delay at a set of traffic lights was sufficient time for them to grab each other's paws and lie face down on the floor. This proved much more stable - they now only had to contend with their rolling stomachs that seemed to ebb and flow with each bend or change of speed.

It wasn't long before Janice parked the Jetta close to her destination, locking the car doors before leaving the bundle of hamsters to discuss, one final time, their scheme for the return drive home.

Several hours later, Janice flicked the indicator and turned into her home street.

The hamsters travelling in the car began to shake with excitement while the look-out posted outside the cavity sounded the alarm.

The parking bay was empty - a twelve-foot space that ended abruptly with kerbstones, a pavement and the brick wall that bounded the garden on its west side.

How often the car had gently rolled to a halt as it neared the kerb! Days without number it had been parked perfectly - never a problem, never a crisis - until this fateful autumn day when, unbeknown to all, there were rodent stowaways on board.

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Janice lined the car up carefully, gently accelerating towards the wall. Four hamsters stood underneath the brake pad while a similar number paid attention to the throttle.

As the human foot came down on the brake, the hamsters exerted an equal force upwards, preventing the brake pads from operating. At the same instant, the others pulled fiercely on the accelerator, lurching the car forward like a kangaroo in full flight.

It's quite extraordinary how a human's mind works. While Janice firmly believed that she'd hit the brake, she failed to understand why both the front garden wall and the lounge window were growing much larger in her sight than she'd ever seen them before from that position. Even when the car bounced up onto the pavement with a dull rattle that sent the dice, hanging from the rear-view mirror, rolling to a double six, she failed to comprehend the problem.

But, having crashed through the brick wall, and finding herself passing the front gate at an ever-increasing speed, she perceived - very suddenly - that all was not going according to plan. Her mind raced through her memory but it found no similar incident. Instinctively, her foot dropped fiercely once more onto the brake.

The hamsters had, by this time, released any control they had over the car, having accomplished their task. Janice's foot locked the brakes and the Jetta skidded to an abrupt halt with its bonnet jutting out precariously over the garden.

Of course, by crashing through the wall, Batza had been released. The cavity ceiling had been ripped off, the rodents fleeing as fast as their paws would carry them back to the burrow.

All that remained was for Janice, and a few neighbours who had dashed madly out onto the street when they heard the commotion, to pick up the pieces.

'That story sounds familiar,' I said.

'And we know a Janice Speddings, she lives not a mile away from here,' Kath added.

'Oh,' squeaked Harriet, 'has George already told you about this event?'

'No, no. Not at all.'

'But Janice has...'

'...even though she neglected to mention the presence of any rodents.'

Harriet thought for a moment. 'So you've seen it from the human side? Does it sound any different?'

'No, it doesn't - apart from the presence of hamsters, that is.'

I paused for a moment and then thought aloud. 'I must tell Janice what *really* happened.'

EPILOGUE

We still see Harriet from time to time, she pops in when she has a moment to spare in her hectic life as part of the community. Other rodents come with her occasionally as well, and, though the ones we've seen have not yet learnt to communicate with us, we enjoy having them around - especially the younger ones who bounce all over the place and have a hard task keeping still even for a few minutes.

A few weeks after we'd finished compiling these extracts from Harriet's meetings with us, I was down in the garden tending the apple tree and mowing the grass when I noticed that the paving stone I'd placed beside George's grave had some old sunflower seed shells sprinkled on it.

I went over, intrigued at how they'd gotten there, and tried to brush them off. But they were well and truly stuck.

Puzzled, I stood up and scratched my head. Then the realisation dawned on me that they'd been glued on to form a four-line epitaph in hamscript.

It was, as I later found out from Harriet, the community's contribution to the remembrance of George. It read:

'Here lies the body of George the ham
Who squeaked with rodents and spoke with man.
A hamster of note who composed true stories,
Some parabolic and some allegories.'

I cringed at that last word.

'I really must teach Harriet what makes a good rhyme,' I thought.

The memory of George still lives on through the stories and articles he composed during his brief time with us. To be able to contribute positively to the next generation even after you're dead and buried must be extremely satisfying (even if you don't know anything about it).

I watered the leylandii at the far end of the garden, then turned and walked slowly back along the grass path towards the house.

'Mmmm,' I mused to myself, looking over to the hedge, 'those sunflowers are coming on a treat...'

The Legacy of George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

Hamster History of the World Volume Four

THE HAMSTER HISTORY OF THE WORLD VOLUME FOUR

INTRODUCTION

Shortly before finishing the compilation of George's first volume of writings (published under the title 'The Stories of George the Hamster'), I discovered a hamscript clearly marked 'HH4' that had been earmarked for inclusion in a fourth 'Hamster History' release which, because of George's untimely death, never saw the light of day.

Indeed, I was never aware of his intentions until I inadvertently stumbled upon the archive. I was allowed by the Publisher - very generously - to include the story as an appendix.

And it was just as well I did for it became an overnight classic amongst rodents the world over.

Since its publication, I've gathered together all the writings and half-chewed hamscripts that I'd put to one side upon George's death and have been systematically going through them to see if it would be possible to bring to both the lay reader and scholar something that would be both refreshing and new.

This series of articles is the result of my devoted work for the past year and a half - with some other hamscripts that came to light through various sources.

I've added explanatory notes before each of these newly discovered works and given as much background to them as I feel, currently, I can be certain about. In later editions of this work, new light may be shed upon their origins and I may need to revise my comments.

Lee H Smith

MIGRATION

For Ann Davey

Lee's Note - I found this blackened hamscrip behind our boarded up fireplace where I remember our Russian hamster, Arlev, used to go each night when we let him out for a brief run about the carpet.

He often used to exit into the room with excitement, telling us 'You should see what I discovered behind there!' - but we thought that he was simply referring to the soot and grime that all hamsters enjoy burrowing in, for he used to come out in the most horrendous state of any hamster I've ever seen.

However, while putting together George's memoirs, the thought hit me that, perhaps, there was more to Arlev's words than I'd originally thought and, at great expense, I had the gas fire removed to uncover whatever was there.

This hamscrip is what I found, rolled tightly into a scroll and tied with a golden ribbon, paw marks on both the front and back.

I can only think that George must've stashed it there for a reason that now escapes me - but he never once mentioned it all the time he was alive.

Perhaps, when at last our house is ready for demolition, it should be taken down brick by brick and every cavity searched - for you never know what might be lurking there, waiting to be discovered.

Migration has long been a trait of the hamster - we've moved thousands of miles, sometimes, to begin new colonies in far-off lands and then, for just as good a reason, sent out hamsters from the new settlement to re-populate the place from where we came.

We enjoy new things - whether it be foods, new terrain or simply the smell of a new plant, the taste of a new berry. The point is that we like to experience the unusual, the never-before-tried, whenever we can.

I guess that's why the first hamster pioneers arrived alongside the settlers in the American West, pushing back the boundaries of Hamsterdom until most of the world fell under our influence.

Even today, some of the hamsters kept as pets in cages throughout California can trace their ancestry back to rodents who first travelled from the Eastern Seaboard and, further still, back to colonies in 'Old World' Europe.

The migrating community about which I want to write lived, for some reason only known to them, on a glacier that rested on the outer shores of the coast of Greenland, a hardy band of rodents who'd created a burrow complex in ice over two centuries, lining each walkway with material from the discarded clothes of human settlers.

Perhaps some ship or other had run aground here on its quest for a new land further west? Perhaps they'd travelled across land and permafrost heading east? No one's quite

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sure how they came to be where they were, but they soon came to the unanimous decision that they wanted to migrate.

For the past few years, they'd watched the ice sheet crack and slip into the ocean, making its way out into the straits, southward, to warmer and sunnier climes, their own burrows inching closer each season until, on that fateful year, they were so close to the water's edge that they knew – just knew – that, come spring, their community would find itself afloat, away from land, destined for another.

With stores stocked to capacity, the sudden thaw came without warning - although it didn't take the community by surprise. For some weeks now, they'd been wary of going too far away from the burrow in case a crack in the ice would strand them afar off, unable to return.

As it was, when the first faint sounds of breaking were heard, they were nearly all 'below ice', feeling the shuddering of the event as if some great monster was rousing itself into life.

Wrapping themselves round one another to lessen the impact of the ice into the water - and pulling the cushion of mosses and lichens around the compartment - they waited for the sudden drop and splash that would signal that their voyage was underway.

They didn't have to wait long and, when the jolt finally arrived, they squeaked their excitement - even though many felt nauseous.

Letting the iceberg settle in the ocean, they dealt with seasickness the best they could until their dizziness was replaced with a calm that had them clambering over one another to the surface to see where they were.

Just ten yards from the ice, they saw what they wanted. Totally surrounded by ocean, they gently glided from the sight of land, gaining speed all the while until, at last, they were moving southwards, bound for some tropical paradise, they hoped, and a new start, a new adventure.

It was taking longer than they'd anticipated. They'd been afloat almost two weeks and still no sight of land. What was more, their food supply was fast diminishing even though they'd called for a community-wide reduction in what was being eaten.

Even so, they calculated that it wouldn't be much more than a week before their rations would be infinitely small and too scant to support them. Although one might have expected desperation to kick in, they never lost sight of their goal and continually posted a lookout - both day and night - in case any sign, any slight promise of a new home could be anticipated.

It was on one evening in April that the watchman shouted 'Land ahoy!' down the entrance and the community exited as one ham into the darkness.

'Where?' one squeaked. 'What do you see?'

The lookout pointed with an outstretched paw, 'In the distance - look! Don't you see the lights?'

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Was that a light? They strained their eyes willing it to be a new continent and, sure enough, first one, then another, confirmed it.

'A light!' one shouted - but they soon realised that all was not well. Having been watching the current and movement of the water, they knew they were moving - as they faced the light in the distance - to their right. But the distant object was growing ever larger even though they knew they weren't headed that way.

Then it dawned on them - whatever it was, it was heading straight towards them at a considerable speed, massing itself upon them to tower over their position even when much water still lay between themselves and its bow.

'Humans!' one shouted.

All was not yet lost - perhaps these were friendly souls, willing to take on board a bundle of rodents as they sailed for a brave new world?

They began waving, squeaking as loud as they could over the roar of the increasingly loud wake of the ship - some even put their paws out over the edge of the iceberg as if trying to stop a bus.

But it was all to no avail.

'It's not stopping,' the realisation suddenly dawned on them. 'Quick! The rudder!'

'Icebergs don't have rudders, you idiot!' the reply was squeaked back with a fair amount of panic. 'Get below and prepare for impact!'

Barely making it in time, they braced themselves, feeling the scraping sound of metal on ice as their home sliced a gash in the side of the ship, pushing their home violently before it so that the hamsters found themselves catapulted into neighbouring compartments.

As the iceberg began to settle, they took stock of the damage and were pleased to discover that no breach had been made through their tunnels. Settling down to sleep off their frightening experience, they abandoned the lookout for the night and drifted off into sound slumber.

The next morning found them bleary eyed, recounting the events of last night and fearing for their own safety. Gingerly, they ascended onto the 'deck' of the iceberg and surveyed their surroundings.

Nothing.

No evidence of anything that had taken place the night before.

Except...

...yes, there was debris all over the place - it was clearly visible wherever they looked. Wooden planks, sheared off with violence, floated in the water along with sodden paper and items that were obviously human but which seemed to have little or no purpose. Human clothes also drifted alongside their progress, bobbing above the waves every now and then when the current dictated.

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As they turned to look back, away from where the sea was taking them, they drew back with surprise as each of them saw - at the same time - a large wooden crate with writing over its side, skidded to a halt on the iceberg.

Apprehensive at first, they scampered over and sniffed apples through gaps in the wood.

'Food!' one squeaked. 'We can stock our supplies!'

Gnawing through the timber proved difficult and time consuming but they had little else to do. As they removed the last red, juicy fruit from inside the crate, a rodent pointed to the writing on the side and commented:

'Oh, look! Titanic!' pausing a moment before reflecting, 'That must be the name of the variety. After all, they *are* big apples...'

THE BATTLE OF CALDBEC HILL

Lee's note - This hamscript, all in one style of freepaw, lay loosely amongst a host of small notes (things like reminders to stock up on sunflower seeds and walnuts for the New Year - there was even a diagrammatic plan which seemed to show secret passages and corridors located in our old house where George first lived) but bore no inscription 'HH4' as would have been expected.

George appears to have put this together from two ancient hamscripts written by different hamsters independently of one another. That discovery made me recall a conversation I'd had with him shortly before his death in which he expressed his frustration at not being able to satisfactorily put together the 'Battle Piece' that he'd been working on for two months.

Although this hamscript is, nevertheless, complete, I can understand George's frustration at harmonisation for it feels disjointed - technical observations about the armies seem to break the overall flow even though they seem needed by the subject matter required. And the second dialogue appears as if it's fallen from the sky with no prior warning or expectation.

Even more, in previous Hamster Histories, the hamsters mentioned get intricately involved in the plot whereas in this they're more bystanders telling a story than active participants.

Still, I've included it here because of its insights into a world event that has been argued over for generations.

Forest was always a good cover for a family of hamsters - especially when there was dense woodland all round and predators had to sniff out a daily meal. The complexity of scents - both animal and vegetable - confused nostrils and gave rodents a distinct protection so long as they were careful to choose burrow entrances that were covered by foliage that blossomed and flowered most of the summer months.

And that's just what Kitsy had done - except that, not two feet from the ascent into fresh air, there was a grassy opening that peaked on the right and left up to a hill and on to a ridge.

It certainly was an unusual place - there was none like it for miles around where the human road skirted one height before dropping down to the sea several miles to the south-east.

Perhaps that's why they chose it - the humans, I mean, not the hamsters.

The rodents had called it 'home' for generations beyond remembrance when their first nest was dug from under saplings pushing skyward to form the new canopy after the November winds had decimated the forest that previous autumn.

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Food here was good - cherry trees thrived in this soil and the root vegetables and tubers fed the family of rodents through the winter months when everything above was frozen solid, covered often with a frost that couldn't be gnawed through.

As Kitsy looked out from the burrow, four main colours dominated her vision - the blue of the morning sky etched with tufts of grey, drifting lazily on the October breezes, and the green foliage that browned in autumn's grip, leaves already sprinkling earthward here and there.

That was why the bright colours of the banners and the glistening metallic weaponry struck her as all the more unusual - a sight that hadn't taken place for as long as she could remember and, if it had ever happened in the experience of the generations that had preceded her, she was sure that the memory of it would have been passed down.

Her attention, therefore, was all the more drawn to what appeared to be two opposing sides, shouting into the air and raising spears, swords and bows. This wasn't your regular, common-or-garden event - it wasn't something Kitsy associated with the first rays of sun and the smell of autumn or even with the open grassland and marsh that provided wild flowers in abundance during the summer.

With a full store of food following a successful night's foraging on the forest floor, she decided that the intrigue which the scene before her offered was more compelling than her soft bedding in the nest. Returning briefly to make sure her young hamlets were snugly secure, she gave each a gentle lick as if counting them and returned to the burrow entrance where the sound of shouting was growing all the more intense.

Harold and his army of Saxons had marched quickly from London after a short rest to renew their strength, pressing those into service who seemed to be strong enough for the hasty march south, men who'd still be able to face the rigours of the battle that they knew would shortly have to take place.

These were the Fyrd - or 'Territorial Army' of the Saxon world - the reserve force that swelled the ranks of the officially paid army, the Housecarls, drawn from the area in which they were needed.

These Fyrd weren't full time fighters, neither equipped with precision weaponry nor suitable protective armour to ward off an enemy's assault - although their leaders, the Thegns, brought sword and spear to the battlefield.

Very often, they came dressed in nothing more than their regular work clothes, carrying pitch forks, axes, scythes, daggers or whatever came to hand from the farms and villages where they laboured to raise families and prosper. Although trained in battle, they were hardly war-hardened veterans but they owed the king their allegiance and would always be useful in war.

The Housecarls, on the other hand, were the 'professionals', well-trained and full-time warriors who were paid for their service. They were clothed with short coats

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of mail, pointed helmets to deflect attacks and carried battle-axes and double-edged swords as weapons of offence.

They represented the high-tech warrior of the day who could join together as a single man and repel a frontal assault by interweaving their shields, standing firm or advancing as a unit that would be hard to breakthrough.

Although they preferred to fight in battle on foot, they travelled behind the king on horses, making better progress to meet advancing enemies than the Fyrd who needed time to catch up with the equine speed.

The Fyrd stood behind the Housecarls in battle for protection - it was only natural, the latter taking the full brunt of the first assault, protecting the more vulnerable troops for hand to hand combat when the battle opened up.

On Caldbec Hill, Harold took his stand, looking out across the valley towards the enemy's last known position some seven miles away on the coast and waiting for his other troops to arrive.

When William appeared on the opposing ridge in the early morning, with a green expanse set out before them below, Harold didn't need too much perception to realise that battle would soon be joined, the declaration of intent being signalled by loud shouting and the waving of weaponry in the air.

Flèche awoke with a bump at the sound of a splash.

Although he lived so close to the sea, the roar of the waves and rattle of the receding ocean as it scoured the beach were to be expected - especially during the storm months when mist hung in the air for days at a time.

But a splash?

That meant the water was nearer than he expected it to be - and that something must've been dropped into it. What he knew for certain was that it wasn't him as his fur was still dry - damp at most. His hoard of cereals gleaned from the night before were also safe in both pouches.

So why did he get this uneasy feeling as if something was amiss?

Probably because something was.

Flèche had lived for months in the corner of a stable where horses were saddled, groomed and fed - it was just unfortunate that, on the very night that they were being removed to their awaiting ships, he'd decided to take his rest in a haybale that had been earmarked for the journey across.

It wasn't until the thud of being thrown into the longboat that he came to his senses but, by then, it was far too late. Poking his nose out into the salty air, he sniffed his predicament and eyed the shore as it faded into the distance rapidly, boats joining their side as they sped towards their destination - a new land, a new conquest.

Flèche had never been the adventurous kind - he was content with life on his side of the world but, unbeknown to him, what was about to happen in those next few weeks was

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to transform his life from mediocrity and obscurity to something fundamentally essential to the survival of the hamster community on the south coast of England.

The Normans had been in England for some two weeks - not that they'd come over on holiday and decided to do a bit of fighting while they were there (although this is what generally happens nowadays when the English go abroad), but the invasion force had come to overthrow the Saxon kingdom and establish its own.

Strictly speaking, the army that stood facing Harold wasn't entirely Norman - in fact, it probably wasn't even *half* Norman, being comprised of large numbers of Bretons and Flemish (people who'd recently had bronchitis but who were generally over the worst of it).

They had cavalry (a quarter of William's force were mounted in battle), archers (which were also a part of Harold's army, although the latter's seem not to have turned up until after the event) and foot soldiers.

The sides were evenly balanced.

Even though with archers and cavalry the advantage might be perceived to have been on the Norman side, Harold commanded the highest ridge and it severely restricted a successful horse advance if they had to clamber uphill to deliver their riders into the fray.

Archers, too, were restricted, having to make allowance for the lesser distance they could fire successfully and effectively.

Perhaps, naturally speaking, one would imagine a stalemate taking place, a withdrawing of the armies after an ineffective and lengthy battle, but both were so committed to ending it quickly and finally that a conclusion was inevitable.

I hope you'll excuse me for having taken up a significant amount of space above explaining to you about the human 'war machine' - hamsters would rather not dwell on such matters and have put up with man's behaviour with much patience over the centuries.

But it seems conducive to help you understand what was going on here, something that Kitsy could never have perceived for she'd had no experience of the political climate of eleventh century Britain.

Flèche did, though.

He'd seen events like this before - whether it was soldiers practising their skills, strengthening their arms and sharpening their weapons or even in real life combat on a much smaller feudal scale when communities would stand against others over disputed land and grazing rights.

Flèche wasn't entirely sure how he'd managed to find his way onto the battlefield that morning - he thought he'd carefully hidden himself in the saddle bag of a horse that had been earmarked to be left in Hastings as the army prepared to march north-west

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but, as fate would have it, although the horse was tethered together with others that had been found to be lame, the bag was deemed to be the most appropriate for the march.

Poking his head out through the opening now, he could see the brilliant colours splashed against the summit of Caldbec Hill, red and white flags flapping in the morning wind, snapping in a grim prophecy of the carnage that was to lie all round this green meadow by sundown.

The problem that confronted him, however, was how to escape - not here, no. He'd be trampled by the multitude of legs before he ever made it to the cover of the woodland.

His best chance was simply to hope - hope and pray - that his rider would find himself on one of the two flanks where a fortuitous leap into dense border foliage would find a soft landing and, upon his disappearance into the shadows, a convenient hole to dive into until it was safe to move on.

But let me return to Kitsy's account, for many scholars have struggled with the facts of the battle and ignored the one unbiased, independent account that exists in rodent history.

Kitsy had no concept of 'war', no idea that what she was witnessing before her eyes was an out-pouring of anger and hate that would end in misery and pain not just here but in the houses of those families whose loved ones were destined never to return.

She simply found it all unusual, different. Something that, for all she knew, might have been the first and only time such a thing as this had ever happened on the face of the planet.

Not much made sense, however.

As the day wore on, she became more and more confused at the running to and fro, the metallic looking robes becoming red to redder and brown, the bodies piling upon others with shafts of wood rising upwards from where they lay.

But it was what she saw in the very first moments of the battle that brought home to her the reason why, six hours later, an unexpected victory was achieved. As we all realise as hamsters, big doors turn upon small hinges and, in the midst of a battle, never is this saying more true.

The first thing Kitsy remembered seeing was the archers - although, never before seeing people such as these, she wondered at their long, slender poles that they carried quickly forward to form a front-line halfway down the incline.

As Harold's Housecarls advanced, the archers reached over their shoulders, retrieving thin feathered shafts that they inserted into the wooden frame of their bows.

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Realising an attack was imminent, Harold's men closed together, raising their shields to form an impenetrable wall that took the violent thud of impact as they hammered into the defence.

Again, the Housecarls advanced as the archers reloaded their weapons, firing once more as their ranks closed to form another closely-knitted barrier.

Arrows skimmed their edges, some flying wildly over the height of the shields into the Fyrd advancing behind but, for all the ferocity of the attack, very few fell. Indeed, within the space of several minutes, William's archers were fleeing for their lives uphill to take refuge behind their well-armed colleagues.

You see, that was the problem with the archer - they relied upon counterparts being in the enemy's ranks who'd likewise fire at their own troops, thus returning ammunition for their recycling into another assault.

Because Harold had no archers, once the arrows were spent, they lay strewn across the battlefield, beyond the line of Housecarls and in 'English' territory - although it did them no good for they had nothing with which they could return them upon the heads of those who'd fired against them.

Kitsy saw many other events that day - the thrust and counter-thrust as first one army, then another, tried to gain an advantage. Flanks of lines fell back under pressure, then reasserted themselves as more help arrived. Feigned retreats, courageous acts of heroism, men loyal to their own particular king dying sometimes at their own army's hand as wayward shots pierced their armour.

Flèche took his opportunity with both paws and threw himself from the saddle with a force that surprised even him, a bed of trefoil breaking his fall and bouncing him into some marigolds that smelt of sweet perfume.

He took not a second to look behind him but ran towards darkness as fast as his paws would carry him.

As the afternoon wore on, Kitsy couldn't help but think that such a battle would go long into the night. But then something unusual happened.

The Normans, having been able to press Harold's men back up the hill, were now beginning to capture ground where their first arrows had landed hours before. As the ranks stepped over the scattered corpses, William saw his opportunity and ordered the archers to hastily advance.

As they neared the line, they grabbed at ammunition frantically until, at last, they had a handful of arrows and, retreating a few short yards, fired in unison over the heads of their own soldiers into the Saxon ranks.

Within firing distance of the unexpected salvo, Harold found it impossible to avoid the shower that descended upon him, falling to the ground mortally wounded and, in unison with him, the Saxon cause breathed it's last hope.

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The first that Kitsy remembered seeing of Flèche was a bright pink nose approaching her position at breakneck speed. Conflicted between wanting to dive for cover below ground or squeaking a defiant attack call and charging into battle, she froze to the spot pushing back with all the force she could muster when he hit her full on.

Both hamsters grabbed their noses in pain and fell onto their backs, wagging their rear paws into the air in an attempt to alleviate the discomfort. Within a moment, they identified one another as 'friend' and, noses still throbbing from the impact, introduced themselves.

'Fleth,' said Flèche trying to make his numb palate work on the syllable.

'Fleth?' she squeaked. Struggling to form the right words to introduce herself she rubbed her nose in an attempt to bring back some feeling and stammered out, 'K-Kissy.'

'Very friendly these English hamsters,' thought Flèche and, without a moment's hesitation, he gave her a warm embrace and a peck on the side of both cheeks that left Kitsy both puzzled and stunned.

That following year, Flèche and Kitsy raised the most beautiful and adorable litter of hamlets that had ever been seen. So successful did they become that all England's Medieval hamsters known to rodent genealogists trace their ancestry back to that fateful day on 14th October in the year 1066 when they both met in strange - if not bizarre - circumstances.

Even today, a small community of hamsters resident near Eastbourne continue to look back to that couple from which they've all proudly descended.

But what of the battle? What did it achieve?

It wouldn't be going too far to say that the eventual Norman victory changed the course of human history and that it would be impossible to even remotely contemplate what might have transpired had the Saxons gained the upper hand on that October day.

But, as to lessons learned - well...

...as Kitsy witnessed, you should never let the enemy you disarmed get more ammunition to fight against you with.

FROM TIME TO TIME

for Jaron Plasencia

Lee's note - I'm indebted to a hamster in Tennessee for the recovery of this hamscript.

Although I had no idea that George had corresponded with any rodent from that particular location (in the same manner as I was oblivious to most things that George did), it now appears that there are a community of rodents that live near to Morristown that have direct links with George and from where reliable hamscripts were sent to him as and when he sent requests.

Discovering a copy of George's first book in a local fishmonger's last year (although I have no idea what it was doing there), the leading rodent of the community had this hamscript wrapped up and sent to me via a network of rodents the length and breadth of the world (distrusting, as they do, both the US and British Postal Services).

Although it took three months to arrive, it was in immaculate condition and bore the classic George paw at the conclusion of the story, the one authenticating mark necessary for it to be considered as belonging to an intended, but never completed, fourth 'Hamster History of the World'.

It appears to be another story attributed to the 'Lone Hamster' series of tales (two stories of which appeared in the first book) although the character is never specifically mentioned.

Evening - a time when hamsters go into overdrive while their owners snuggle up between the covers and enter rest mode. Sometimes, rodents and humans never meet up for days, weeks - even months. They just notice the disturbance of items in each other's cages and can testify to their co-habitor's presence even by an absence.

But now, as the faint light of the hall clicked off, Yome sniffed the air to check for humans. Although the telling odour of warm sweat pervaded the air, he could tell - as only hamsters can - that it was, perhaps, five minutes old.

He exited the warm burrow and contemplated the night's business.

Grooming - first and foremost. As always it was.

No, perhaps not - there was an urge coming upon him to run, run for all his worth as if his life depended on it. Obeying the desire, he slid down the tube and across the wood shavings into the giant exercise wheel that stood ready for his paws.

He paced - gingerly at first - then faster, gathering speed with every revolution of the wheel until he was running full pelt towards a destination that lay only in his mind but which he was sure he'd reach in good time.

Suddenly, it wobbled.

That was strange. I t'd never done that before.

There it was again!

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Yome distinctly felt the shudder start in his paws and extend upwards into his body until he found himself slightly off-centre. Correcting himself in full flow, he ran back into the wheel's centre but, with another rattle, he came to an abrupt halt, sniffing the edge of the contraption for signs of wearing, of breaks and cracks.

He paced slowly, examining each foothold until he found the problem - a small shard of broken plastic was clearly missing, something that he'd been oblivious to until that moment.

The crack looked old - as if some other rodent had broken it years ago and that, only now, he was discovering the problem. But, be that as it may, it was causing the wheel to wobble in a most disconcerting way that had Yome feeling nauseous.

Checking the floor, he reassured himself that it hadn't broken in the past few minutes since exiting from his sleep - only shavings scattered about the floor were visible. If he'd shattered the wheel, he would surely have found the missing piece.

'That's odd,' he thought, sniffing the fracture once more, 'this wheel's done for...'

'...That's what happens when something the size of a walnut hits it.'

Montmorenci sniffed the damage, picking up the shard of plastic in his paws and throwing it into the trash pile.

'I guess it'll still work,' he told himself, 'but sooner or later that wheel is going to start wobbling.'

He tentatively paced forward, allowing the wheel to rotate with ever-increasing velocity. No, not now - the treadmill was stable for the time being. But he had to be careful, almost hesitant, if he was to make sure that he didn't find himself thrown off as he approached maximum velocity.

Not that he got there very often nowadays - it was his age, you see. Once a hamster hit the age of two, they were increasingly aware that life was slowing down - whereas they were used to living in the fast lane, now they were all too willing to pull over and let others pass. They'd even give them hand signals to encourage them to do so.

But he'd lived a complete and full life, achieved more than he could've ever imagined and, of even greater consequence, knew that his exploits would stand the test of time.

With the eclipse of the day signalling a new night and rising moon, he thought about the sunset of his own existence, hoping that those who came after him might learn from him, might not have to go through the trials that had shaped him to be the way he was, the hamster he was by nature.

He pressed a tongue at the bottle and watched the air bubbles ascend as he drank deeply from the cool water. He made one more mark with his sharp claw into the side of the holder - a habit that he repeated each evening of his life - and began counting the marks as they circled out of sight.

To a human who concentrates on large objects, the marks would have been imperceptibly small but, to a hamster, they looked like...

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...the marks of some specific design.

Perhaps they were?

Yome stared at them for a moment before realising that they weren't symmetrical - that was the real give-away. How hadn't he seen them all these times he'd come to drink?

It was obvious!

These marks must have been made by some sentient being - something small like he was, perhaps even another hamster.

That made him sit up and take more notice.

Another hamster?

Not here, not now, surely?

No way! If there was another rodent in the compound, surely he would've met him by now? He'd been all over - upstairs and down - and was certain that he was the only hamster there.

Besides, wouldn't he have noticed his food disappear mysteriously? And that had never happened so he must be on his own.

The options, however, to explain the phenomenon were scant. He let his mind play with the idea of some sort of time-traveller, of hamsters living in a different dimension but where the water bottle co-existed in both worlds, of rodents that would materialise from faraway planets trying to make contact with their earthly equivalent.

Eventually, he realised that the most logical possibility was that some hamster *had* lived in the cage before him. Not the option that he *wanted* to believe, I must add, but the one that he seemed to be inexplicably cornered into believing.

Perhaps the damage on the wheel was also evidence of a previous owner?

Excited, he began looking for further clues - what could he find that would point to the type of hamster who'd gone before him? Finding nothing further that sparked his imagination on that level, he descended into the basement and noticed, out the corner of his eye, another mark that seemed not to be random.

In an ancient hamsterglyphic script, there was a clear letter inscribed on the side of the wooden seesaw that had been here since the day the humans had first put him there. Indeed, as he'd discovered, the object was so securely fastened to the floor that it was impossible to budge.

And, believe me, he'd tried on numerous occasions.

The inscription read 'V', the letter that signified the friendship that existed between rodents of similar species, the sign that hung over hostelrys the world over that guaranteed a travelling rodent a good meal and a comfy bed for the night.

But why inscribe it there on the seesaw?

What sort of 'bed and breakfast' was being signified?

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Then, in a flash of brilliance, the meaning hit him - the last hamster to live here wasn't trying to extend some paw of friendship across time but was attempting...

...to point downwards to where the treasure is hidden.

There! It was done!

An easy enough sign to interpret. Now all Montmorenci had to do was indicate clearly where to dig - after all, the floor was often covered in shavings that obliterated the secret hidey hole that was all too easily overlooked.

With an identical mark, he indicated the exact place on the plastic rim that was weak, where slight pressure would cause the plug to spring upwards.

He needn't do any more, he told himself - any inquisitive hamster would burrow for all his worth if he was given the clear instruction that there was something buried underground, something that a hamster from years gone by, even, had felt it significant to leave for the benefit of a subsequent generation.

He pressed firmly down on the plug, sealing the contents away and covering the mark with as many wood shavings as seemed warranted.

Hidden, at last.

And it would remain so until some later generation would uncover...

...the mark!

There it was again! This time on a small plug which seemed to be sealed into the floor. Yome sniffed it for no apparent reason he could think of - it was just something hamsters did.

Carefully looking round the expanse of the cover, there was no obvious way to get in but perhaps the mark meant something? He placed a paw - gingerly at first - feeling the rough edges of the indentation scratch his foot.

Still nothing.

He tried pressure, standing on the mark with the front half of his body leaning over and, to his great surprise, the top moved upwards with a click that made him jump.

Sniffing at the crack, he inserted his teeth and prised it further apart, the cover popping out of its socket to reveal...

...the mask!

It was all he had - but it was all that was important.

Now it lay buried for a future generation to use, to discover its truth and to employ it to advance the influence and onward march of Hamsterdom throughout the earth.

Montmorenci settled back into a warm pile of straw and cloth for the final time, one final groom bringing a satisfying squeak of achievement that echoed in his ears long after it had been silenced by his surroundings.

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Like a disciplined athlete, he'd run the race to achieve that certain prize - now it was someone else's turn, someone younger who'd have the energy to begin where he'd left off, to continue what it had been his commission to do.

If only the finder would realise that, it would be all worthwhile.

Morenci, drifting off into oblivion, curled up into a tight furry ball for the final time...

...as Yome slapped the mask across his eyes and felt something begin to course through his veins.

CHRISTMAS TIME IN SHEFFIELD

Lee's note - Amongst the piles of enigmatic writings was an entire volume fronted with a sheet simply saying 'Christmas' with no other explanation as to whether George considered the works suitable for release. Perhaps they were simply notes that he'd categorised as having a common theme that needed removing from what was otherwise a very varied series of literary sketches that were jumbled together in his make do library?

Here I found strange observations about my wife's home made pizza that we have on Christmas Day, about the mozzarella cheese and tomato purée that make a suitable foundation for the spiced sausage sprinkled on top - but especially about his night time reconnaissance missions to the kitchen to recover slices of Christmas cake that we thought must have been attributable to house mice so large were the thefts.

I have chosen to publish just the two articles from this file, a subsequent story about a rodent visitor that bore the title 'HH4' which we now know was a shortpaw way for George to earmark certain works for a proposed fourth edition of 'The Hamster History of the World' - and a poem here which doesn't appear to have been selected for inclusion.

I must confess that the last line of each verse still defies interpretation, but scholars at Harvard University assured me only a couple of weeks ago that they feel that they're close to a breakthrough and, one way or another, should be publishing the full translation by the end of the year 2027.

Please pause to contemplate on the meaning of this emotionally charged poem before moving on to read further works.

Christmas Time in Sheffield

It's Christmas time in Sheffield and snow lies in the street,
The Season's lights are sparkling overhead.
The snow is crisp and even, when strangers warmly greet
With zankle plingly fickle vertal zed.

It's Christmas time in Sheffield, when Santa is expected
And kids hang up their socks above the fire.
The reindeer will be coming soon and none will be rejected
For grunkle smarts in piglets floppy stire.

It's Christmas time in Sheffield, the trees have lost their leaves
But tinsel's being hung on yonder boughs,
And coloured baubles flicker light while nature gently weaves

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Her wingly frackle murtle spotted cows.

It's Christmas time in Sheffield, the trams are running late
That shoppers can buy gifts for all their friends,
And buses run into the night before that special date
When flangers snorkle drackle pickled ends.

It's Christmas time in Sheffield, excitement's greatly growing,
The sun is setting on that special Eve
And chestnuts roast on open fires with orange embers glowing
Releasing stokol klangstorm puppy grieve.

THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BULBS

Lee's note - George never meant this work for publication.

I found it in a small pile of hamscripts that were joined together by a single string of solidified spaghetti and managed to prise them apart with four kettles' worth of boiling water.

The frontispiece bore the title 'Legends and Myths of Rodent History' and was subtitled in George's own paw-writing 'No meaning - no truth'. It appears that one of the main criteria by which George was able to judge the authenticity of a discovered work was to see whether it bore spiritual insight and, having contemplated the following work, decided against it.

I can see his point for, having now completed my seventeenth re-reading of the hamscript, meditated on it for eight straight days breaking only for food and necessary toilet visits (although I did avail myself of a commode at one particular point when I thought I was on the verge of a breakthrough) and also asked a few trusted friends to read it through, I must agree with him.

This is what George would have categorised as 'Apocryphal' - that is, a hamscript, as he described previously in 'The Great Escape' (contained in my first book of his works 'The Stories of George the Hamster'), that '...is not considered "inspired" because of the lack of meaningful moral instruction that it gives to the reader'.

However, this particular story seemed to border on being insightful and, as it dealt with the late, great Thomas Edison, I thought it might be worth including in this book as many interested in this historical scientific character might buy a copy simply because it was included.

Although it has gone unrecorded in human history, it's a well established fact in Rodent folklore that Thomas Edison used to keep hamsters in a small shed, bricked into his house and heated from the main coal fire that spread warmth throughout the ground floor.

No one is absolutely sure why hamsters attracted his attention so much but, in numerous writings preserved in the Musée d'hamster de Paris, researchers can read of the extensive work he did on investigating and cataloguing safe foods for rodents, of his inventions of the exercise wheel (although, being square, they never really caught on until the mid-twentieth century when they were re-designed circular) and his attempts at finding the most pleasing type of bedding possible.

These are matters which I do not now wish to develop or describe in any detail but the interested reader can find adequate literature on the subject in the 'hamster' section on most good pet shops' bookshelves. Suffice to say that hamsters still look back to that time when one great scientist used what resources he had to further the advance of our well-being.

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Perhaps Edison's greatest invention - and, indeed, the one by which he's most remembered - is the light bulb, something that every home in the civilised world would take for granted.

But the original reason for its invention wasn't to provide light for his fellow humans when the sun had set below the horizon (after all, humans had the candle - what did they need with another light source?) but to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of Edison's observations of his hamsters' nocturnal habits for, in using the wax and wick of man's preferred way of lighting a room (why they chose to invent the candle rather than the light bulb at all is beyond the logical reasoning of most rodents' minds), he would invariably set light to bedding, forcing him to reach for the nearest glass of water to extinguish the blaze (this being also the reason why the fire extinguisher was originally developed but, again, this is beyond the scope of this present work).

Of course, it would have been easier to simply place a protective cover over the candle, something that Edison struggled with for many weeks. But leather, although durable and fairly flame-resistant, seemed to block out most of the light produced and he ended up in a worse position than before.

Glass also came to his mind but, seeing as this design was already being employed in the production of the oil lamp, he felt that he might infringe design or patent rights and so turned his attention to something that was as radically new as it was revolutionary - the light bulb.

Why it got this name is lost in the shrouds of time.

True, the eventual product *was* light, weighing in at under two ounces - but so was the candle and no one had ever thought to call it a 'light' candle. For that matter, why not call writing equipment a 'light quill'?

Again, it *did* look like a flower bulb - yet only superficially so. For where were the roots, the little green shoot breaking through the dead covering towards the sky or the need to bury it three inches under the soil during the latter months of the year?

Better by far would have been the label 'Electrically-powered glass-covered alternative candle' but, as history teaches us time and time again, sensible labels rarely get used (for example, all the greyhounds I've seen are brown and 'golden' hamsters are seldom ever yellow - and never made out of gold unless ornamental and, therefore, not sentient).

There probably was a good and sane reason but, to us in the twenty-first century, the logic escapes us. One day, we may unearth a diary in which the phrase is explained but, for now, we're set to struggle with the stupidity of it all.

So, having dismissed the easier adaptations of candlelight, he decided to target something revolutionary and set about experimenting with bright, burning objects and hamster bedding, seeing which would ignite and which wouldn't.

To his abject horror, he found that bedding was so combustible that it didn't matter which substance he used for it was consumed within the space of a few short seconds.

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Just as he was about to give up, he suddenly - and very unexpectedly - had a brain wave.

'Perhaps,' he thought, 'it's what the bedding burns *in* that's the problem. Perhaps it's something to do with what's in air?'

Early the next morning, he began experimenting with different gases - things like the gas that you get from dirty socks that have been lying around on the bedroom floor for three days (and, of which, he had rather a large number), the steaming gas that rises from cesspits (which seemed only to increase the rate at which substances combusted) and even the strange aroma that rose from four day old cooked sprouts (although, judging by the way children react at freshly cooked sprouts, the smell must be very similar).

But, alas, nothing seemed to work, even though some gases certainly retarded burning metal.

Then, in a simple twist of logic, he realised the answer.

It began one cold February morning when he heard one of his pet hamsters squeak and he began reasoning why it was that their voice was higher-pitched than the common mouse.

The solution hit him like a wet herring being slapped across his face - it was obvious!

Hamsters spoke the way they did because they sniffed helium - and that was also the reason why, when they breathed into a candle flame, it was extinguished.

This meant - and this was the big leap of logic that solved the problem - that, for some reason, helium didn't give the candle what it needed to continue to burn.

He immediately decided to call helium 'inert' - although what exactly 'ert' was and why helium was 'in' it has puzzled scientists the world over from that day to this.

Excitedly, he began searching for other gases that were inert, experimenting with them in tightly sealed glass containers, passing electrical charges through metallic threads that glowed white hot, causing there to be a brilliance that filled the room but which was never consumed.

More importantly, hamster bedding didn't catch light - it was a stunning breakthrough that transformed society. Instead of men and women fearing flames setting their hamsters on fire, they were able to relax and spend fruitful hours being entertained by watching their pets exercise on their wheels into the wee small hours of the morning (something that's still much more exciting than the present day television program schedule).

Of course, as with all new inventions, the light bulb didn't catch on overnight. But, once a successful marketing campaign had hit the streets that offered a personal free hamster with each bulb, sales sky-rocketed and the candle became doomed to the corridors of history.

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With time, though, light bulbs became fashionable even without hamsters being present and households, to keep up with those next door, adopted a candle-free environment. What modern man doesn't understand, though - and this is something that you'll find nowhere within the pages of human history - is that the light bulb and hamster are inseparable parts of the one great invention.

While it's quite true that there exists a growing number of people who yearn back to the 'pre-rodent' days of lighting and who fill their houses with foul-smelling candles - sometimes even lighting them - it wasn't so from the beginning for Thomas Edison's intention had always been to provide safe illumination for the hamster owners of the world.

THE RED MILL

For Pavel Plasencia

Lee's note - The evidence points towards the possibility that this was an out-take from one of George's earlier works 'An English Hamster in Paris', released in George's first book 'The Stories of George the Hamster'.

I discovered it along with the record of an enigmatic conversation he'd had with Mademoiselle Madeleine Duphare of the Opera de Paris in which she expressed her doubt as to the whereabouts of both myself and my wife when George lost our trail during his epic voyage, stowed away in our hand luggage.

However, a thick red line was drawn under that short piece and, in the same ink, the demarcation 'HH4' was clearly visible on the left-hand side of the first paragraph.

Even though axed from the final Parisienne work, George must've felt sufficiently pleased with this story to want to include it in a future work.

Although still a lengthy piece, I had to edit the original manuscript as it contained an eight-page discourse about the appropriateness of different types of varnish on table surfaces and, although of particular interest to rodents, it would have detracted from a human's enjoyment.

The full version, however, can be downloaded from the usual sources.

At the age of just two months it was obvious to his parents that their hamlet would never be able to use both rear paws. No one is quite sure – even to this day – just what prevented the legs from developing, though a congenital defect is by far the most likely cause. But history is certain that his old nickname, 'Two-Legs' Lautrec, was given him at an early age.

As a youngster, while the other hamlets in his neighbourhood were up all night running frantically on exercise wheels, Lautrec would sit beside his own and spin it with both his front paws, dragging himself to bed when he grew weary or when the first rays of the sun began to warm the earth.

It would be wrong to think of 'Two-Legs' as being either backward or slow – by no stretch of the imagination could that ever have been levelled at him, for his passion for art, in composition and appreciation, was demonstrably present at an early age.

One story – the authenticity of which can't now be proven one way or the other – records how Lautrec would interlace the wood shavings in his cage through the bars, making wicker-like displays that had depth and substance to them once he'd added half-shells of nuts and seeds that he'd finished with.

But the problem was that pet owners preferred the four-legged version of hamsters and his time at the shop, staring out from his solitary cage, dragged on into months until that one fateful day when the owner of the newly opened theatre-cum-night-club, the

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Red Mill, saw him in the window of the shop as he passed by on his way home one afternoon.

'Reduced to clear,' read the sign beside the cage. 'Novelty two-legged hamster going cheap.'

Of course, that wasn't strictly true - Lautrec went 'squeak' just like any other hamster - but the sign seemed to do the trick for, within five minutes of being drawn to him, Henri purchased his new companion and took him home excitedly to the small apartment that sat at the top of his much frequented establishment.

Come nightfall, when a hamster's activity period begins, Henri would take Lautrec and sit him on the bar in his own special place, away from prying eyes with brushes, paints and various canvases so that he could continue his passion of painting any and everyone who frequented the halls of the Red Mill.

Here, Two-Legs saw a wide cross section of the city's people, all coming to be entertained by famous acts renowned throughout the world, glamorous and brightly coloured girls dancing the notorious Tin-Tin (a cheaper version of the Can-Can that had been invented by an out-of-work choreographer so that Henri couldn't be sued for plagiarism) while bartenders juggled with bottles and mixers long into the night.

Here it was that Lautrec drew some of his most famous pictures, taking his sketches back to his nest when sun came up to work on them with oils (Lautrec found that Pure Italian Virgin Olive was the best) before Henri would hang them in the small shop that opened during the day, selling scenes from the city to the crowds of tourists who'd frequent the streets (it also explains why his paintings can be found the world over, taken there by people returning from their experiences in the city).

It was after a couple of months that Henri invented the dragster for Lautrec, a simple invention of two matchboxes glued together with a small pair of wheels joined by an axle secured underneath.

By placing the hamster's rear end in the contraption, Lautrec was suddenly able to move rapidly along the full extent of the bar, chatting with the characters who went there nightly, earwiggling conversation and getting different vantage points from which he could complete his sketches.

Art Critics still talk about Lautrec's 'static' period before the wheels had been made for him, referring to his latter sketches as being filled with 'motion', an inadvertent testimony to the fact that the bar surface wasn't perfectly flat and that, when Lautrec went to sketch a scene that caught his attention, the wheels would begin to rotate and he'd drift towards one end of the bar.

Of course, these 'motion pictures' or 'movies' were the first of their kind, the mixed up or confused aspect of the works being the inspiration for the later school of Impressionism that swept the Western world.

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It was only in the last few weeks of his life, unfortunately, that Henri decided to make a pair of brakes to attach to the cart, but most connoisseurs don't regard the sketches made in that short time period as having anything like the vibrancy of his earlier works. This could, of course, be just a matter of snobbery.

The Red Mill was a place where men were men and where women certainly weren't - they were the wrong shape for a start and wore make up. Although, if the place had opened its doors today, you may have wondered at the relevancy of the distinction I've just made.

It was a place that the most colourful of characters graced nightly, their stories being interwoven with the imagined mystery of the place. The Red Mill could be many things to many people - just as the people who attended for a night out could be the same.

Does that make sense? Let me explain.

Lautrec liked to chat - it was what made the hours pass all the quicker when he struggled for the inspiration for his next sketch or when his paw ached with tiredness and he needed to sit quietly down and rest it on a pre-warmed cushion for half an hour.

One night, a particularly sprightly gentleman wandered into the place, propping up the stool as he ordered his drink and pushing his hat to the rear of his head. He scratched his balding pate and, out of the corner of his eye, noticed the small furry rodent pulling his way along to greet him.

'New in town?' questioned Lautrec. 'Not seen you before.'

In those days, to talk to a hamster wasn't considered unusual - especially after you'd had a few drinks at a bar - and, besides, the man appreciated the company.

'New here,' came the reply. 'I've always wondered what this place was like.'

He looked at the tables set out round the hall, the dancers performing no more than what seemed to be a few inches from those sat watching and the busy waiters pushing their way to fulfil the orders at the appropriate tables.

'And what's your profession?' Lautrec asked, intrigued - for, although his clothes seemed nothing out of the ordinary, there was a quirkiness in the material, a roughness that defied explanation.

The man returned his gaze to the bar and answered, 'I'm a sailor by trade.'

He paused. 'If, indeed, you can call it a trade.'

'That must be exciting,' Lautrec enthused, 'are you bound for a port?'

'No, not at all.'

The conversation stopped abruptly - almost awkwardly. Lautrec, inquisitive as ever, pressed his acquaintance once more. 'You've just returned from the sea, then?'

'Nope.'

Two-Legs was just a little bit baffled. What could he be a sailor of if it wasn't of the sea? If there was anything else one could 'sail', he'd certainly never heard of it.

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'So,' began Lautrec, 'when was the last time you were at sea?'

The sailor scratched his head and began, 'Let me see now...' the cranking of machinery could faintly be heard as he tried to summon the answer from his mind.

'Must be nigh on twenty years - more like twenty-five.'

The hamster fell speechless, struggling to come to terms with the information.

'A sailor,' he thought to himself, 'but he's had no experience of the sea for two decades or more.'

He stifled a question and then took courage and asked, 'Wouldn't it be better to say that you *were* a sailor - or that you *want* to be a sailor again?'

The man looked at him with puzzlement in his eyes. 'You believe what you want to,' he began, 'I believe I *am* a sailor...'

'...but, surely, if you *are* a sailor it means that you must currently be doing the things that a sailor *does* - not what they once *did*.'

The man looked at Lautrec with madness in his eyes, pulled on his hat and drank the liquid that remained in his glass, slamming it onto the bar with a chink that displayed his annoyance.

'I can see it's a waste of time talking to you,' he said, swaggering away from the bar.

'Once a sailor, always a sailor! Who are you to tell me what I am?' and, with that, he walked out through the door, onto the street.

Lautrec was confused, puzzled - he scratched his head, groomed and returned to the centre of the bar from where he could see the dancers take to the floor with the new routine they'd been rehearsing all afternoon.

This was something that he hadn't got any sketches of - it was brand new - and he hastily committed to paper the thoughts and ideas, the expressions and movements before he forgot the vision.

Just as the cabaret was nearing its conclusion, a petite lady looked over his shoulder and observed, 'That's very good. Are you an artist?'

'Yes,' he squeaked back, 'I sit here most nights and take my pleasure...'

'...I'm a cook,' she interrupted. 'Live on the west side of town. You know, I have every cookery book that's ever been published throughout the world - read each one from cover to cover, I have.'

Lautrec pouted his piece of charcoal and turned to gaze at the lady.

'You must make some great dishes,' he observed.

'Ha!' she laughed loudly. 'No, no - we always eat out. Don't have time for making things. I just like to read about it - whiles away the time between meals.'

Turning to go, she tossed a couple of coins onto the bar and signalled to the waiter, 'Here! Let the hamster have a drink on me!'

Lautrec squeaked after her, 'Merci, madame!' and pointed to the container of freshly pressed walnut oil that sat behind the counter as the barman hastened to pour him a large shot.

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Later that evening, after the last of the clientele had passed through the doors into the night, he sat quietly thinking about the conversations of the previous evening.

That was the strange thing about people, he mused. They could *think* they were whatever they would like to be and yet not have any inkling that a person is only what they live.

If they were to take a good look at him, why, how could they not see him as an artist, a painter, a person who delighted to capture in still life the vibrancy of what took place all around him?

But where was the evidence of that man being a sailor?

Or of the woman being a cook?

Sure, they had some of the trappings of the profession but there was little evidence that they were living out the reality.

'If a person *is*,' he mused, 'He should also *be*.'

He scratched his chin, looking through the series of impressions created that evening at the Red Mill.

'People,' thought Lautrec as he settled down to sleep, 'are strange, deceived creatures...'

AUTHOR! AUTHOR!

Lee's note - Probably the most absurd of all the hamscripts I've recently discovered, this looks much older in composition than anything else. More so because, in the top left hand corner, the inscription 'HH3' can be clearly seen - a work that was released in 1991 (included in the first book of George's writings).

At the time of having the booklets first printed for distribution to the local church, George had asked me whether there was room for 'one meaningless short story' but, as the proofs had already been sent away to the printers, there was nothing I could do - indeed, I soon forgot the incident until I uncovered this hamscript along with 'Futtock' that appears later (which also bore the 'HH3' inscription).

I can only imagine that George had the idea to include it as another example of Apocrypha - even though there's clearly instruction in it, there seems to be no overall teaching that pervades the entire story.

This is why most experts regard 'Futtock' as being a story that simply didn't make the Volume Three final cut while this one - the 'meaningless short story' - was intended to be included but was too late.

'Oh, Roger! How could you?' the heiress staggered towards the mantelpiece with a half empty glass of champagne in her hand, her lower lip quivering with grief. 'All those years that I trusted you! I never imagined - could never have imagined - that even then...'

'You fed me lies!' the angry young man retorted. 'Why did you never tell me that Lord Tregannon was my father? Were you too proud?'

She slumped her head across her forearm, shoulders shaking her sorrow into copious tears as she turned to her son, mascara washing down her face.

'You could never understand,' she began. 'How could I tell you what you didn't want to hear? You were always off somewhere, gallivanting across the world. It was only that time in the shed when you were pickling those gherkins that I...'

'...No, no!' the writer paused and put his pen down across the paper. This script was beginning to depress him. Three weeks into the project and he was wondering whether he'd ever finish it to his satisfaction. Still, back to the issue at hand.

'Pickling gherkins!' he grunted. 'What a stupid thing to put into a film! Think! Think! What do the gentry do for leisure when they're at home?'

He reached for a large volume and retrieved it from the shelf, fingers flicking through the entries until he came to a relevant passage.

Yes, that was it! It made much more sense.

He picked up his pen, crossed out the offending words and began at the point from which he was happy, trying to stimulate his mind to work...

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'...You could never understand,' she began. 'How could I tell you what you didn't want to hear? You were always off somewhere, gallivanting across the world. When did I get the time?

'Even when I tried to tell you, your mind was caught up with that blessed tennis!'

'Oh mother!' he gesticulated with his hand. 'Why didn't you write me? Phone me? Take me to one side and explain? All your excuses are just poppycock, poppecock, poopy...'

He reached for the dictionary and hastily found the relevant page, reading it aloud.

'Poppycock. Mmm...balderdash, idle senseless talk. That sounds better. Better word, balderdash. More upper crust, I think. Fits better.'

He inked out his attempts at a correct spelling and wrote in balderdash, sitting back to re-read the speech...

'Oh mother!' he gesticulated with his hand. 'Why didn't you write me? Phone me? Take me to one side and explain? All your excuses are balderdash...'

'No! That isn't right at all!'

'Oh mother!' he gesticulated with his hand. 'Why didn't you write me? Phone me? Take me to one side and explain? All your excuses are poppycock...'

'NO!'

He slammed his pen down onto the paper, squirting ink onto the wooden surface as he jumped up, face red, pacing the room.

Halfway across, his feet stopped suddenly as he turned to face the work bench at which he'd been writing.

'That's it! Yes!'

He hurried back across the room, blotted the ink away and corrected again...

'Oh mother!' he gesticulated with his hand. 'Why didn't you write me? Phone me? Take me to one side and explain? All your excuses...'

Lord Tregannon, head held high, thrust the door open to the study, clattering the panels into the wall as he bellowed, 'So, the truth is finally out!'

The young man's countenance fell as his face became ashen.

'Now you know why you're the way you are, son! You're no more and no less than your father...'

'Never! I won't admit it!' he screamed with anguish. 'I'm the man I am because the scriptwriter has characterised me this way...'

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

Yes, that was the point - the young man was entirely at his mercy.

He could write a few violent outbursts, make him passive, kill him off in the first ten minutes. What did it matter? If he didn't need him, he could discard him into the dustbin, onto the cutting room floor as if he was simply a rag that had served its purpose and was now worthless.

Imagination, that was the key.

If he could make the audience believe that what they were seeing was plausible, dramatic, true to life, he was certainly on to a winner.

A lot depended on the actor, too, it had to be said. If they couldn't dramatise his lines, he might as well write gibberish for all the good it'd do.

The author had this uncanny sense that the characters in his novel were sitting around waiting for the next line to be written - as if their existence depended on him writing something.

Well, to a large extent, I guess they did.

Although many would claim that they were 'true to life' - some go even as far as to think that they were real people being candidly filmed in an authentic world - it was all simply a figment of one man's imagination.

Real life wasn't like this - it might be *thought* to be like it but it was too idealised, too routine a portrayal of the complexities of a man or woman's mind. How could you show the unexpected reactions that so often dogged society without audiences shouting 'Implausible!' or 'Unrealistic!'.

To be honest about it, you had to write what they were expecting to hear - almost what they *wanted* to see being portrayed. Independent though the author would like to have been, he knew his dependency wasn't upon his imagination - even though he prided himself on it - but upon someone else's expectation.

He reluctantly began to scratch out the last few words of the manuscript and thumbed through his notes, his 'plot points' that showed him the overview of the work.

'Having an alien spaceship land would certainly be original,' he thought to himself, 'but it's not what the vast majority of people will be wanting to see happen.'

He tapped his pen on the table and slumped back into his chair, thinking aloud, 'Tornado? Er, no.

'A sudden bolt of lightning that starts a raging fire trapping them alive to die a horrible death?'

He scrunched his face into a distasteful implausibility. 'Darn! I wish I could think of a half-decent ending!'

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In a flash of inspiration, it came to him, causing him to jump with excitement. He shook the pen at the page, trying to think of the best way to begin his near-genius and wrote...

...George the Hamster drew the author's consciousness to a close, ending his treatment of his character with a few short taps on the computer keyboard.

It wasn't the best way to finish a story, it had to be said, but at least it rounded it off nicely, leaving readers to contemplate the points raised and to decide for themselves whether there was something they could learn from it all.

It had been a difficult manuscript to finish, he was sure of that - but it'd been worth it in the end.

THE BUDGIE OF THE BASKERVILLES

Lee's note - In March 1901, Conan Doyle holidayed in Norfolk - later that same year the infamous story 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' appeared in The Strand magazine to critical and public acclaim, serialised from August to April of the next year.

However, what's often overlooked by literary historians is that there exists a community of hamsters in Norwich on the banks of the River Wensum that have an ancient tradition of a much earlier story concerning a budgie that was associated with the same family of Baskervilles as exist in Conan Doyle's version, and that the human writer's presence near the burrow entrance that year is proof positive to some rodents that his 'original' story was, in fact, 'borrowed', changed and claimed as his own.

When George first told me about the possibility I poo-pooed the idea but, now that critical analysis of some of Conan Doyle's private letters of the time have been published by Harvard University, it seems all the more likely that this hamscript that was sent to me from Alaska may well prove to be the original one that George had been compiling shortly before his death.

Accompanying the story was a hastily scrawled note in his handwriting that requested that the story be compared to '...the oldest surviving copies of this story that are known to exist in your community in Juneau'.

Although some humans have disputed the authenticity of this work due to the existence of a refrigerator in the plot, it has been carefully explained elsewhere that pre-fridge humans did have pantries and larders that were kept at low temperatures and that it's to this that the rodent text almost certainly refers.

Why the text speaks of a modern day refrigerator is simply a literary device to make the story relevant to present day readers.

Accepted, therefore, as 'authentic', I'm indebted to the scholarly world for allowing the text to be included here amongst George's other lesser-known works.

Darkness pervaded his sight to the right and left, both upwards and down.

Not even the slightest glimmer of light cracked through the black canvas that masked everything from view.

Then, suddenly, a perch - a small cylindrical piece of wood stretched out across the void of nothingness, suspended there by a hand unseen.

Then a mirror and a bell - the scene grew with increasing detail - a water dispenser, a seed tray. But still no cage, no wires - just the perch hanging there mysteriously, the other objects dangling in mid-air at one end of the shaft.

A budgie - bright blue, with puffed feathers - appeared at the far end, hopping energetically towards the mirror, staring, preening itself as it turned its head first one way then the other.

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Seed sprayed into the air as its head dived into the tray, water splashed downwards as the gurgle of its swallow filled the void - the bird eyed the bell quizzically then, bringing its beak down violently, rang the metal object with a loud...

...'Ding!'

Furlock Holmes woke from his sleep with a start, the recurring dream dispelled by returning consciousness as the ceiling came sharply into focus.

'It's becoming more of a hindrance than a blessing,' he squeaked to himself. The more he thought about it, the greater his sense of bewilderment at what his mind was trying to tell him.

Perhaps it was the solution to this most puzzling of cases that he'd been pondering for near on two weeks - perhaps his mind was holding out a symbol of what it was that should be leading him during his waking hours - or perhaps it was just the result of eating too many sunflower seeds before he went to bed each evening.

He wasn't sure...

...but he *was* sure about one thing - it was beginning to drive him nuts.

Not small insignificant nuts but huge brazils, the biggest he'd ever seen.

Perhaps even bigger if you used a magnifying glass.

He woke at the same point every evening, too, when he was sure that what had just transpired rang a bell in his mind that he should, by now, have been able to interpret. But there was some key, some hinge upon which this plot turned that was escaping him.

He recalled the events of that first meeting with the rodent physician Jimmy Mortified, the Baskerville's dearly beloved pet and confidante, when he first arrived at the baker's shop in London.

It had been an oppressive day, the humidity dripping from the air upon everything that moved through it.

Furlock had thought even then that there was something strange about the visitor, something detached from the matter at hand, as if he'd been sent on an errand that he was desperately trying to claim as his own but which belonged to another who didn't want to be named.

'The most eerie of phenomena occurs every morning,' Mortified had begun after the pleasantries had been exchanged. 'The claw prints of a budgerigar are found in the breakfast butter - whether it be new or part used. The cover can be sealed or left gently resting on the tray but the result is always the same - when they come to serve breakfast, the humans always scream when the cover's removed and the claws are revealed.'

'How odd,' Flotsam squeaked - but Holmes was one step ahead.

'I assume that you've checked the refrigerator to make sure that there isn't a bird living in the ice box?' he enquired.

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'Of course! It was the first thing we did! I suspect foul play...'

'Illogical,' Furlock interrupted. 'While the presence of a chicken's claws may indicate foul play, a budgie's does no such thing. There's a purely rational explanation that simply has yet to be uncovered.'

He paused, holding his head upward as if grasping for inspiration.

'Now, let's look at this positively,' he continued. 'We should be grateful that the prints aren't those of an elephant...'

'Why ever not?' Flotsam and Mortified squeaked in unison.

'...because, otherwise, the butter would have been squashed flat - it may even have been so thin that it would have been mistaken for an omelette. At least being a budgie's means that the top layer could be scraped off and the remainder still used.'

They both nodded, Dr Mortified adding, 'Many hamsters in the area believe that this is none other than the outworking of the curse on the life of Yugo Baskerville - a rat of dubious upbringing and even more dubious morality. He's believed to be the one who initiated the curse of the Budgie, a rodent who'd stolen sunflower seeds from the local hamsters over three generations ago and from whom the humans took their name.'

'I have no time for curses,' Furlock waved his paw, dismissing the idea. 'Rest assured that there's a perfectly logical and rational explanation for whatever has caused these footprints in the butter. And it's to this problem that myself and Doctor Flotsam will give our attention...'

That seemed like an age ago, but his calendar assured him that it was only twelve days - twelve *long* days - and twelve sets of identical footprints that seemed to mock him daily.

And that dream, too - what did *that* mean?

Furlock rose from his soft, downy bedding and groomed as he always did, matting down each and every tuft of hair with as much spit as was necessary.

In spite of nightly guards at the refrigerator entrance, the result was always the same - identical prints in the same place. Perhaps that was the clue - for, even accounting for the fact that it could be the same budgerigar, variations in the claw would surely suggest that there must be *some* difference, however small, in what was being witnessed each morning.

Yes! That was the solution!

That was what the dream was telling him!

While it would be expected that a budgie would feel at home on a wooden perch, they'd never choose of their own accord to fly into a refrigerator. It had to be a subterfuge - whatever that last word meant.

But it sounded clever and Furlock thought he'd stick with it.

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At the pre-arranged time that evening, Furlock, Flotsam and Mortified met together along with the rodent guard - as they had done for the previous twelve nights - outside the front door of the refrigerator, long after the human inhabitants had ascended the stairs to bed.

'This is pointless,' objected Flotsam. 'It's not as if we've achieved anything - we've seen no one, found no clues, heard nothing. What can we achieve tonight?'

'That's because we've been looking at this thing backwards,' concluded Furlock. 'We've been thinking about the nature of the creature that might have left those prints rather than try and consider the reason why the prints have been left. Just because you see the evidence of something with your own eyes, it doesn't mean that it actually exists.'

Flotsam looked at Holmes with almost total bafflement - Mortified had the look of enlightenment on his own but the expression was purely the result of something he'd eaten an hour earlier.

'What I mean is this,' Furlock continued. 'You see the footprints of a budgie so you presume that a budgie must have left them - you realise that a budgie *couldn't have* left them so you invent some mystical budgie-like creature to satisfy the false premise that you cling on to as a prime fact. The *real* fact is that there's a paw - not a claw - in this that's more sinister than any theorising can imagine.'

And, with that, he scampered to the rear of the fridge and pointed to a large hole in the base into which the three hamsters wriggled, Furlock pointing out a 'budgerigar foot stencil' that lay, propped up, in one corner.

Ascending into the refrigerator, Holmes continued, 'The idea was to cause the human inhabitants of this house, the Baskervilles, to develop Budgiephobia - a common fear amongst irrational creatures like humans.'

'And why? Because it was to make a way for the refrigerator door never to be opened for fear that the Budgie Monster would peck them to death if they ever discovered it...'

Just then, Flotsam raised a paw for silence as he heard the faint scratching of another rodent ascending into the fridge the way they'd come, the wooden claw stencil rattling against the side of the frame as the creature climbed up with three paws clinging to the side, the other firmly grasping the stamp.

Realising that immediate action was required, Doctor Mortified sprang upwards towards the top of the milk bottle held fast in the door and extended his frame to pop the front door open, releasing the light button that illuminated the interior.

'Rufus!' squeaked Flotsam indignantly.

'Furlock!' the rasping voice of the rat spitting venom into the air broke the rodent's silence. 'I 'ate you!'

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With a mad dash across the chilled grilled shelf, Flotsam landed astride Rufus' head, knocking him unconscious in the twinkling of an eye that had Mortified blinking twice to make sure his eyes hadn't deceived him.

'But why did they need a secure storage space?' Dr Mortified asked as the local hamsters led Rufus away, gagged and bound.

'It was fairly obvious,' Furlock concluded, 'that the rats were planning a raid on the hamster food stores and needed a safe place to hide away their swag. If they'd been able to frighten the humans into leaving the fridge alone for fear of the Budgie's curse, they would've had a cool store that would've preserved all that they would've managed to steal.'

'It was all fairly obvious when you realise that the great grandson of Yugo Baskerville was none other than Rufus the Rat. Rats spread lies to make you believe whatever's advantageous to them and disastrous to us.'

'As it was,' Furlock dampened an offending piece of fur with his tongue, 'their dastardly plot was uncovered long before it ever came to fruition...'

ODE TO THE MEANING OF LIFE

Lee's note - Going through the seemingly endless legacy of George the Hamster has been a monumental work that has taken me many months of painstaking effort, perseverance, medical prescriptions and psychiatric counselling.

Sometimes, just when I thought I'd stumbled upon a brand new story, I'd unroll the manuscript to find only a title and a few hastily written scratches that were put there to direct his thoughts when he was intending to next return to the subject to develop it.

Other times, the lengthy work was barely intelligible because of George's poor paw-writing at the end of his life. On still other occasions, I found works that had either been translated into or were waiting translation from other rodent languages such as meerkat, gerbil and squirrel - these weren't languages (and still aren't) that I'm in any way proficient in and I continue to await professional help in deciphering the meaning of these works.

I'm also awaiting unqualified professional help.

However, shortly before we went to press, I received the first interpretation of a four verse poem that I discovered in gerbilese (an eastern dialect of gerbil) almost a year ago. Experts at the British Museum finally managed to translate what appeared to be gibberish into English by the use of the hidden coding of the Rosetta Stone, a tool that has been used to decipher other ancient scripts in times past.

Here, then, is the first gerbilese poem a human book has ever contained - further research will need to be done in order to determine whether this was a George original (and, therefore, to confirm the feeling I've had for many years that he was, indeed, at least bi-lingual) or whether it was a work dug out from the annals of rodent history that he'd wanted to release into the world.

No doubt, now that it's been released here, many critical commentaries will be published in subsequent years - scholars should avail themselves of the soon to be released 'Text with Commentary' that the Museum will be putting out for the more technical background to this find which space doesn't permit me to include here.

Ode to the meaning of life

Flumbee pots and chickle weeds
Consprigging with fortnightlies.
Skin rat sprats and flumbick seeds
Can battle clats so sprightly.

Gruntle piglies forny flip
With prattering bradstock winders,
And applet treebles harvest pip

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That granny's stockwell minders.

But will gorge rumply pickle poots?
Or flickle quats a-plenty?
While hightell flangers shout out 'Toots!'
And bucklets elementary.

And if port plongsets seek their flick,
When autumn flies proke highward,
Then drample lions eek their plick,
Perfleeing kneeling skyward.

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CAVEMAN

'Caveman,
I always wanted you to go
Into caves, man.
Intergalactic mouse'
From the hit single 'Caveman' by the inhabitants of Baghdad Zoo

Lee's note – George was working on this hamscript shortly before his death. I remember him sitting watching a television program with us and 'tutting' most of the way through it, insisting that the subject matter had been 'misunderstood' and 'deliberately distorted'.

Although this work originally lacked an Introduction, there were extensive notes that accompanied the hamscript to remind George what to include. It's from these that I've taken the liberty of constructing the first section, without which the remainder of the story seems incomplete.

I've often been asked by humans the world over why it is that hamsters left no trace of their involvement in ancient civilisations if they were so important and at the forefront of innovative improvements. The problem is not in the question, of course, but in the mentality of the men and women who look for the answers and the way they interpret information.

It is, perhaps, with the greatest bewilderment that we, as communities of rodents, hear humans attribute everything they find that's 'ancient' to mankind as if they were right there when it all happened, witnessing the hand of man forming wooden tools, knapping flint and discovering fire.

The truth is, such evidence from the past is only ever assumed to be human in origin when the real truth is much more profound.

Take, for example, cave paintings.

In every book – and news article – where I've encountered them, their existence is put down to a bunch of primitive men and women who found compounds that would create different colours, portraying their world on the walls of the caves where they lived.

Fact is, they were actually painted by rodents who found a tool to express their artistic creativity in the muds and bedrocks that they daily burrowed through to create nests. When Red Sandstone was discovered by a hamster by the name of Buznoss, the powder was exported round the then-known world to give every rodent the ability to paint 'red'.

The same was true when Greenstone was unearthed - and chalk.

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It has often been alleged that the 'human' hands that painted such forms were hardly proficient in their artistic skill, the shapes often appearing distorted and out of proportion – a sure sign, say some, of the primitive mentality of mankind.

If a human *had* drawn them we should, rather, be talking about some of the worst artists that the world has ever known - *but* hamsters viewed their world from six feet below a human's eyes so that perspective was radically different. They didn't see eye-to-eye with a gazelle but toe-to-eye and the paintings are a clear indication – and conclusive proof – that either humans were three inches tall or they weren't responsible for the majority of them.

So, why don't hamsters appear in the drawings that have been found, as many humans have objected?

Precisely because hamsters weren't concerned with their own appearance – they *knew* what they looked like so there was no reason for them to make a representation of themselves on the wall but, rather, they set about drawing other life forms – humans as well as animals - although they tended to concentrate on those creatures that were fast becoming extinct because of man's intervention for food.

And that's what these paintings clearly demonstrate – they're a pictorial history of the types of magnificent creatures that no longer exist. If hamsters weren't the creative animals they were, men and women might never have known that elephants and mammoths existed in so many places just a few thousand years ago or that men lived alongside them.

Perhaps, one day, a hamster skeleton will be unearthed in one of these pictorial caves, buried with his paintbrushes and palette, and then humans will be forced into accepting that rodents were at the cutting edge of artistry long before they discovered the canvas.

Having emphasised the important role that rodents played in recording faithfully the world around them, I must move on to relate one of the most ancient of stories that was originally handed down from one generation to another by squeak of mouth.

Drawn to the caverns by the hamsters' exquisite drawings, early humans found that they also provided great protection from the howling wind and rains of winter, where food could be stored in the cool atmosphere that prevented quick decay.

Cave-occupying hamsters would frequently sit watching them go about their business, wondering if they'd ever manage to master the simple techniques that they so often struggled with.

Hamsters, being the caring creatures they are, resolved to help them develop, but trying to educate them was by no means easy and many a rodent simply gave up after the briefest of encounters.

Reyma was a hamster who specialised in linguistics and languages – he already knew bison and woolly mammoth, had mastered gerbilese, grasshopper and gazelle and was well

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on his way to being able to communicate with the tiger (one of the world's ten most difficult languages) and the three-legged purple-pied pink cotton snaffler (which has long since become extinct - as well as the blue variety).

If anyone could 'make contact' with humans and develop their language skills, surely it would've been Reyma.

Reyma held up a blade of grass from a small tuft that grew by the cave entrance.

'This,' he squeaked. 'What do you want to call...'

'Ug,' growled the caveman. 'Ug.'

Reyma wanted clarification. 'This is what you want to call an "Ug"?' he slowly spoke, the caveman nodding his approval.

'Okay, let's get on to some other basics,' he looked round the floor for a stone and, scurrying a few feet away, returned with a pebble an inch in diameter and held it up to the man's gaze.

'What's this?' he asked. 'What do you want to call this?'

The caveman pondered for a moment as if the question was proving hard, then rubbed his chin as a light from somewhere seemed to be switched on.

'Ug-ug,' he stammered.

'An "ug-ug"? Did I get that right? You want to call this an "ug-ug"?'

Again, the caveman beamed from ear to ear, obviously enjoying the game that he was now playing. Reyma retrieved a stick from his nest and held it up in the air as far as he could.

'Object three,' he squeaked.

'Ug,' grunted the caveman.

'"Ug"?!' Reyma complained. 'You can't call this an "Ug"! You called the grass "Ug"! You'll get confused if you call things by the same sound!'

The caveman looked puzzled but, looking back at the grass, he seemed to comprehend the problem. He lifted his finger and pointed, growling, 'Ug-ug-ug.'

Reyma looked bewildered. 'So you want the grass to be an "ug-ug-ug"? The twig is now an "ug"?'

The caveman nodded and smiled.

'If this human,' thought Reyma, 'tells me the next object is an Ug-ug-ug-ug, I'm gonna scream.'

He pointed to the fire that blazed ten yards from the entrance, the caveman following his gaze as the smoke rose upwards, blown about by the light breeze of the plain.

'That!' he instructed. 'What do you call fire, eh?'

The caveman thought long and hard, his face contorting into a crumpled ball. 'Ug!' he spoke with excitement, 'Ug!'

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Reyma slapped a paw across his face and walked into the darkness of the cave as he heard the man behind him excitedly repeat 'Ug!...UG!...UG!' monotonously for the next five minutes, his voice reaching a crescendo of excitement as Reyma plugged both ears with straw to try and get some sleep.

Come morning, a group of humans were gathered at the cave entrance repeating 'Ug' over and over monotonously, each trying to drown the other out with sound, pointing at random objects and naming them the same as everything else.

No wonder the discussion was becoming rather heated. How did one know that their 'Ug' was any different to another's - even though they represented totally diverse objects? Indeed, the scene was fast becoming like one you'd expect to find on any given Saturday at any given Soccer match when the home team scores - not that Reyma had any concept of such a phenomenon but, if he had, he would've agreed.

Reyma returned to his painting on the cave wall, trying to ignore the pandemonium that was ensuing at the cave entrance. As he began mixing his palette of reds and greens, blues and yellows, he perceived that they were becoming silent, the sound of shuffling behind him growing louder until the family were stood, watching him at work.

'First,' he instructed them, knowing that they had little or no perception of what it was he was saying - even after all these weeks of attempts, 'you have to mix your colours, making them the right consistency to stick to - and not run off - the walls.'

He held the palette vertically, demonstrating that the colours were more paste than paint.

'And what shall we draw today?' he asked them, their blank faces staring at his brush as he ran it across the paste, lifting some up towards the wall.

As he drew a wavy line across the rock canvas, a caveman uttered 'Ug!', pointing with his finger as if illumination had just hit him like a sledgehammer (had sledgehammers been invented, that is).

Reyma paused and squeaked, 'Just a few more lines and all will be revealed.'

He took more paint onto the brush, sketching out a head as the family began 'Ug-ing' with enthusiasm. Now with a head and backbone, Reyma turned to them, pausing with his strokes and asking them, 'Can you tell what it is yet?'

The cavemen looked puzzled - a couple whispered 'Ug!' as if in affirmation.

Reyma lifted a new, thinner brush, taking blue onto the fine strands to colour the nose and horns, scraping into the cave wall with intense concentration as another human uttered the immortal word...

'...Ug!'

The tape recorder hissed and whirred, spluttering out the monosyllabic sound as the Press strained their ears to catch the first sound of their ancestors ever heard, extracted as it was from the groove of the cave painting.

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A scientist stepped up to the microphone to explain.

'As the painter scratches the paint onto the wall' he paused to point to the red pigment on the slide, the gathered crowd directing their stare as he continued, 'the implement acts like a stylus, recording the vibrations that are present into the grooves for us to read tens of thousands of years later.'

He fell silent, wiping a tear from his face as he remembered the moment of their discovery.

'It was an emotional and near spiritual experience,' he began explaining, 'to hear man's first intelligent words across the millennia...'

CHRISTMAS CHEER

for Lee Westerman

Lee's note - Clearly marked 'HH4' on the top left hand corner of the first page of the hamscript, this story bears all the hallmarks of what has become regarded as an authentic work that should be accepted as factual.

It contains stunning observations and spiritual truth - even though it doesn't deal with a momentous event in human history from a rodent perspective. George was quite willing to show humans the alternative - and much more accurate - version of events *but* he never once felt limited to have to be confined to the history that mankind felt was important.

After all, human history seems to be the record of what the rich and famous did rather than an insight into the poor and ordinary people who were just as important to the way the world has become. Although archaeology might redress that balance to a very small degree, history is still overloaded at one end of the spectrum, being something that George felt needful to redress.

Everybody wants a Christmas Hamster, full of wine and meats, luxurious chocolates and...

Dang! Did I write 'Hamster'?

I meant 'Hamper'.

Let me start again...

Everybody loves a Christmas Hamper, full of wine and meats, luxurious chocolates and exotic spiced fruits - delivered to your door in a sturdy wicker basket, children excitedly opening the secure cover and peering inside at the wondrous treasures contained.

The last thing you'd expect to find in a hamper is a hamster - well, perhaps not the *absolute* last thing cos you'd never be able to fit a giraffe in there - or an elephant - and the presence of a hamster is more realistic than either of those two animals.

More realistic than a steamroller or traction engine.

Or a villa in the south of France.

But you get the picture.

If you opened a wicker hamper and were met with a little brown and white furry rodent, its ears sat up like two radar dishes and a pair of deep black eyes meeting your bewildered stare, you may well be justified in letting out a surprised scream.

And that's exactly what Penelope did - and it was why her parents came running in from the kitchen to see what was wrong.

Although Christmas was a time of pleasant surprises when presents opened always seemed to delight the senses, a hamster in a hamper wasn't exactly what they'd had in mind as being the ultimate gift.

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Besides, a lamb chewing straw from a feeding trough or a cow lowing in a stable might well have certain traditional associations but, if the writers of the Biblical accounts had ever known of the existence of a rodent in the manger, they decided - sadly but probably very wisely - to remain silent on the matter.

Even though the surprise made Penny forget what she'd been thinking moments before - so much so that, even to this day, she still can't recall what she was expecting as she creaked open the lid - the hamster clearly recalled thinking 'The sun's come up very late this morning' followed by 'Who opened the lid?' when the first crack of daylight appeared before him.

Such profound contemplations are integral parts of a rodent's brain waves but, sadly, a total lack of sentient logic is also what more often than not exists within a human's mind. Perhaps that's why we bear with their failings so often instead of condemning them for being evolutionary backward.

But, I digress.

Penelope sat staring at two big black eyes staring at two very frightened and empty ones. Four more joined the hamster's line of vision - that was six - all aimed at the hamster who was as bewildered as anyone as to what was supposed to be going on.

'Are they looking at me or the food?' he thought, his eyes flitting between each pair.

Then he squeaked indignantly, 'I found all this first so it's mine, you hear?!'

The humans, however, seemed not to understand, scooping him up into their outstretched arms and placing him on a small coffee table in the centre of the room.

There was a lot going for the room itself - it smelt of freshly cooked vegetables, roast meat and, just a few inches away from an outstretched paw, a bowl full of peanuts sat invitingly. While the humans frantically discussed amongst themselves something that was way, way above his own head, the hamster grabbed a nut, ate half and then pouched the other while nobody was looking.

'We can't have a hamster for Christmas,' the father said. 'I thought we were supposed to be having turkey.'

'Now there, dear,' the mother interjected as Penelope burst into tears, 'I'm sure your father was just teasing...'

There was a silence.

The mother coughed loudly, applying her elbow to a very vulnerable and sensitive area.

'I was just teasing,' the father jumped to obedience, smiling. 'I wouldn't dream of eating our guest.'

He was just about to add 'Besides, I'm not sure there'd be enough on a leg to satisfy our hunger' when his conscience told him to think twice and, in a very rare moment in his life, he decided to listen and obey.

Perhaps, reasoned Penelope's mother, the hamster was simply a mystery gift, put there by the sellers of the hamper as a seasonal extra because one of the products was

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missing or couldn't be supplied. It just didn't sit right with the father and, having rung the wholesaler, he discovered that even the most serious of dilemmas can be met by some people with maniacal laughter - though he couldn't think why.

When they finally returned their attention to the hamster, they found that the coffee table was rodentless, the route by which he'd escaped being impossible to ascertain with any great amount of certainty.

All they knew was that, apart from the absence of a couple of peanuts, the table was as hamsterless as it had been ten minutes ago.

Paw prints were impossible to discern - had the mother not hoovered the room just half an hour before the lid was lifted, the dust might have testified to small marks where damp paws had lifted the dirt but, as it was, no direction looked any more likely than any other.

One thing they *did* know was that he couldn't be very far - with a solid floor beneath them and doors firmly shut, he *had* to be somewhere in the room, somewhere that a small furry rodent could hide himself away undetected and invisible.

Out of the corner of her eye Penelope saw the curtain quiver with impact and, letting out a squeal of realisation, pointed with her finger as a four inch furry rodent shot skyward up the velveteen faster than a vaselined ferret down a water pipe - not that the world has seen many vaselined ferrets even consider entering water pipes but, if they had, the speed would surely have been closely equivalent to that of the hamster climbing to a secure high spot from which he could survey his surroundings.

Shouting 'I'll go get a cage', the father sprinted into the bedroom where, very fortunately for the plot and brevity of the story (after all, they lived a half hour's drive from the nearest pet shop even if they'd been open - and pages of text would have been necessary to cover his temporary disappearance and successful return, something that the editors of this story would have found unacceptable), a large metal compartment was stored away in case of just such an emergency as this.

Just why anyone would have envisaged something similar to this ever happening in their lifetime is inexplicable, I admit, but humans are strange creatures and the logic of their minds isn't for us to contemplate.

As he returned to the living room, he could see his wife holding out the aquarium fish tank net to the side of the pelmet as the hamster placed his rear paws firmly onto the rail and leapt into mid-air, expecting to glide gently to earth as a rodent's misconception of the similarity of their fur to a bird's feathers normally led them to believe.

With a quick roll of the wrists, he landed safely in the net, Penelope letting out a squeal of delight as he was lowered into the awaiting open door that was shut securely after his entry.

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That evening, a string of guests were invited to share in the family's joy, the hamper's contents employed for that very purpose, feeding those who called to catch a glimpse of the new pet that, although believed to have been lost, was found in the most fortuitous of circumstances.

It was strange, indeed, for the hamper was never meant to be spent on others - it had been procured with the sole intention of feeding them for the next few days as the holidays continued until New Year. But, in the space of a few, short hours, all that remained was the wicker basket that had brought their most welcome of new friends.

Meanwhile, in the warmest of snug nests, the hamster settled back into the cosiest of sleeps, thinking to himself, 'Strange. You can buy a hamster like me for a fiver at most of their local pet shops. But there they've been four hours now, throwing caution to the wind and spending many times my value simply because they found me...'

Humans, truly, are remarkably strange creatures.

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FUTTOCK

For PublishAmerica

Lee's note - See my comments that introduce the story 'Author! Author!' for the background to this parable.

It should also be noted that George never intended that this story be read by young hamlets who, he felt, may not be ready for the language used (besides, they may not understand such unusual words).

'I only asked,' squeaked Purros, his skin beginning to redden beneath his fur. 'I would've thought that you could've at least answered my question with a "Don't know" if you really had no idea of an answer.'

Skanda looked at him with puzzlement, wondering at the response. It was, indeed, a strange position to be in for his answer was as accurate and as genuine as could be – it was just that this hamster felt that he'd responded in a manner that was offensive.

'Look' Skanda began, 'you asked me what the name of this wooden beam was that we're sat on – and I told you. I can't help it if you don't like my answer.'

Purros looked the other way, trying not to let the other hamster catch his gaze – 'You know what you did!' he began. 'I don't have to make the point!'

The two hamsters sat, stowed away in the hull of a Spanish Clipper, feeling the sway of the calmer waters on the vessel as it gently glided through the ocean on one of the most becalmed days of the entire voyage.

'You asked me what the beam was called,' Skanda tried to explain, 'and I told you it was a futtock. I can't help it if...'

'There you go again!' Purros interrupted him. 'You take great pleasure in being as obnoxious as possible. Don't you care that the word is offensive to me?'

'But why?' squeaked Skanda. 'Why's that word so offensive? It's the right word. Futtock. There! I've said it again. Futtock, futtock, futtock. What's wrong with it? It's a perfectly legitimate word!'

Purros pulled his ears down close to his head, trying to block out the sound but it was no good. The two-syllables echoed in his head so clearly that he knew he was going to lie awake in his nest, plagued by the word for hours.

Skanda decided to give Purros an illustration, something that he could grasp to understand. He began, 'Here! Look at this!' pointing to a ball-shaped fungus that grew only a foot away from where they were now stood.

'You've seen these before,' he squeaked, 'they're everywhere down here, growing on old wood. Now, what would you call one of them if you had to describe it to someone?'

Purros looked carefully, walking gingerly over to where it grew, sniffing above and below to determine what the object was.

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'I'd say,' he began, 'that it was a fungus that grew in the shape of a ball, full of spores that get carried on the wind to populate another area when ripe.'

'That's a mouthful!' Skanda objected. 'You'd honestly describe it like that?'

'Of course! Why? How would you describe it?'

'It's a puckfist. That's what they're ca...'

'How dare you! You've dragged this conversation down to mere crudity, indeed!' Purros screeched, beginning to hop from one paw to the next with indignation, pacing up and down with anger as Skanda lifted his paws into the air in bewilderment.

'What's wrong with you?' Skanda squeaked. 'I've done no such thing! That's what the ball's called! It's a puckfist!'

Purros strolled off, across the void, passing numerous puckfists as he came to rest a distance away on another futtock.

'I don't *want* to know,' he squeaked loudly back. 'You stay there and kindly *leave me alone!*'

The clipper was nearing port, Purros having resolved his differences with Skanda in the two days that had elapsed since their altercation. Skanda still wasn't sure just what he'd said that had caused the offence but had decided - whenever possible - to use words that didn't sound the least bit rude.

It wasn't easy, it had to be said.

Being a rodent so full of verbal expression, he found it nigh on impossible at times when there was only one word for the object in view and he had to change the easiness of using it for an entire paragraph.

It was a challenge, that much could be said.

Having stowed away on board the oared-rowing boat in which the crew had set out to the port from their anchorage, Skanda heard Purros' question with dread, asking him about the nautical tackle that they watched the sailors use.

'There!' Purros pointed at the object. 'Those metal u-shaped things that they put the oars in.'

Skanda thought long and hard.

True, he could just say 'Rowlocks' and be done with it, but it wouldn't help matters if he did. They were expecting to dine together, to travel round the island that coming week, see the sights as a pair of travelling companions. He couldn't risk upsetting the tentative friendship by him being honest.

Although his mother had always told him that honesty was the best policy, he had to confess that she could never have imagined such a difficult situation as the one in which he now found himself.

'I have no idea,' he squeaked. 'Never really paid them much attention before now. The humans probably haven't given them a name as of yet.'

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'What?' Purros objected. 'You mean they don't have a specific name?! I think the range of your vocabulary is lacking!'

How much Skanda wanted to shout the word out for all to hear - with a certain amount of venom which would certainly have changed the meaning of the word. He was suffering inside trying to contain himself but it had to be done, there was no option.

'Well, then,' Purros continued, 'I shall call them "U-shaped Oar holders". There! I'm sure it'll catch on...'

Sat at table that evening, Skanda began to look at the menu with a fair amount of horror - there, amongst the starters, was 'Soup of the Day'.

Perhaps it wouldn't have caused him too much of a problem had he not been discussing their meal with Purros as they climbed the hill overlooking the bay and hearing that he'd set his heart on soup.

As they scurried through the door, Skanda noticed that in large letters on a blackboard was chalked the informative 'Soup of the Day - Cock-a-leekie' which Purros had missed, being more content to remark on the view.

As they browsed through the menu, Purros remarked, 'I'm in luck, Skanda - they've got soup on the menu!'

'Call the waiter over and have him wipe it off,' he'd smiled back - but it was definitely dawning on him that, perhaps, his friend had had his sense of humour surgically removed.

'I guess it's just possible,' Skanda thought to himself, 'that, somewhere, they may still have it in some jar, waiting for it to be re-inserted. If only, if only...'

The waiter's approach snapped Skanda awake, contemplating his best method of concealment.

'And what are you hams wanting?' he began. 'The chef's speciality today is sunflower-seed stuffed courgette, roasted in walnut oil.'

They both began salivating and decided to opt for a large portion regardless of what they'd already chosen from the menu.

'No need for a starter, then,' Skanda announced, folding the menu closed and handing it back to the waiter.

'Always room for a starter,' Purros smiled, turning to the service and asking, 'And what's the Soup of the Day?'

Blind panic gripped his mind as he focused his eyes intently on the waiter's lips as he opened them wide to start 'Co...'

'CHICKEN!' shouted Skanda. 'I saw it on the board outside "blended with leeks".'

'Yes,' said the hamster as he wrote down the order, 'it's a local speciality - we call it Co...'

'Soup's great as a starter,' he interrupted. 'Make it two, will you?'

'Yes certainly, sir,' he squeaked as he ran quickly into the kitchen to relay the order.

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Skanda wiped the perspiration from his fur, thinking he'd got away with it.

'That was very impolite,' Purros whispered across the table. 'Haven't you any manners?'

Back on the ship, Skanda began struggling with his own identity - try as he might to be the hamster he knew he was, he was finding that Purros was robbing him of his nature.

Perhaps that was too strong a description, but he certainly felt as if he was at a loss to be himself, always having to watch what he said, careful to avoid the odd sounding word that could be misconstrued as having an ulterior meaning.

No, it was getting maddening, infuriating.

He was going to be himself no matter what it cost him, no matter what the consequences. This was it! This was the flash point he needed - he was going to ascend from the hull of the ship and gaze into the night sky to get himself settled back into a peaceful state of mind.

It always worked - and he was going to come back a different hamster.

No, the same hamster, same as he'd always been but emboldened and fearless - his determination was suddenly broken by his colleague's voice.

'I'm glad I saved some of that courgette til now,' Purros spoke with enthusiasm. 'Chewing it over after so many hours reminds me of the great meal we had.'

'Masticate all you want,' he squeaked defiantly, 'I'm going to watch Uranus rise from the bow of the ship...'

SNATCHED FROM THE JAWS OF VICTORY

Lee's note - I checked this story out, I wasn't convinced.

Even though it appeared in a file of George's labelled 'Greatest Sporting Histories', I wondered not only whether it had been copied and adapted from human history but whether the event as recorded here was accurate.

I needn't have worried.

The Japanese paw of the world's hamsters had preserved this hamscript since its very early completion in June of 1956 - the year when the event is purported to have taken place - the place from where George had requested it when he'd been working on what we now call his fourth 'Hamster History of the World' (enigmatically titled by scholars 'The Hamster History of the World Volume Four').

Not only did the writing prove to be authentic but a horseshoe impression at the conclusion of the story under the rodent author's paw was proven to be none other than the hoof of the animal in question.

This affirmation of authenticity, then, comes straight from the horse's mouth (or, better, from his foot) and, after much research into the events that unfolded that fateful day, I can confirm that the 'facts' are as accurate as if you and I had actually heard and witnessed them ourselves.

Centred around the grave of the legendary Red Rum, not more than a few yards away from the Aintree Racecourse winning post, there lives a community of rodents who've maintained a presence there since the dawn of human pre-history.

Of course, in the early years, the area was heavily forested but now they exist by scavenging off the humans on race days, storing up enough food to see them through the times when a human is hardly ever seen.

It's a good and rich existence - made more so by the fact that both dogs and cats are forbidden here, measures having been put in place to stop their entrance onto the course wherever there's an opening. Although the odd animal does still venture out onto the track, it's a relatively safe and peaceful existence broken only by the hubbub of race days.

Although race meetings have been held here for many decades, the hamsters still remain blissfully unaware that perhaps the most famous of all human races, the Grand National, takes place during the early part of Spring.

But what do they care for the thundering of hooves and the roar of a capacity crowd? The day is simply a storage opportunity and they give over all their waking moments - both day and night - to finding, gathering and saving everything that can be remotely described as 'edible'.

This has, on a few occasions, proved unfortunate.

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In 1967, for instance, while recovering a beef and tomato sandwich that had been thrown into a small, insignificant fence by a human baby prior to racing, their ultrasonic squeaking distressed the large field that came to the obstacle, causing all but one horse to either come crashing down to earth or to refuse to even try to scale it.

The only horse who made it over, as it was discovered afterwards, had befriended a litter of hamlets in its stable at home and so found the experience nothing unusual, providing one of the racing 'shocks' of the year.

Again, in 1993, when a false start voided the race, the human viewer failed to see a line of hamsters crossing by the starting tape to reach the outside of the track where a hot dog van had jack-knifed, spilling its frankfurters all over the grass.

Their presence forced the horses into a blind panic that broke the tape and, although the jockeys battled valiantly to stop their charges bolting, the stewards who stood in front of the field with white flags instantly forgot their duty of signalling a 'no race' and ran for their life, off the racing line, behind the safety of the rails.

Needless to say, the jockeys that did eventually finish were angered to find out that all their efforts had been futile.

But the community's weirdest intervention came many years before - a good two decades prior to the invention of both Rotastak and Habitrail - when what looked a certainty gave every jockey the warning that no race is ever won until you cross the line with your horse's head in front.

And, even then, you still might not be crowned the champion if you don't compete according to the rules.

Perhaps if Soos had been a bit more careful and not tried to pouch more than he knew he was capable of carrying, the disaster might never have happened. In hindsight, I guess he would've held his paws up and said that that was his first - perhaps his only - mistake. But it's all too easy for errors to multiply like snowflakes cascading down hillsides that turn to snowballs and then avalanches.

So, someone had dropped the contents of a crisp packet on the near side of the course, just opposite the burrow entrance that was nearest to the main grandstand holding a capacity crowd.

The hamsters had been eyeing the mound of potato with salivating mouths for the best part of ten minutes but had found no opportunity to recover such an extensive haul without a serious risk to their own welfare - the pounding of hooves causing the ground to thunder a warning to any rodent who dared try.

But, as if by magic, the ground grew eerily calm and peaceful and the hamsters looked out across the long tufts of grass knowing - just knowing - they had enough cover to get there and back in a flash of speed that would make them become a blur in any human's eye.

Nodding in agreement, they dashed as one hamster to the far side of the track.

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'The starter's calling them in,' the commentator announced from the stands. All twenty-nine runners began to line up behind the rostrum, jockeying for the best position, shuffling within an inch of the starting line to have their nose in front going to the first.

'Under Starter's Orders,' the crowd hushed with anticipation. Men raised their binoculars to their eyes to follow the runners round the circuit, a few men tried to push their way up the elevated stands to get the best position.

'And they're off!'

A wild roar went up as the runners jumped off away from the grandstand toward the first of the fences.

The hamsters heard a loud crescendo of noise but thought nothing of it - it had been happening all day. They battled against grass tufts their own size as they scrambled across the track, their noses guiding them to the food whenever the vegetation obscured their view.

'Athenian's a faller at that one,' the commentator continued.

A few groans went up from the crowd as the field turned into the straight on the first circuit towards the infamous 'Chair'. Many lowered their binoculars to see for themselves the distances between the runners, to see the entire painting displayed before them of the crowds almost motionless, watching the race unfold before them.

The hamsters were pouching as much as they could, their backs to the action but feeling the momentary vibration of horses somewhere in the distance. A couple glanced over their shoulders but saw little that worried them, returning to the matter at hand in a split second.

'As they approach Becher's, they're beginning to bunch. Armorial the third is still out in front with Eagle Lodge well up with them,' he paused trying to identify the colours. 'Then comes ESB, Sundew and Ontray. And as they jump...Sundew's a faller.'

Somewhere in the stands there was a loud shout that echoed out across the grass and into the country. More groans went up and chit-chat broke out between couples as the race began to hot up with just over half a dozen fences still to jump.

Soos, his pouches full, was one of the last to turn his back on what crumbs remained to head back across the course for the safety of the burrow but, instead of turning completely, he noticed the largest crisp that he'd ever seen lying close to his right shoulder and instantly grabbed it between his jaws, intending to transport it, head stretched high into the air, as fast as his paws would carry him.

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But the tufts of grass that had been problematical on their outward journey now became like a mountain range as Soos tried first one way, then another, to get round them, over them, through them.

He *knew* he should let go of the crisp but he couldn't let such a prize slip away - there'd be no opportunity to return to pick it up.

'All the remainder are safely over the Canal and are turning for home,' the commentator's voice, betraying excitement, tried to keep as steady and calm as possible, but the crowd's volume began to increase and he was forced to raise his voice to be heard.

'And Armorial's a faller,' the crowd gasped, 'leaving Devon Loch in the lead.'

The Queen Mother's horse was travelling effortlessly, his challengers struggling to keep up. The jockey looked round quickly at those pursuing him, knowing he had a fistful on his mount and relishing the final few fences as they began to prepare to turn for home.

Soos was making painful headway, the saliva now beginning to drip from his mouth as he struggled to maintain any sort of speed, in any sort of direction. He placed the crisp down at his side for a quick look to get his bearings and, locating the white rail, wiped the salt from his mouth with his tongue and picked his luggage up once more, doing his best to accelerate towards the burrow entrance.

The horses were turning for home and, with just two fences to jump, the crowd began to roar. No one knew exactly what they were shouting about - or for who - but the spectacle and exhilaration was getting to just about everyone as Eagle Lodge and ESB were driven up alongside Devon Loch to jump the second last.

Francis *knew* he had them both beat - he'd been in this position before and he knew he'd only to let out a couple of inches of rein and his ride would be long gone in the distance.

As they rose at the last, he gave the horse all the encouragement he could and landed a length ahead, beginning to increase his stride and, with it, his margin of certain victory.

The crisp would *not* behave itself - did this thing have a mind of its own?

If he pushed it to the right, it wanted to go left!

What was with this stupid...

'And they're coming to the Elbow and Devon Loch is beginning to...'

The crowd stood to its feet, cheering loudly, men throwing their hats into the air and women crying with emotion as the Queen Mother's horse began to stride clear.

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The commentator gave up trying to be heard, switched off his mike and began shouting along with the rest.

Soos felt the ground begin to vibrate beneath his feet - he knew that wasn't good. It was a tell-tale sign that a very large and fast animal was approaching and he wasn't sure what to do.

He poked his nose into the air to sniff the direction and decided it must be approaching from his left. Pushing the nearest tuft down to the side, he peered out through the hole.

'Grief!' he squeaked. 'That's the biggest horse I've ever seen...'

Devon Loch saw a small bundle of fur appear as if out of nowhere and wanted to swerve to avoid it. But the jockey on his back was urging him forward and there could only be one outcome if he continued on the collision course.

Thinking quickly, he went through his options and chose the one that seemed the best to him at the time.

The crowd screamed with despair and then fell silent.

They saw with bewilderment the horse jump in the air as if trying to scale an imaginary fence, collapsing on all fours only fifty yards from the winning post. The jockey found himself catapulted into the neck but recovered well, bringing the horse back onto his feet as ESB raced by to pass the winning post as champion.

Soos watched the dark form scrape the sky above as he froze to the spot, the brief end to the vibration of the ground being broken by the louder crash of the thoroughbred as it slid long the ground to a standstill.

He clean bit through the crisp with fear but managed to run headlong for the burrow entrance, clambering beneath ground before he had a chance to discover whether the beast had turned about to try and eat him.

Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, Francis led his mount away with sadness and despair while a very foolish hamster was scolded by the community for being so stupid as to put his life at risk through greed.

Didn't Soos realise?

It was an animal-eat-hamster world out there, it was silly to take risks.

Still, at least all was well that ended well...

CHEESE

For Jenny Budnick

Lee's note - The origin of this manuscript is one of the easiest to be sure about.

When Harriet first met with us to relate incidents regarding the life of the late, great George the Hamster (see 'Requiem for a Dead Hamster' previous), she described to us a story similar to the one now set out below, claiming that it was one of George's 'epics' that the community continued to recount.

Because my recollection of Harriet's words were somewhat fragmented, I waited until she could find time to dictate it to me - when it was just too late for me to include it in 'Requiem'.

I've kept the manuscript in a back drawer for the last ten years and only remembered its existence shortly before this book was submitted for editing.

'I don't like cheese,' squeaked Shapha, his nose twitching faster than a vibrating guitar string.

'It's the sliminess - and the smell. Yes, definitely the smell - I can't get a piece past the end of my nose and, if ever there's a piece in a room, I have to leave as soon as I possibly can.'

He thought for a moment before concluding, 'That's cheese for you. Obnoxious stuff...'

Natah had been arguing his case forcefully but it seemed as if it was all to no avail. Being the more travelled hamster, he urged his friend to open his mind, to allow himself the opportunity to sample the different culinary delights of the world in which they were travelling but, to Shapha, cheese was cheese.

It didn't matter that they'd just landed in France, stowed aboard a freight plane from London. It didn't matter where they were, in fact.

Shapha knew nothing about the word 'cheese' and the way it conjured up in one hamster's mind a radically different concept to what it did in another rodent's - a different experience, a different memory of taste.

Humans were the same.

To an Englishman, it meant cheddar flavoured with fruit and herbs, sauces and chillies - even beer and pickle. To a Frenchman it meant soft, creamy consistencies that sometimes moved off the plate of their own accord.

Nope - not a bit of it.

To Shapha, 'cheese' meant slimy, tasteless slices of yellow plastic that smelt as if they were better attached to the sole of a human's shoe than attempting to lift it anywhere near the mouth.

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The two hamsters sat together in the corner of the freight container, waiting the pick-up truck that would take them to their destination - not that they were too sure just where that was to be.

They *knew* it was France - it'd said so on the side of the packaging - but just where was 'Fromageries Bel'? Or was that a place, indeed? They didn't know - although it seemed to be somewhere near Paris judging by the next word and number.

The first line of the address was also strange - it read 'Port Salut'. Now, should that be 'Monsieur P Salut' or 'Madame P Salut'? There didn't seem to be any indication.

The names weren't something that rang any bells with them.

All they knew was that their journey so far had been exciting and that tomorrow marked the beginning of the second month since they'd bid the community back home adieu and travelled east to explore exotic new lands and exciting, spellbinding locations that they'd never before seen.

Even though Chipping Sodbury, it had to be said, hadn't fulfilled *either* expectation, at least they'd enjoyed themselves there and made it to London within the week.

But, now, they were in France - with all that that name conjured in their minds.

It was just a bit of a shock when the crate cracked open and they exited into the semi-darkness of a factory where the stench of rotting milk pervaded the air, causing both hamsters to find the nearest exit into daylight to empty their heavy burdens onto some fresh green grass.

'That has got to be the worse smell *ever*,' Shapha complained.

Natah wasn't in disagreement - it was one of the few 'facts' that they'd agreed on since their voyage began. As they sat back against a brick wall overlooking the valley below, Shapha began to smell 'cat' - faint at first but growing with increasing pungency so that he turned to Natah and suggested they leave immediately.

Keeping their backs close to the wall for cover, they let their noses guide them away, in the direction where the scent grew weaker, replaced by the warm muzziness of grass and wild flowers.

'Look!' said Natah. 'There's another container over there - that's got to be a locally used one. Let's get ourselves outta here and see where we arrive.'

With one nod, they instantly scurried across the yard and dived into the van, Natah remarking 'Gosh, it's chilly in here' as the two solid metal doors were closed, all light was excluded and the temperature began to plummet.

Hamsters don't have too much of a problem in the dark, they rely on touch. Their whiskers act like radar sensors as they tread carefully round their surroundings while their fur becomes hyper-sensitive as bodies make contact with walls and low overheads.

The problem wasn't the light - it was the lack of food that posed the dilemma for, although they'd assumed that the van had been filled for a local delivery, it was headed - with two overnight stops - for the south.

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Not having had time to fill their pouches with anything suitable, both hamsters began to grow hungry within the space of a few short hours.

'There's got to be *something* we can eat in here,' Natah observed as Shapha stood on his hind legs to sniff the air.

'Well, there's certainly a smell in here that makes me think of food,' Shapha observed. 'A sort of nutty creaminess - yes, that could be edible.'

They carefully made their way over to where the smell was the most pungent until they stopped by a small object that resembled a wheel in shape - not being able to see what was plainly before them was frustrating but a few revolutions round the circumference and a couple of journeys over the top assured them that it was most definitely not attached to anything.

Shapha suggested they attack it from the top - just in case their gnawing disturbed something and it collapsed. Best it collapsed with them on top of it rather than standing beside it where it would endanger them both.

He bared his teeth, giving one final sniff in the air to make sure the smell seemed edible, and scraped a small paper-like area away to reveal the springy stickiness that attached itself to his paw.

Licking the dampness, he remarked, 'A bit bitter - but palatable. I bet the real food's beneath the surface.'

With a careful attempt at peeling, he sunk his teeth into the flesh and removed a slab, slicing it in two and handing a piece to Natah.

'Creamy,' Shapha squeaked.

'Smooth,' Natah added.

'I think I detect slight acidity...'

'...and it's mild, too - almost tangy. You know what?' Natah remarked.

'What?'

'This is a *very* pleasant cheese, if I'm not mistaken.'

'Cheese?' Shapha squeaked indignantly. 'It can't be cheese! It doesn't smell like it, it isn't slimy.'

Natah was certain. 'No, it *is* cheese, alright. You can tell. What else could it be?'

Shapha scratched his head with puzzlement.

'It's not anything chocolate related,' he said, trying to think. 'Perhaps it's one of those man-made soya-based efforts? Yes, that must be it.'

He took another bite of the lump as he whispered indignantly, 'Cheese, indeed!'

It wasn't long before they were burrowing into the lump, extracting large chunks that they removed to a safer location to eat at their leisure.

Although the van had stopped at various locations along its route, the present lack of movement was unusual. After a few short seconds, the engine died and the sound of

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voices could faintly be heard, the clunking of metal rods causing the rear two doors to begin to move, letting light in to where Shapha and Natah squinted.

'Now's our chance,' Natah urged his colleague. 'Head for the door when the human comes in!'

Gracefully, like some ballet dancer trying not to add to the noise of the orchestra, they tiptoed at first, then ran full pelt towards daylight, running down the steps and into the nearest bush they could find.

Safely escaped, they surveyed their surroundings - yep, it was safe alright. No worries. There were branches and stems all around that nothing would be able to penetrate. They could stay here for sometime while they regained their composure.

'Let's take a look at that van,' Shapha squeaked, Natah following his lead as they moved grass blades to one side. Natah found an interesting flower and began chewing on a petal as they read the writing on the side of the van.

'Le Véritable Port Salut,' he began, stammering over the words.

Natah looked questioningly at him. 'Makes no sense to me, either.'

'Fromagerie,' Shapha continued, 'du Port du Salut.'

'Fromagerie? What's that mean?' Natah asked.

'No idea - no, wait! Look! The titles are translated into different languages at the bottom. Now, where's the English. Yes, there!'

Natah took up reading as Shapha's voice trailed off. 'The Cheese Dairy of the Port of Salut.'

He paused. 'Cheese Dairy! Hey! That *was* cheese in there!'

'Rubbish!' squeaked Shapha. 'Everyone knows that cheese tastes foul...'

THE UNFINISHED STORY

Lee's note - Classical composers the world over leave behind works that are 'Unfinished'.

Whether they ever intended them to be finished or not has never satisfactorily been discussed to my knowledge but it's not beyond the realms of possibility that, for example, Schubert's great 'Unfinished' symphony is just that because he got so fed up with writing it that he put it on the back burner instead of in the open fire.

Such an 'unfinished' work also appears in the literary legacy of George the Hamster.

I discovered this hamscript amongst a pile of others that had been labelled 'Adventures in Africa' and, although no introduction ever seems to have been written, I wouldn't be surprised if, several years from now, we learn of a lost tribe of hamsters deep in the dark recesses of some tropical tableland who have a tradition that insists that George at one time parachuted in to record their stories and experiences.

The only strange point about the story, though, is that it's set in the frozen wastes of the Arctic Circle.

However, it seems only right that, along with the great writers and composers of human history, I include here George's own 'Unfinished Story'.

Okla the hamster lived in the frozen wastelands of the Arctic Tundra, an area that got so cold that a rodent's whiskers had to be regularly thawed else they'd snap off at the slightest of touches.

Even though lichens and mosses provided a sufficient food source during the lengthy summer days, come winter, the ground became so solid that alternative food sources had to be found - or else an animal was forced to hibernate until the first green shoots once more poked their head upwards from the earth.

But, for Okla, life was simpler and less harsh.

She lived next to a well-supplied base camp that equipped humans in their quest for the North Pole, providing shelter and highly nutritious food before they said a fond farewell to their guests in search of the glory that was associated with being the first to reach it.

Okla was never quite sure whether there really did exist a Pole somewhere 'out there' and, if there was one, who put it there. After all, if there'd ever been a human that had made it there to set it up, why were they all rushing to get there *first*?

Perhaps Okla might have lived an unknown and fairly quiet life had she not got it into her head that she also wanted to be the first to go where no hamster had gone before - where she was sure that, if there really was a Pole, no hamster would have had the strength or have been mad enough to put it there.

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Surely, the North Pole had never seen a hamster and it was her intention to remedy that on the next mission that seemed to have a genuine possibility to achieve what each and every group had set out from there to do.

In the next four months, Okla saw many come and go - and return defeated, although some never made it back at all.

Just when she thought that there'd never be *anyone* who had the potential for success, there came a sober and clear-thinking expedition who discussed repeatedly the problems, the solutions - who seemed to leave no stone unturned in their planning ahead, calculating for everything that might take place and making more provision than anyone before them for 'snowed in' days and times when the terrain would get so treacherous that they may have to sit tight for weeks before being able to progress further.

Such a team would have enough food, she was sure, to keep her alive throughout that long journey.

On the evening of their departure, she secreted herself amongst their baggage, finding the warmest and best insulated compartment she could and settled herself down for the long and arduous voyage.

On the fourth day - just as she was gaining confidence that there was nothing that could go wrong - disaster struck.

Realising that the expedition had to progress rapidly if they were going to make it past the point at which the ice cap was beginning to break up into floes of ice, they ditched the non-essential bags, leaving Okla behind at a place where the howling wind masked the humans' departure.

Thinking that the lack of movement was simply to be understood as a lengthy period of reassessment, when she finally poked her nose out from the zipper, the humans had already disappeared over the horizon, their footprints having been covered by the drifting snow.

Polar bears are curious creatures.

But, there again, if your world is totally white underfoot with a light blue sky overhead, a bright red bag is bound to attract your attention.

And it sure did.

Okla heard the breathing of a large animal as it came close and felt the bag move as it poked its nose into the partly opened zip in its search for a quick lunch. She tried to struggle to the furthest point away from the opening but her rear paw was trapped round a thermal sock that prevented her freedom of movement.

The bear's humid breath was now distinctly a feeling rather than a noise and two solid surfaces closed about her as she lay there immobile. Sharp, white teeth began pressing downwards on her furry body as more bone cut upwards in a pincer movement.

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She raised both front paws into the air but already the jaws had gone beyond the point where she could fully extend herself and try to force the mouth open.

She tried to back away from where she sensed the throat must be but she found herself pressed up against the side of the bag that left her no room for manoeuvre.

'This is it!' she squeaked to herself. 'I'm going to be eaten!'

Then, suddenly, and totally unexpectedly...

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From Russia with Nuts

FROM RUSSIA WITH NUTS

INTRODUCTIONS

From the Editors

When we were first observed in the pet shop by our soon-to-become owners, our thoughts were unprintable and we burrowed ourselves as deeply as we could into the warm bedding that we'd come to regard as our home.

Even an email to a hamster owner in the States claiming that we'd been hamnapped did nothing to release us from the place we'd been brought to. But, then, as we began to survey our surroundings, it dawned on us that, perhaps, we'd actually reached Hamtopia - that ethereal place that's only whispered about in hushed tones and where all captive hamsters long to live.

For here there was always water, dry and fresh food and so much space that you could have swung a cat - if we'd've been able to lift such an animal.

It was while Rab was looking through the contents of the master's hard drive one night that he came upon this old manuscript that had 'Last modified' dates which were well over three years ago (and which we were soon to discover had actually been written over five years ago).

'Could we have discovered some lost work of the great George the Hamster?' we both thought but, as it turned out, this was a work compiled by our master after George had expired, when he was keeping two hamsters by the name of Hakeem and Arlev - both of which had never learnt to write and who'd dictated the contents of the stories as and when they felt inspired.

We also discovered an old record of a meeting with Harriet that had been edited out of the final production of 'Requiem for a Dead Hamster'.

Here was an oral rodent tradition, then, that we'd never before discovered.

With Lee's permission, we set about making the text more rodent-like. After all, this had been written by a human and it bore all the marks of such. We tried to be as faithful as possible to the text but needed to add comments here and there whenever Lee had been overly tedious. Rab, feeling particularly drawn to the wisdom of Hakeem worked on his own with the relevant texts while Arlev fell to Yafa - a system which worked remarkably well.

What you've come to, therefore, is a rework of an old document that records the story - hitherto unknown - of the first mouse ever to climb Everest, of a newly discovered tale of the Lone Hamster and of the sinister but observant fable of the frog king. And much more, besides!

We trust that it will be a source of rich pickings and that these traditions might be traced back to be firmly placed into the framework of history.

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Rab and Yafa.

No, Yafa and Rab.

Why? Rab put first makes the phrase flow.

No it doesn't. The double syllable is what makes the names coalesce.

Rab has that degree of authority about it - it has to be pre-eminent.

Just because your name means 'Boss' doesn't mean it has to come first.

Well 'Beautiful' is hardly a good opening, is it?

Better than 'Rab' Who on earth gives pets these names?

Owners - that's who. I like my name. It has that air of, er, supremacy.

Sheesh! What are you like? You fur-brained rat!

Don't call me a rat!

I'll call you what I want!

Sounds of squeaks and ruffled fur emanated from the computer room. I pushed open the door to witness two Russian hamsters standing on their rear paws pointing to one another and loudly squeaking:

'He started it! What're you looking at me for?!'

From the Original Author

I remember putting this manuscript together in the dim and distant past at a time when the autumn was beginning to turn leaves orange and yellow - and the hazy October sun was caressing the fallen petals of summer's first love.

Get on with it, will you?

Yes, back in those heady days of innocence, the contemplation of nature's beauty seemed to castigate one's own shortcomings and played eerily on the senses that conceived of the natural realm in a somewhat conceptual time framework.

Oh, for goodness sake! Cut to the chase!

It was on just one such day that I first remember squeaking nonchalantly to Arlev about some textual problem and he casually remarked that what was needed was to show demonstrable proof that hamsters had something to teach the civilised world.

Yawn.

It was then that 'From Russia with Nuts' was birthed in the loins of my conscience.

Eh? Is that rude? I'm sure it must be.

The womb of my imagination was gestating a literary foetus that would soon burst out from some cranial cavity and fill the world with its loud cries for attention. This was how I imagined the original work.

We suggest you turn straight to the first story and ignore this gibberish.

And then it happened! First one story. Then another. And another!

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With each successive story, the whole grew until it was finished - like some rhinoceros in search of a water hole which fell into a steep-sided well and splashed with a deep resonance far below.

If you haven't already taken our advice, you really should with no further delay.

Splash! Splash! the rhinoceros would sound as it hit the cooling clear waters of the spring and the refreshing liquid would ooze over the animals warm back, seeping into every pore.

So, just how would a rhinoceros fit down a well shaft, anyway?

And it was done! The booklet was complete!

Which is more than can be said for this introduction.

But I feared the revelations which had been given me and I decided to keep the contents secret. For three years, this manuscript has been kept hidden until that fortuitous day when, a few weeks ago, Rab discovered the files collecting dust in a darkened corner of the computer. The rest is history and I must commend this series of stories to you as one of the first truly inter-species works of the world which has quality stamped all over it.

That's cos we straightened out all your errors, mate.

Lee H Smith

PROLOGUE

Part One - The Decision

When our pet hamster, George, died on September 14th 1993, I had no intention of ever keeping hamsters again. I got rid of all the equipment via a small advert in one of our local shops. And, come the following year, I had been hard at work, both in planning and digging, on the construction of a garden pond for the wildlife of the area.

Even in '95, both watching the nests of wood mice sited under the foundations of the garage and tipping the balance in favour of the metamorphosing froglets around the pond, had done nothing to stimulate me into focusing my attention on the possibility of having rodent company indoors.

But then, during October of the same year, I started pining for a hamster.

You might think this a sad state of affairs, but a man has to be a man and not deny the very nature within him that seeks for expression through the overflow of his life.

Perhaps I was stimulated into thinking this way by our regular visits to George's old friends, Steve and Catrin, in Chesterfield who had had Sandy the hamster passed onto them from friend.

Perhaps the not too infrequent visits to pet shops for bird food had unwittingly lit a fire within me as I glanced, entranced, at the tiny furry balls of rodent fur that snuggled together beside the check-out.

Perhaps it was all this and more - but my mind finally fixed on the idea the day after I'd asked Kath if she wanted us to buy a cat. I honestly don't see the connection now but, at the time, I'm sure there must have been one.

Realising that we had neither the time nor the money to be able to give a cat a good home (not to think of all the complications for holidays), Kath dismissed the possibility and resigned herself to be petless.

The day after, as we sat idly on the settee and wondered just when Saturday night tv would have anything interesting on, I broached the subject that had been on my mind for at least the past two and a half hours.

'Why don't you get a hamster?' I asked.

Kath breathed out deeply - perhaps she was sickening for something.

'A hamster is a mindless ball of fur whose only desire in life is to eat, sleep and run for endless hours in an exercise wheel. I want something soft and cuddly, something that I can interact with, that will snuggle up close to me and sit on my lap.'

'What have I been doing wrong,' I thought to myself, 'that she hasn't noticed that I'm all these things to her already and more?' though, perhaps, 'soft and cuddly' would be better replaced by 'soft and podgy'.

'Well, how about a pair of Russian hamsters? You could have one and me the other - but I'd look after them.'

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'I don't want a hamster.'

'You could pick them as well - like you did George.'

'But I don't want one!'

'And we could call them, er, Socrates and Plato - or something like that - and we could watch them play and have fun.'

'Lee!' she said firmly. 'I don't want a hamster!'

'Now don't be hasty - I'll give you time to think about it.'

'I won't change my mind.'

Over the next couple of hours I gave Kath ample time to reconsider her position but all to no avail. In fact, she was becoming even more resolute in her determination not to have anything to do with a rodent.

So I determined to try and prompt her into seeing things my way.

When I wrote to my father about a week later, I composed a poem that, I think, said it all - but I cunningly disguised it so that, firstly, my dad would think that I wanted to share it with him and not have a dig at Kath and, secondly, make it really subtle so that Kath would see the deep feelings and emotions that had begun to stir within me without necessarily thinking that I'd written it deliberately for her (in our house, we always read each other's letters before we send them).

The letter read:

I've just finished a poem that you and mum might like to read (who knows? I might put this one to music and sing it at church):

People seldom understand
The trials of being just a man,
The anguish in one's heart is soul destroying.
How can a man renege his being?
To go through tribulation feeling
Down in spirit and with sorrow toying?

From deep within, conviction rises
Emanating from this crisis.
The nature of this man finds self-expression.
And hands reach out to grasp the aim
To handle what I need again,
And carry through until I gain possession.

So why, oh why,
Can't I buy
A little furry hamster?

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I'd wait all week
To hear it squeak.
My little furry hamster.

I can't be at all sure just whether Kath realised that the poem was intended for her as she read it. It's quite possible that the point was missed upon first glance but that the truth slowly dawned on her after a short period of time.

Whatever the true interpretation of events, all I can say is that Kath finally agreed within the next couple of days to us having either one Syrian or two Russian hamsters and so began the long haul of saving up for all the equipment that was necessary to make our future acquisition both happy and contented.

Part Two - The Search

The pet shop was stocked full of items that were instantly recognisable as being for the respective animal. To my left there were rows of chews, leads and treats for both cats and dogs while 'budgie heaven' lay to my right. A long way into the shop, on the right hand side of the serving desk, was a stack of play wheels, small rodent houses and transparent exercise balls.

The owner stood at the counter measuring out portions of wild bird food, the only part of her that moved seemed to me to be her arms and her two beady eyes that witnessed my arrival.

'Good morning,' I began. 'Could you tell me if you can get hold of Russian hamsters?'

She looked up from her work and thought for a moment before replying - either that or she'd had a hard night and it was taking a while for my words to register.

'That's tricky,' she said, 'they move so quickly and compress themselves into such a small space that I always end up with them jumping from my hand. They nip, too, they've drawn blood on occasions. Are you thinking of getting some?'

'Why, yes, how very perceptive of you. How did you guess?'

'Years of training, I suppose,' she said, 'you just tend to get to know these sorts of things.'

She put the measuring jug down, lowered her voice to a whisper and continued informingly, 'You don't want to be buying hamsters, they're not a real pet. You want something that will respond to you, that you'll be able to share your life with, that you'll be able to treat as a companion.'

'I'm sorry,' I interjected, raising my hand into the air to bring her sentence to a hasty close, 'but I'm already married.'

She smiled - probably out of politeness - before continuing undaunted, 'You want to buy a stick insect. Marvellous pets, stick insects - faithful, devoted and they make the most amazing guard dogs.'

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'No,' I said hesitantly. 'No, I don't want a stick insect. I've really set my heart on a pair of Russian hamsters.'

'Please yourself,' she sounded offended, 'but don't come back here when you find your smelly little hamsters are boring you silly. I might not have any stick insects left then!'

'I take it that you haven't got any hamsters?'

'Um, as a matter of fact I think I sold the last pair back in the eighties. Not much call for them round here. People prefer stick insects, you know.'

'Really? You surprise me. Well, thanks for your advice. I don't suppose you know any shop that would sell Russians, do you?'

'No. As I said, There's not much ca...'

'Well thank you for your time, anyway.'

I exited into brilliant sunshine, switched off the car alarm and drove into the distance.

'Excuse me,' I began, trying to extricate the attention of a rather sleek proprietor from his copy of the new edition of Lizard Weekly. 'Do you sell Russian Hamsters? Or can you get h...'

I remembered my previous encounter and stopped in mid-sentence, changing my enquiry to 'Can you get them at all?'

'Do I look like a masochist?'

'I'm sorry?'

'I said, do I look like the sort of person who would take his own life into his hands by keeping such an unpredictable animal?'

Temporarily I fell silent, I wasn't expecting his reply.

'I take it that the answer's "no", then?'

'Reptiles are wonderful creatures,' he said. I was expecting his features to light up with a warm glow, but his face remained ashen with a deep frown. 'Useful, too. Never had any trouble with flies since I've had a reptile running round the house.'

'Yes, I'm sure. We haven't got central heating so we couldn't keep them but, obviously, I would've wanted to keep them if we had've done.'

'Have you thought of moving house,' he enquired, 'or of having it installed? They're worth the effort.' His voice droned monotonously on, barely changing tone and certainly lacking any detectable feeling.

'Alas, no - I'm really after hamsters - Russian ones.'

'Sorry, can't help you,' he muttered and returned to the magazine, studying a 3D centre-fold spread of a green chameleon. He pointed with his finger as he concluded the conversation with the words, 'Try the shop down the road.'

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The only shop I knew that was 'down the road' was the chemist. Nevertheless, I thanked him and left quickly, grateful that he had, at least, not been as pressing as the last owner.

It was while I was on my way to the third shop that I wised up.

I remember someone once saying to me that every owner looks like their pet (or was it the other way round? I can't remember) and, come to think of it, my last two encounters certainly gave me cause to believe the truth of that statement.

The 'stick insect' had been rigid, unbending, completing her tasks with a minimum of movement, while the 'lizard' was cold and emotionless - definitely oblivious to anything I might have been feeling.

Perhaps I could work out which shop I would get a favourable response in by the type of person who ran it? It was worth a gamble. But just what were the characteristics that I could discern without having to engage them in conversation? What physical proportions would indicate a hamster lover?

The more I thought about it, the more I convinced myself that I should look for a small rounded figure with a chubby face as if they'd pouched something. Maybe fast, too - I know that our old hamster, George, had not been too keen on exercising, but most hamsters ran about on a wheel for seemingly endless hours during each night.

Perhaps I should look for a very podgy, but active, proprietor?

I tried shop after shop but to no avail. At one, a lady sat with a broad grin that seemed to span ear to ear - obviously a cat owner. At another, the salesperson sat almost to attention on the chair looking round the shop with sharp, jerky motions that instantly gave me the impression that they favoured budgies.

Just as I was about to give up, I found the 'hamster' - only half a mile from our house, too (*Rab - this, incidentally, is where we were also bought from*). As I gazed in through the window, I could see her busying herself with dusting, carrying, filling. Rattling cages and throwing food in-between bars that were fixed low down on a side wall.

When a customer came in she fairly leapt on them with the customary, 'Can I help you, sir?' and her physical proportions were most certainly rounded - maybe 'well-insulated' is a better description. Certainly it's one that's more tactful.

This just had to be a hamster shop!

As the last customer came out, I stole in, watching her hasty approach to greet me. 'Do you sell lizards?' I found myself saying, not understanding why the words were coming out of my mouth.

'Grief, no!' she sounded appalled, almost shocked. 'You don't want to be buying one of those - you want a hamster.'

'Do I?'

'Of course you do. Wonderful pets, hamsters.'

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'But aren't they solitary animals? I mean, I was hoping to get a pair of lizards.'

'No, no! A misunderstanding. Syrian hamsters are solitary,' she explained, 'but Russian and Chinese hamsters need company - other hamster company, that is - or else they pine.'

'Oh,' I made myself sound surprised, 'I'd never thought about a hamster,' and, for the next hour, she told me all about the pros and cons of her most prized pet. I couldn't stop her.

I don't know why I didn't ask for a hamster to begin with except that, perhaps, I thought that she might like to have the satisfaction of knowing that she'd managed to persuade someone that her fascination with hamsters was something worthwhile, something that was understandable and desirable.

I left with my task completed some time later but at least I'd found a shop that sold Russian hamsters. What with Xmas coming up and being away that season, we felt it better that we wait until the new year - a period of about two months - before we purchased our new pets.

Part Three - The Purchase

It happened very suddenly in the end - and it was Kath's fault.

The date was 25 November 1995 - a full five weeks before we'd planned to buy two rodents - and I remember that I'd settled down to watch the live Rugby League match on the telly between London Broncos and Halifax, when Kath bounded into the front room and said excitedly:

'You should see the little baby hamsters that they've got at the pet shop!'

She'd gone there on an errand for I -can't-remember-what, but I know that I'd asked her to find out if the shop was open the Saturday before New Year's Eve and whether it would be likely that they'd have some Russians in.

Before I knew where I was, I'd uttered that fateful heart-felt whine, 'I want a hamster,' followed very shortly by the plea, 'Can I have a hamster now?'

To my utter astonishment, Kath said 'Yes'.

I was so shocked that I asked her again just in case she'd lost contact with reality, but the reply was still in the affirmative.

This was just too good to be true!

I rushed upstairs and grabbed the equipment and set up a limited run for them, deciding to set up the other pieces when we'd got them settled in. Then we dashed off to the shop and bought a pair of male Russian hamsters.

It all happened so quickly that I felt stunned - almost drained - I even missed the classified football results on the telly! Perhaps I was ill?

Later on that evening, just as the hamsters eventually found the nest compartment, Kath asked me which one was hers.

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'Neither,' I replied, 'we own both'

Then, thinking quickly, I added, 'I'll own the front halves and you can have the other bit.'

Without a moment's hesitation, she replied, 'So I get the intelligent end, then?'

I could see her point after having watched them for the past hour and a half - but little did we know just how wrong we'd both be in the coming months as they showed themselves to be...well, read on - you must make up your own mind.

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INTRODUCING...

Lee feeds his hamsters every day.
They're Russian ones and both are grey
With coal-black eyes and cute pink noses.
They run like mad on furry toes-es.

Arlev, he's a lion heart,
Adventurer supreme.
The other one is big and wise.
That one's called Hakeem.

They love each other, cuddle up.
'Well,' you say, 'they might.'
But when they see a sunflower seed -
Boy! Can brothers fight!

Well, anyway, this ode must end,
I've said as much as can be said.
The hamster wheels have stopped their noise.
The balls of fur have gone to bed.

Exclusively written by Kath Smith (age 7+)

...Arlev.

His name is a made-up compound of two Hebrew words meaning 'lion' and 'heart' - hence the translation would be 'Lion heart'. Whether this construction is etymologically sound or not I couldn't tell you, but the name stuck!

Those of you who've read the three volumes of George's 'Hamster History of the World' will remember that this was the name of the rodent who found himself trapped in the den of lions with the prophet Daniel.

Arlev is the more active of the two, spending endless hours alone in the exercise wheel running for all his worth, stopping only briefly to sniff around the compartment in case he's arrived anywhere significant. He's into fresh food more than Hakeem (though neither of them are great eaters like George was) and we see in him a fitness fanatic trying to burst out and find expression.

Funnily enough, he was the one who won the first battle between the pair even though he was considerably smaller. But I should add that the victories are now fairly evenly distributed and they always end up sleeping together after a squeak and tumble contest.

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Since that first day, he's grown fairly rapidly and now matches Hakeem for size, but the one distinguishing physical characteristic is his pink inner ears. While Hakeem has a grey fur-covering, Arlev only has a smattering of fine white hairs that allow the pink of his flesh to show through.

Arlev is also the more inquisitive. When I have to get access to the nest area to mop urine up or alter something, it's always him who wakes in an instant and walks over to sniff my hand while Hakeem remains dead to the world and the possibility of danger.

He's rarely inactive - except for sleep - and his movements are far quicker than his brother. Once Arlev is sure of his surroundings then he'll speed about with a minimum of deceleration - though he has, to this day, always managed to stop in time when Hakeem has blocked his path by sitting to groom in one of the long access tubes.

...Hakeem.

Again, this is a Hebrew word but not a compound one. It means simply 'Wise one' and, I guess, it will have been given to many an ancient new-born child in the hope that they might turn out to be everything that the name implies.

I've already contrasted Arlev and Hakeem above, so much of what I should write here has already been written. But just a few things that need a specific mention if you're to understand the following pages.

Although Arlev was the first to travel down a tube (with a little bit of force and coercion), it was Hakeem who followed the route and, more than this, applied it to a couple of tubes that Arlev hadn't discovered existed.

He was the first to enter the burrow basement unit, for instance, and the first to ascend from the tube section into the exercise area - this was applied knowledge, demonstrated when nothing was expected from him.

Most days he takes leave of Arlev during the late afternoon and travels over to a nest that's located on the far side of the cage where he spends lengthy periods of time grooming and just sitting quietly with his eyes closed as if in contemplation.

Hakeem also enjoys grooming Arlev but the latter makes his annoyance known in language that I can only describe as loud and insistent - a cross between a mouse's voice and a dog's squeaky toy.

There are a few puzzles that we set for them to do and, though I've not actually seen them solve very many, it would be more like Hakeem to solve them than it would be for Arlev.

For instance, a hamster hoop which hangs from a small opening by a piece of string will be tugged at by Arlev to try and release it, but Hakeem will chew a hole in one of the sides and remove it calmly. Some of his wisdom has now brushed off, I'm sure, as Arlev has begun using the same technique.

So, there you have it.

The Legacy of George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

Two very different hamsters though from the same litter of five (two of which were albinos).

I'm sure that, in the coming pages, you'll get to understand their characters better than this brief sketch can detail - and see just what each one has to say to the attentive reader.

CONTACT

Never underestimate the power of a hamster,
Though they seem to be possessed with the smallest of brains.
As soon as your back is turned
They will be plotting a way of escape.

Ancient Chinese (Hamster) Proverb

'Squeakoff,' said Arlev.

'Squeeeee-cough,' I repeated.

'No, no, no,' objected Hakeem, 'you didn't raise your right eyebrow when you said it. Instead of saying "Greetings, O furry one" you said "Pickle me a walnut, it got away from me in the night while I was asleep"!'

'Sorry. This Russian tongue is more difficult than I expected it to be. Why don't all the varieties speak the same language?'

'A lot of the words are similar,' comforted Arlev, 'but we've been separated from the Syrian colony for so many years that our language developed differently to theirs.'

'It got refined,' interjected Hakeem, 'it became purer.'

I repeated the sound, remembering to raise my eyebrow as much as I'd seen them do.

'Better,' spoke Hakeem.

'Splendid!' enthused Arlev.

'Now, let's go on to something a bit more difficult. Watch me carefully...'

The sound didn't appear too difficult to mimic but the facial expression was thwart with danger. Somehow I had to move both eyebrows in opposite directions while twitching both ears simultaneously. I practised alone for a few minutes before feeling confident enough to attempt it in public.

When I finally did, I was assured that I'd done well.

'What did I actually say?' I enquired.

'Oh, something like "The sawdust is damp, find another place to go to the toilet",' informed Arlev.

'I can't think that I'll use that phrase very often.'

'You never know when that sentence will come in useful,' objected Hakeem, 'it's got me out of many a tight corner.'

I thought about that for a while but had to give up for I couldn't possibly conceive of a situation in which it could ever deliver me. But, hamsters being such unique and strange creatures, perhaps it had a hidden agenda behind the words that spelt out a warning to a would-be assailant, forcing him to flee for his life? I don't know. But I certainly couldn't see the significance of it for me.

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And so the long hard process of relearning continued - day after day, at every waking moment, with every opportunity.

There were, of course, a lot of common words that George spoke which were transposable directly into Russian and a lot of ones that you could tell were similar and, with a little alteration, could be used almost in their original form. But others were difficult - like the guttural sound of the Israeli to the European, or the strange clicking noise that some Africans make.

Nevertheless, with a little perseverance I got to a point where I could hold a decent conversation with both Arlev and Hakeem without having to interrupt them too much with 'What does ***** mean?' or some other similar phrase.

What follows on the next pages will seem strange - if not fanciful - to a great many readers. Just as all my recorded conversations with George have done in times past.

But, over the next months, I spoke with both Arlev and Hakeem on a great number of subjects including that age-old problem of how to determine the ripeness of a cherry (which I have not reproduced in these pages) and the conjectural mathematical hypothesis of free-falling hamsters down vertical tubes (this, also, has not been reproduced but it may, at some future time, find print within the covers of *New Scientist* to which it has been submitted. *Rab - it came back with a rejection note*).

But, unlike George, their stories didn't just relate to hamsters and other such rodents, but spanned a few creatures that he'd very rarely, if ever, mentioned - such as the hedgehog. Creatures which, it appears now, they encountered on their frequent nocturnal visits into the garden while we were fast asleep in bed.

I've divided the rest of this booklet into two major parts - the stories of Arlev followed by those of Hakeem as told to them from the 'hamsters of old', 'the rodents of renown', but I've included some original wise writings of Hakeem who developed his own Hamscript alphabet after his second month with us.

There are also poems and writings that I put to paper in-between the death of George and the acquisition of these new ones - I have tried to insert them into the dialogue as smoothly and as seamlessly as possible where they seemed appropriate but a couple I've used as a dividing section between Arlev and Hakeem's stories. I think it will be quite obvious which ones are mine so I have refrained from adding my name to them.

I have also added a meeting with Harriet (she still pops in from time to time) which didn't make 'Requiem for a Dead Hamster'. I related the problem in that publication that I had had with some of her puzzling sayings - some of which still remain perplexing to me - but I finally got the gist of one of them and so reproduce it here for you. I have used it to divide the two 'human works' in the Interlude.

But, almost totally, the rest of this booklet belongs to Arlev and Hakeem. This is their platform from which to tell you, the reader, their own particular tradition that has been handed down to them.

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PART ONE - THE STORIES OF ARLEV THE HAMSTER

TOUCHING THE CHEESEBOARD

The epic story of the first mouse to conquer Everest

Consider well the mouse, my son
and contemplate why it doth cross the road.
Surely it doeth so because of its limited intellect
for it never once saw the car that cometh.

Ancient Chinese (Hamster) Proverb

The fortnight had seemed like a millennium - perhaps even longer.

Was it really only two weeks since we'd got Arlev and Hakeem?

As I looked at the vast array of accessories to the hamster nest units in the pet shop, stacked to the left of booklets detailing, in the most intricate of ways, how to get the most out of your parrot, I realised that, probably due to an oversight, they'd neglected to stock brake pads.

If you're like me, then asking for a product that doesn't appear on the shelves is best done when everyone else has gone out of the shop so that, just in case your request seems absurd, only the proprietor will think you a fool. I waited patiently for the last person to exit, then sidled up to the counter.

Hamsterwoman was making high-pitched whines as she busily dusted the shelving under the glass-topped cabinet. I coughed to attract her attention and she abruptly stopped, peering with two large glistening eyes over the top edge.

'Yes?' she squeaked excitedly. 'Can I be of some assistance?'

'It's probably an oversight on my part,' I began, 'I might not have looked in the right place. But I was wondering if you stock - or can you get hold of - Hamster Wheel Brake Pads? Well, I think I'd need the kit first - not much point in pads if I haven't got the equipment to put them in, is there?' and I half-smiled and half-giggled nervously.

She returned my smile but I could see a puzzled expression descending over her eyes. She went to begin a 'no' but thought better of it in case she might have misunderstood me, then began with, 'And what exactly *are...er...Hamster...er...*'

'Hamster Wheel Brake Pads,' I could see she was struggling.

'Yes. What are "Hamster Wheel Brake Pads"?'

'Don't you have any?' It was my turn to sound surprised. 'I thought if anyone would have them it would be you.'

'I may be able to get hold of them but I'm not sure just what they are. What are they used for?'

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'Oh, they're attached to the hamster's exercise wheel,' I began, using my hands to try and graphically illustrate the concept behind the product, 'and there's a long wire that extends in a sheath from inside the cage to where the owner sits - so the wire has to be quite long. Then, when you're watching telly and the hamster gets on his wheel and starts rattling away, you simply press the button and the pads close around the wheel and...'

'...the hamster loops the loop because the wheel stops?' she concluded.

'Not necessarily,' I objected. 'The wheel stops I grant you, but it doesn't follow that the hamster keeps on running. Even less that he goes round in a circle.'

'Mmm,' she thought for a moment. 'I can't say that I've ever seen them but they sound like quite a neat invention. I'll tell you what I'll do - I'm seeing the rep on Tuesday and I'll make a note of it in my diary to ask him. Perhaps they're a new product that we haven't had in yet?'

She opened a large blue book that sat near the till and scribbled a note in black ink:

'Hamster Wheel Brake Pads,' it read, 'for the funny looking gentleman with the pleasant wife.'

'Do you have a phone number?'

'Yes, certainly,' and I reeled off a string of numbers that she hastily scribbled down.

'I'll ring you the following day. Okay?'

'Fine, fine.'

Wednesday, the phone rang. It was Hamsterwoman bearing sad tidings - unfortunately, there was no such product on the market.

But the importance of having a brilliant wife was brought home to me forcibly when Kath suggested I buy a pencil with a rubber on the end so that I could poke it between the cage bars and touch the wheel every time it got too noisy to hear the programs.

I thought long and hard over this - I even spent my entire lunch time measuring the lengths of pencils in WHSmith - but all to no avail. Nothing was sufficient for the task - they were all either too short or the rubbers were on the wrong end.

Finally, we fell back on plan B - we turned the volume up.

Rumble, rumble, rumble.

'I guess that Everest isn't all that far from our home land.'

Rumble, rumble, rumble.

'At least, it must be nearer to us than it is to you.'

Rumble, rumble, rumble, rumble, rumble.

'I suppose that's why the tradition is far stronger with us than it is with nearly every other variety.'

Rumble, rumble.

'He was one of my heroes, you know. I remem...'

Rumble.

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'...ber listening to his exploits round the commun...'

Rumble, rumble, rumble.

'...al meal we used to share in the pet shop.'

Arlev had taken me by surprise with his sudden pronouncement. While I expected him to be exercising in his wheel now that we'd put the telly on, I wasn't expecting him to burst into dialogue that I was only half-hearing and which was vying for my attention along with the program I'd been looking forward to all day.

But, knowing that I'd rather have an intelligent conversation than mindlessly watch a pre-recorded show, I pressed the standby switch on the remote control and watched the picture disappear into oblivion.

The rumble of the wheel droned monotonously on as I got down on my hands and knees to peer in through the wire.

'Everest?' I said. 'What's made you start talking about Everest?'

'Memories,' came the reply, 'I remember...'

The wheel came abruptly to a halt as Arlev, his nose lifted high into the air, continued, 'Strange, isn't it? A smell that you've not experienced for a long time can take you back to a time you'd forgotten existed.

'You see, there was this mouse who climbed Everest - I always thought he was a hamster but mum and dad insisted that he'd not come from our line and I can well believe them cos you'd want a famous rodent like that to be part of your species, wouldn't you?'

Rumble.

'Well, yes, I suppose you would,' I replied, flicking my cassette into the record mode. 'But you've only given me a few short snippets, Arlev, do you remember the whole story?'

'Oh yes. As if it had been told me yesterday. Wonderful physical performance, I say, every muscle tuned and honed to achieve that ultimate prize - that's why he was my hero, someone I could always admire and try to emulate. Silly really, I know, me being a hamster and all that - fancy me respecting a plain old mouse!'

Rumble, rumble.

'So just what *is* the story, Arlev?'

'Oh yes...'

Rumble.

'...the story - true story...'

Rum...

'absolutely true...'

R...

TOUCHING THE CHEESEBOARD

Time would fail me to tell you
Of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah,
Of David and Samuel and the prophets.
Those who through faith conquered kingdoms,
Who enforced justice,
Who received promises from God.
They stopped the mouths of lions,
Quenched infernos,
And escaped the edge of the sword.
They even won strength from weakness,
Became mighty in war,
And put large armies to flight.

I was born a fighter. I had to be. When you're the runt of an eight-mouse litter, if you don't clench your paws into a fist and box a few ears you tend not to survive very long. It can be very frightening if you put yourself in the same situation and imagine the ferocity that you'd have to demonstrate, but I never once thought of the personal injury that frequently came my way. All I saw was food and seven other rodents bigger than myself standing in front of me.

I don't know why my parents called me Bigfoot, it's not a particularly uncommon name amongst wood mice. After all, our paws can reach almost a third of our body length - the same as our noses - and mine weren't particularly large as they go. But I reckon my parents didn't think I'd survive very long when they first saw me after birth and spent little time on an original label. If they'd only been able to see inside my heart, they'd've known I wasn't your borg-standard mouse.

Do I regret that? No, not really. I guess I would do if I was to sit down and meditate on it, but I've never been one to think very long and hard over such suppositions that lie in my past. 'Here I am' is my philosophy - I can't alter where I am today, but I certainly can change tomorrow by my reaction to the present. That's why I'm alive and dictating this biography now - it's because the dice were loaded, because the chips were stacked against me, that I stood up and let myself be counted.

That was my learning curve in the nest, my training ground where war was taught me - or did it just come natural as if by second nature? I guess I'll never know. I don't want to, either, that's not my concern - what I am is what's important and, well, I've already covered that ground, haven't I?

It wasn't long before I was the largest in the nest. I was the first to venture out into the great beyond, long before some of the litter were even weaned. The world

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excited me, everything was so, so fresh and vibrant. It was as if it had all been created for my enjoyment and laid out for me to grasp by the scruff of the neck.

Yes, I know that sounds strange. It sounds as if there was a violence involved that you would recoil against. If it was violence I was talking about I, too, would shrink back from my description. No, that's not what I meant. When I first saw the complexity of life that surrounded me on every side it made me excited - many of my own age shrank back in fear when they saw the vastness of the universe and their own finitude, but I only ever wanted to get out into the magnitude of it all and experience as much of it as I could.

When something stood in my way, I had to remove it. When an obstacle blocked progress, I had to overcome it. When some circumstance prevented me experiencing the fullness of Creation, then I had to grab hold of it and make it my servant instead of my master.

I think it was that same sort of attitude in my heart that drew me to the possibility of being the first ever wood mouse to climb Everest.

But why Everest? I don't know. Didn't someone once say in answer to that question 'Because it's there!?' I guess that sums it up as far as I'm concerned. If your heart beats like mine then you'll appreciate the illogical reason behind the desire to conquer. If yours doesn't, I can never hope to make you understand the exhilaration I felt when I first saw that mighty mountain afar off and knew that it beckoned me to overcome its sheer terror.

I'm going too fast, now, let me back track. How was it that I'd ever heard of Everest in the first place? After all, there I was, a small rodent in the back edge of someone's garden - how could I possibly realise that there were climes a thousand miles away that stood as monuments waiting to be overcome? It's all that owner's fault if you want to lay the blame at anyone's door - no, not him, blame his wife. It was she who consigned all the owner's magazines to old tea chests in the garage. We had to find bedding from somewhere, didn't we? It was prime material if it was properly shredded.

And there it was! Only a picture, but it held my attention the moment I first laid eyes on it. Mighty Everest! That's what stirred me, the unconquerability, the virgin snow on which no paw had ever yet set foot. That's what focused my gaze and set my sights.

The rest is history, I guess, how I found a human team bound for the Himalayas and how I stowed away in their gear. I could tell about the dangers, I know them all. From the first aching symptoms of frost-bite to the unpredictability of a fatal avalanche through crevasses that show no mercy to fit or frail. You would probably tremble at all the possibilities - but I can honestly say that I never did. I only saw the goal, the target, the victory. I only saw pressing on regardless until my objective was achieved - I never saw failure, never made any provision for it.

Mmmm. I can remember the first time I saw Everest with my own eyes. It seemed to me to glisten with an aura that's impossible to convey, as if it was made for such a

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time as that and just such a person as I. Somewhere, high up on the steeper slopes, the sun caught some object and a narrow shaft of reflected light bounced into my eye - it was like a jewel, I recall, like a crystal clear diamond that shone, beckoning me to climb.

Of course, I wasn't the first to attempt such an arduous task, I was only the first to complete it. There were others before me almost too numerous to mention but, to keep my achievement in perspective, I should mention a couple of the more famous rodents whose name history records.

As far as I can ascertain, it was a hamster who first caught the vision. Went by the name of Hickory - though the natives called him 'The Frosted One' on account of his white whiskers. No one's really sure just what happened to him but, years later, they found his last camp set up under the lee of a towering glacial summit with his diary tucked under a thermal pillow. The last entry was on November 22 1956 and was quite short and to the point. It read 'Have run out of supplies. Am turning back to base camp. A land of unshellable peanuts this surely is!' - that last sentence being a reference to the unbreakability of monkey nuts when the harsh temperatures of that altitude seal the peanuts into a solid sarcophagus that's impermeable to rodent teeth.

Hickory's error was in thinking that he could make the summit alone with no help - he had hardly enough food for a week - let alone two months - when he set out, thinking that the upper reaches of the mountain were made of ice cream and custard (something that I never found to be true) and that they would give him abundant sustenance. And thermal protection in the fifties when he climbed was so flimsy compared with what's available today that he was almost doomed before he began. But that's not to say that he shouldn't have bothered. If it hadn't've been for his example and others like him then I would never have gone where he'd failed. I certainly learnt by his mistakes and made sure that I shacked up with a group of humans who already knew the paths and had enormous expertise behind them. In Hickory's day there weren't the people around for him to choose from, it was all shoot and hope.

Hickory was certainly an inspiration to me. His earlier diaries speak volumes about determination and perseverance, of will and boldness, that found a sympathetic beat in my own heart.

The only other attempt that I want to mention here is the ill-fated Gargel 3 expedition. I'm sure that most are already aware of that team that so nearly achieved what I did ten years later.

Predominantly, the team were house mice drawn from across the globe and put together after much careful thought by their leader who gave his name to the expedition - Georgio Gargel the third. Gargel had limitless hours in mountaineering feats before he ever let his mind wander onto the prospect of making rodent history. In '75 he'd been the first to single-handedly scale Nelson's Column without the aid of any tackle when a cat pounced on him during his holiday vacation in London. I suppose you

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could say it was an achievement based on fear, but it only showed the world, and himself, just how much of a natural he was.

Then in '79, after more straight-forward victories, he completed awe-inspiring Ama Dablam in just seven hours, stopping only for a piece of cheese and a toilet break halfway up.

But Everest proved elusive. With the weather fast closing in on his party of eight and with two stretchered team-mates needing urgent medical attention, he had to take the reluctant option of abandoning the summit when it lay within two hours' climb up the easier south faces.

I read Gargel's biography again just the other week and something struck me that I'd not seen before. It was almost as if he buried his heart on the mountain before he returned for, as far as I'm aware, to his dying day he never climbed again. It wasn't fear, certainly - it was as if the possibility of the achievement had been snatched from his paws at the last gasp by an ill-fated west wind and he could never come to terms with that failure.

But it was different in my case. I knew that it was important to try and do all that I could to get the victory over what stood in my way, but I also knew that if I failed it wouldn't be dishonour to my name. Disappointment, yes, but far better to die trying than never to put the climbing boots on and pick up the pick axe. If you aim for something big then you've all the possibility in the world that you might hit something worthwhile, but those who set their eyes on nothing and go for it usually achieve just that. I certainly didn't want it to be said of me that I strove for nothing and was successful in it - far better to say my hopes were set high and I succeeded in attaining something a little below the mark.

Both Hickory and Gargel were very much in my mind when I first set my eyes on Everest. Their memory almost whispered in my ears the encouragement to achieve where they'd fallen short. It was as if there was an exhortation from all those of similar disposition throughout earth's history that prompted me to set my face forward, upward, in search of the goal.

It seemed like ages that the fly cover on the back-pack was open but it was probably only a few minutes. Sufficient time, nevertheless, to whet my appetite for the ascent.

Let me extol the virtues of my fellow rodents before I proceed with the details of the climb - they were the real powerhouse behind my success, they were superb. If it hadn't been for their sacrificial support and their tireless work in making everything I needed for the expedition, I would never have got past the initial planning stage.

Despite frequent trips to Damart, we never once found anything suitable for the size of a wood mouse. Don't get me wrong, I'm not decrying their stock levels or the

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variety they hold, but thermal protection for rodents just isn't one of their high priorities.

I think the smallest item of clothing that we found was a pair of gloves - one finger of which was large enough for me to fit inside. No, we had to abandon any hope we'd entertained of being able to buy anything 'off the peg' for me to use. It all had to be made from scratch using the best materials that could be found, and that was a task that my fellow colleagues-in-fur gratefully undertook. While I was concerning myself with the ins-and-outs of body weight dynamics and toning my muscles into peak fitness, they were hard at work researching into and producing adequate thermal protection that would not only give me minimum heat loss but also optimum freedom of movement.

And the result? Quite incredible. I never thought that such vital wear could be so thin, so close-fitting and yet so protective. The secret lay in the material they used - spider silk. Finer, tougher and more enduring than anything humans have ever discovered or manufactured - I just had to be careful not to stay stationary for too long or I stuck fast to whatever I came into contact with. But that wasn't the problem - the more I moved, the more heat I generated and the more I kept warm.

The ropes, too, were made from silk, sixteen woven strands in a sort of plaited configuration that had an overall strength far greater than the sum of the constituent parts.

Nightly they toiled as if nothing else mattered, eyes never growing weary nor paws flagging in zeal, until the tackle had been completed, checked, rechecked and re-rechecked.

It's so important to remember the driving force behind the success story! So many like to take the glory for themselves and not share it around liberally, but if it wasn't for them the expedition would have been doomed.

From the moment I left for the Himalayas to the day I returned, the silk-suit was never once taken off. In the raging temperatures of day on our trek across land to the foothills of Everest, it kept my frame cool, and, in the bitterly chilling winds that swept the face of the mountain at night, it served as more than ample protection.

I'm quite sure that my human mountaineering colleagues never once suspected that they had rodent company, even though there were many close calls. Varying my presence in each member's personal belongings ensured that, if there were ever any suspicions, a quick search drew nothing but fresh air.

It was three days into the first part of our main climb that disaster almost struck. By this time I'd already mastered both the entry into and the exit from the baggage, leaving my fellow climbers shortly before dawn to get a good head start on them, maintaining a distance from their assault on the face that meant I could always shimmy back down a short way when they decided to pitch for the night.

But it was the third day, as I've already said, that almost cost me my life.

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I'd risen as usual about half-an-hour or so before the shallow breathing of their never-never-land turned into the first wakening gasps of consciousness. Being on a shallow ridge that clung like super-glue to the precipitous face, there was only one natural way up - a narrow fissure that would lend a helping hand and a brief respite from buffeting winds that eddied the gully.

I set off tentatively at first - then with increasing boldness - as the first shallow rays pierced the horizon and lit up the surrounding view. And what a view! In the distance, I could imagine farmers beginning a day's work on cultivated fields oblivious to my presence on the mountain and could almost hear the thundering roar of a river, shrunken in my view by remoteness. Closer, the brightly coloured tops of base camp were only just visible hundreds of feet below - such an incentive to press on when I thought back on the success of the previous two days.

Perhaps it was complacency, then, that pushed my paw and forced the near-fatal error. I should have systematically checked my gear before I ever put the first piton in to support my weight. It should have been second nature to me, should have echoed in my mind as a loud warning. But, if the voice was there, I was oblivious to its calling.

All that I knew was that something gave way beneath me - something that bent when the full weight of my frame came to rest on the pin - and I was left clutching fiercely a protruding rock above with nothing but air beneath.

I felt the jagged, razor-like sharpness of the vertical wall press into my belly as if I'd stabbed myself. It was the shock which added to the pain and the weight that pressed me into the face that winded me momentarily. I could feel a grazing on my left paw start to ooze and drip with blood, but I was totally helpless to tend to it. Besides, that was the least of my worries! Let it pour down like a river and colour the mountainside red, but let me not lose my hold on that one rock which was the only lifeline to safety I possessed!

Strategies raced through my mind with increasing rapidity but nothing seemed plausible, nothing seemed capable of success. A foothold? There wasn't one. Hammer a new piton in to support me? How? Both my front paws were clinging for all their worth onto the rock above. Scramble up the escarpment? But I needed a foothold!

It was then that I regretted not climbing with a mountaineering colleague! If one is endangered, the other can rescue, but alone? One slight mistake and the conclusion is an icy cemetery on the side of an unmerciful mountain.

I don't know how long I clung there - all I know is that it wasn't long before I started to give up all hope of ever seeing terra firma again (except fleetingly as I sped towards it).

But then a strange thing happened. Hickory's name came to mind. Then Gargel's. Then a host of others too numerous to mention flitted into my consciousness and beyond like guests passing the time of day with one of the same disposition.

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'Hickory gave up,' I said to myself. 'He gave up when he could have pressed on with a few more supplies and better planning.

'Gargel turned back when victory was in sight, he could've made it.

'And what of me?' I gritted my teeth and spat out the words with a defiance starting to rise from deep within my frame. 'Are you going to give in Bigfoot? Are you going to end the struggle here?'

The great cloud of witnesses echoed in my brain - they had achieved so much and yet hadn't tasted the final victory. They had come so far, greeted the crowning achievement that still lay in the future but couldn't lay hold of its reality. Their example spoke to me of perseverance, of pressing on regardless even if I was to fail - but let go and give up the fight? Never!

I felt my paws strengthen, my heart beat faster and my body began to shake as, from somewhere deep within me, I called upon that last piece of resolve that I possessed, that I knew was there and had been there from the day I was born. Gradually - but extremely slowly - I pulled myself up level with the protruding rock and felt with my rear paws for a foothold.

My face contorted with the effort and I bared my teeth with strain but, finally, my toes touched something solid - a platform! Only enough for one paw, but sufficient. I released my hold on the rock with one limb, gently reached into the sack strapped securely on my back and took out a piton.

As high as I could, I reached and wedged it into the rock face. Then, lifting my hammer up and behind, I brought it down ferociously onto the head.

I n! Secure!

Maybe only half an inch higher but it was progress. I transferred myself upwards, reached high again and secured another.

Twenty minutes it took me until, at last, my rear paws reached that saving rock that I'd clasped in desperation so long ago.

Then I rested and let rejuvenation enter my tired aching limbs. I'd done it! Yet not I, but an exhortation from the past. A word of encouragement that had stirred me up to lay hold of the victory that so many had reached out to take but had failed to obtain. As if the forerunners had tasted but the scantiest morsel that satisfied their minds yet, having tasted it were content that, one day, the fulfilment of all their dreams would find reality.

I finished the climb that day early - the team that followed me up made heavy weather of a minor overhang that I'd managed to avoid later on in the day, but I was glad for the rest as I watched them reach a narrow ridge where they bivouacked for the night.

It was good to know, to have the encouragement and the resolve inside, that there was every chance of realising the promise of victory that had alluded so many who had gone before me.

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Everest is merciless but unfeeling. It's not a capricious mountain that summons an angry hand from behind its back and pushes assailants off its slopes whenever they seem to be making successful headway - it's neutral in all its affairs.

Everest is a world in itself with its own laws - far harsher and more severe - with its own code of conduct that you ignore at your own peril.

Life below is just as dangerous, but man has come to live with it. He knows how to cope with the rushing cars that speed frantically across his path ignoring crossings, how to deal with the falls and mistakes that bring pain and suffering to every individual who moves and breathes.

But Everest is just so uncompromising. If a human makes an error of judgment when they put a shoe on they might miss the bus that they run for, but make the same mistake there and they could be hurtling towards an early grave.

Danger is relative.

We learn to cope with it when it's commonplace and expected but, up there on the rock face, where you hang on with all your strength, you're never quite sure what the next life-threatening dilemma will be that will stare you in the face.

Should man never try to accomplish what's dangerous?

Shouldn't man rather live within the security of his own existence where the most that will ever happen to him is that he might burn his tongue on a hot cup of tea?

But that's the essence of man, to conquer - frightening himself sometimes by the heights he reaches. Stretching out to grasp a higher pinnacle above which he's not yet breathed, urging himself onwards for a higher calling - and then one higher still.

But conquest is not the be-all-and-end-all if destruction follows in its wake. When truth is compromised, domination and control are not far away. They ooze like acidic weed, choking life from lush vegetation that springs up all around. It's not enough to find a mountain to conquer if a trail of death follows on its heels - if, along the path of victory, there lie corpses that could have been nourished back to health and invalids that were disabled by the forging assault.

To conquer an Everest means to achieve victory by the proper means. Why, you may keep yourself on the mountain, but the one you're roped to might well be dragged off by your one moment of carelessness.

And then there was a plain.

After days of climbing, struggling, persevering towards the summit, the ground levelled out for a brief stretch and a flat piece awaited us as campsite.

It was cold, very cold. I can't tell you just how cold it was as the alcohol in my thermometer had frozen solid, but I knew it must be well below zero because two of my whiskers had snapped off when I'd been grooming them the night before. My breath froze like candyfloss around my lips as I exhaled, and just trying to remove the sherds

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of ice caused excruciating pain that I decided not to undergo. But the climbing kept my aching body warm, even though I regretted my suffering face.

The climb itself had been satisfying. Breaking camp early that morning, I'd made rapid progress before the real mountaineers had stirred below me. What was more, they'd experienced some difficulty mid-morning but, because of my size, I'd found a narrow gully that had aided my ascent. I was a long way ahead but knew they would catch me up eventually because they'd talked about this plain the previous evening and their plans to recover here from the hardships of the day when at last they reached it.

But, for the time being, I was alone with my thoughts, alone with the cold and alone with the wind that whistled round my frame.

I couldn't help but find the scenery beautiful - you would have done the same if you'd been there. The almost surreal clearness of the sky was amazing - what other word can I use to describe it? - and the harshness of the terrain made me wonder if, perhaps, I had wandered into some gallery or other and had stumbled into one of the picture frames to become part of an artist's study.

The contrast between light and dark made me think that my eyes saw only black and white - perhaps this was a world where glorious Technicolor had never reached? - and though the blueness of the sky was transparent, it was differing intensities of reflected light that struck home.

And yet...

And yet...

The plain was a carnage of rubbish - of oxygen bottles, discarded mountaineering equipment, canvas, wrappers, containers, flasks. Somewhere, not too far from me, was a human form - certainly not alive - lying on his side, motionless. Although the beauty told me this was a unique place, I also wondered whether I hadn't found myself transported back to England and was now entering a public park maintained by some local council or other.

But here there were no placards which read 'Please dispose of your litter thoughtfully'. There were no bins, either. And, if the rather dead human was, in fact, a litter collector, he certainly wasn't going about his business with a great deal of enthusiasm.

Of all the places that I would expect to have been kept 'green', it would have been here - unspoilt, unsoiled, un-anythinged Everest.

But in the midst of beauty, trash confronted me. Where there was brightness, I found dirt and filth. And on that one place in the world where I would honestly expect to see Creation unspoilt by the hand of man, I found more desolation than anywhere I would have expected to have found it below.

The climb was full of surprises.

It didn't begin there on that plain way above the tree-line, it simply continued to be evident to me at that point. It confirmed what I'd already witnessed - that in perfect

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beauty there are always flaws that spoil. Yet the obverse became equally true for me - that no matter how spoilt the Creation might be, there's always, close by, perfect beauty, because of the Hand that oversees all, the Hand without which nothing can exist.

The ice particles were causing me to wince with the sharp, penetrating pain that removed warmth from my cheeks. The wind was whipping up what lay below my paws into a fine dust that won entry behind the reflective eye protection.

It was a bright, but foul, day. As near to a blizzard as you could imagine except no snow. I would probably have tolerated snow if the heavens had opened, it certainly seemed to me to be a preferable alternative to the icy particles that swept upwards and inwards but the clouds were far below and not above.

I was so close to the summit now I just had to press on regardless - a lone figure on a lone ridge with no sound to break my solitude except the whistling wind and the gentle brushing sound as particles rushed into me and passed.

But this was hopeless!

How could I possibly see where I was? How could I possibly be sure I was standing on top of the world when visibility was less than the spitting distance of a house sparrow?

I knew there was a small alcove a short distance back along my now obliterated path so, reluctantly, I turned around and blindly searched it out. To be so close was frustrating - to almost reach the crowning glory of your achievement and yet to have to temporarily let it drop from your grasp is a perplexing feeling. When you're torn between success and delay, the impatience always seems to be intolerable, even though safety has to be the overriding criteria in places such as these.

Far better I live to try a little later than to be the reminiscing subject of the first mouse to climb Everest!

I eventually found the small depression and dug deeply into the hollow. Wrapping my thermal protective case around me, I buried myself cosily into its warm snugness and waited anxiously for the conditions to improve.

Now I knew the truth behind that ancient rodent proverb I'd learned such a long time ago, it seemed, in the nest. I had truly been 'touching the cheeseboard without tasting the cheese'.

I don't remember how long I lay in that fragile cocoon of warmth or even if I heard the wind die down and an eerie stillness settle on the top of the mountain. But I do remember waking with a start when my stomach struck up with hunger.

It must have been a day or so since I'd last eaten. With all the excitement of being so near I had, unwisely, forgotten all about physical welfare and now regretted it. I

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rooted around in sack pockets and found a small supply of food gleaned from my last meal alongside the humans.

The silence hit me then. As if a thunder bolt had struck close by, I jumped with alarm as the quietness encompassed me and the realisation grew that the time had come for that final journey before the long descent.

Tentatively, I unzipped the fastening on the thermal case and poked out a nose into the air, then two eyes. Daylight, dazzling daylight - brilliant blue sky that squinted my eyes into convulsions, I reached for the goggles and slapped them across my face.

Yes, that was better.

Hastily, I grabbed my equipment together into the sack and set my face upwards towards the summit. Not that I could see it - I only saw whiteness rising into the distance - but 'up' was the way and I knew I was almost there.

Echoing in my mind were the words of Gargel, discovered in his diary:

'Forever climbing higher - and upwards now I tread,
Though fear of danger compasses me - through terror and through dread.
My living deeds will thus confess, my death will testify
That every peak confronting me had victory applied.'

Upwards, onwards, one final effort. Telling myself, encouraging myself to keep the steady pace going as I tramp the few short metres and...

...I'm there!

On top of the world with all things put under my feet.

Nothing higher, everything beneath.

And joy - mixed with relief and satisfaction.

I surveyed all that lay before me like some proud monarch eyeing his entire kingdom. All had been finally put far below and the victory of that moment consumed me with tears. And yet the futility of my achievement also echoed in my mind. Even though I'd accomplished much, I realised then that so many battles remain to be fought and so many victories - far more important than this - remain to be secured.

And I thought to myself, 'What does it matter that I won? What does it really matter?'

So many people touch the cheeseboard in their own lives, yet fail to taste the cheese. Human history books are scattered with them, if you would but look, of people who almost made it to the summit of their strivings and yet fell short when victory was seemingly in their grasp.

Men like to disregard them, choosing, rather, to remember the heroes who achieved that for which they set out, the heroes who, maybe even through no cleverness of their

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own, found themselves elevated to a position of admiration and awe over the heads of their fellow beings.

People like their heroes to succeed. Failure cannot be tolerated in a character that speaks to us of endless victory and continual triumph. If 'number one' is not an applicable label, then men prefer to change the hero rather than admit weakness in their revered image.

But why?

Trying is the goal, not success. Indeed, success is trying your best in the face of unparalleled circumstances, in the face of difficulties that stretch your perseverance to the limits. Failure is what happens when you give up, not when you're defeated.

Success is not running a four minute mile with two legs, but going after the same goal - and failing - with only one. Making a way that others might catch the vision and take your example to greater heights.

Many people have Everests in their lives, mountains that seem to stare them in the face and which appear to be too difficult to even begin to attempt. Others are already used to climbing the mountain and are no real heroes when they stick within the confines of their own ability - far better they launch out into the unknown and dare to conquer what they themselves have never won victory over, than to contemplate how great their achievements are when they make little or no headway in new battles.

I, Bigfoot, both touched the cheeseboard *and* tasted the cheese. But there are those who, thousands of miles away from the literal Everest, have attempted far more than I have ever done.

IT CAME FROM BEHIND THE FIRE

It came from behind the fire...
...with black matted fur and whiskered beard
and eyes that shone red in the light.
...with sharp taloned claws that scraped on the tiles
and blackened the floor as it trod.

And all who saw it shook with fright
As its head poked around the fire bright.
Its body appeared a crimson glow,
Advancing on victims real slow.

It came from behind the fire...
...what mysteries doth that mortal fiend
hide behind its throbbing breast?
...dragging its tail and grooming its fur
and glancing a menacing stare.

And should some mortal meet its gaze
As it exits from that misty haze,
A chill of fear runs down the spine
While terrorised victims whine.

It came from behind the fire...
...with cobwebs clinging to sooty paws
and blackened ears that were glistening wild.
...a sinister frown and a puzzling stare
which darkened the cooling midnight air.

And all who saw it shook with fright,
As its head poked around the fire bright.
Its body appeared a crimson glow
Advancing on victims real slow.

'Arlev!' said Kath.
'Look at the state of you!'

A FISTFUL OF PEANUTS

The Story of Montmorenci

'Pow! Pow!' squeaked Arlev. 'Put those paws in the sky, you rat!'

Hakeem shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

'You'll have to forgive him,' he said, 'he gets days when he goes all hyperactive and there's nothing anyone can do to calm him down.'

'Peeoouu-Peeeeooooouuuu.'

Pause.

'Peeeeooooouuuu. Peeoouu-Peeeeooooouuuu. So you thought you'd get the better of me, did you? Throw your gun out from behind that food bowl - I've got you covered.'

'He once saw "Gun fight at the OK Corral" on the pet shop owner's portable and he's never been the same since,' apologised Hakeem.

Arlev came to an end of his make-believe, blowing the smoke from the end of his sunflower seed shell and replacing it in his pouch with two revolutions about its axis. Being near the food bowl, he grabbed a piece of lettuce and began gnawing some strands into his mouth.

'Do you like Westerns, Arlev?' I asked.

He looked up with a half-glazed, half-conscious look.

'Oh yes,' he squeaked. 'Oh yes - the coward who makes the hero, the bad guy who gets his just desserts, the good triumphing over evil. What could I possibly not like about them?'

'The violence?'

'Mmm. Perhaps...' he thought for a moment, then continued, 'But it was a violent time, wasn't it? I mean, people did die, didn't they?'

'Yes, of course. But...'

'It was different where hamsters were, though. It was more challenge and submit rather than death and glory.'

'I remember a story George once told me about the Lone Hamster...'

'The Lone Hamster? You're kidding!'

'No, honestly.'

'Which one?'

'"High Moon",' I said. 'I'd never heard of him before til that day - thought he was a figment of his imagination until I discovered that the human's Lone Ranger was based on some Hamscripts discovered at the turn of the century.'

'"High Moon",' Arlev was racking his mind to try and recall the plot. '"High Moon". No, I don't think I know that one - must be one I've missed out on. Tell you what - I'll trade you story for story. You read me "High Moon" and I'll tell you one you've never heard before.'

'Okay, it's a deal!'

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Hakeem groaned loudly, descended the long tube and entered the nest.

'What's with him?' I said.

'Hates Westerns,' Arlev squeaked. 'Too physical and gutsy. Anyway, let me begin. There was this small township on the edge of nowhere...'

A FISTFUL OF PEANUTS

For Steve Foster

Take care not to make a public performance of your goodness with the intention of letting everyone see how good you are. If you do, you can expect no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Domino the hamster was not a rodent you could easily knock the spots off.

With a flare for simple mathematics and a glint in her dark brown eyes that told you she was in charge, she had progressed beyond all her fellow colleagues to the respected post of Chief Cashier in the Furs National Bank of Scratchville, a small frontier town in the mid-West where hamsters were hamsters and coyotes weren't.

Here in Scratchville life was tough, raw, almost primitive. A place that showed no mercy to young and old alike; a place where no luxury, no security, no sure-fire investment could be taken for granted; a place where you had to look over your shoulder every time you wanted to see the person behind you.

It was here, then, that Domino had been raised, and it was here that she prospered, offering strongholds for the wealth of all the clientele.

Micklethwaite the mortician was one, his flowing whiskers running the full length of his skinny jaws that he groomed repeatedly as he shiftily handed over his profit of sunflower seeds for safe keeping. He'd just recently moved in from Prunestone, an even wilder town than Scratchville, and well appreciated the need for security after an entire year's store of hazelnuts had been stolen from him by the infamous Rat Boys Gang - a band of desperadoes who, even now, had made dastardly raids on towns within the immediate vicinity.

Then there was Zacchaeus, a giant of a hamster if there ever was one. You could always tell when he was around because the ground trembled with his advance. He ran the local hotel on the far side of town - the 'Squeak and be Thankful' they called it - a popular resting place for travellers on their break from the pioneering drive that had pushed back the already well-defined realms of Hamsterdom.

I could recount numerous characters - all wildly different yet somehow very similar - but let these two suffice. It's more important that I tell you about Domino's boss, Montmorenci.

Montmorenci is a common name for a hamster - too common for a rodent of such a high social standing as he - so, when he found himself thrust into the role of Chief Banker of the Furs National, he took on the name 'Hammy' - a far less common name and one that no other rodent in Scratchville had ever been given.

The name didn't stick, however - history books today still refer to him as 'Montmorenci the ham'. It was the same in town, too - the rodents had grown up calling

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him 'Montmorenci' and referred to him, lovingly, as 'Monty' - it was just too much to expect an entire community to change from one label to another over night.

Montmorenci the ham was timid and weak, he covered away from Domino's authoritarian gaze whenever she turned her eyes to reproach him. It was certainly a strange state of affairs for, while he was far heavier, far taller and far wiser, he often bowed to the whims and fancies of his chief cashier whenever it got too much for him to take on the wrath of a female.

I know that sounds terribly bad but it's just the way it was - Domino was unequalled among rodents in this, she was unsurpassed in bravery when it came to standing her ground, and Monty, being the meek hamster he was, always seemed to back down for no good reason whenever his back was against the wall.

But how little did the inhabitants of Scratchville really know him!

My story begins on the fourteenth of June in the year 1865.

An ordinary day as they go, there was certainly nothing that hung in the air that seemed to indicate that this day was going to be any different than most others - the sun went down, the hamsters awoke and business began as usual.

For Domino it meant the usual routine - a four-hour grooming session in her apartment nest before exiting into the moonlit burrows that led directly to the Furs National. Every brown hair had to be in place, every whisker preened and polished, each nail meticulously filed and honed before she would ever let herself be seen by the general public.

Montmorenci opened the doors on time at a quarter past nine and in walked the usual rabble of customers, eager to either deposit or withdraw their hard-earned nuts and cereals.

Each sunflower seed had to be weighed and sniffed - there were numerous forgeries circulating in that part of the mid-West and it was only if the deposit passed the most stringent of tests that it could be accepted and a receipt issued.

Why, not a week ago, a lone stranger had tried to exchange a hollow walnut for five peanuts (a deal that was so much weighted in the bank's favour that Monty had immediately felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up to warn him that all was not what it appeared to be).

And so the transactions continued - just the usual time-honoured routine until...
...until just before the moon had reached its zenith.

The first that Monty and Domino knew about it was when they heard the commotion in the streets as rodent squeaked to rodent and news spread like a bush fire the length and breadth of the main street.

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Monty pressed his nose to the window to try and sniff out just what all the noise was about, but before he could inwardly digest these unusual happenings, in ran a rodent waving a shovel in the air, covered head-to-toe in dirt and grime.

'Nut strike at Canine Hollow!' he shouted loudly. 'Take yerself to them there hills!'

The door slammed behind him loudly as he ran down the street repeating his cry.

'Nut strike?' squeaked Domino excitedly. 'Did he say "nut strike"?''

'Funny,' thought Monty, 'that face looked familiar.'

'Did he say "nut strike"?' she repeated, her voice betraying her excitement.

Monty felt himself snap out of his day-dream.

'Er...yes, I think so,' he said. 'Canine Hollow, I recall,' he finished as his mind raced once more and he found himself peering out from behind the shutters, trying to catch a glimpse of the prospector.

'I've seen that face before,' he thought to himself. 'I'm sure I have'. He could just make out the voice as the rodent made his way into the hotel, but, by that time, the commotion had gathered such pace and the crowd had been whipped into such a frenzy that it was almost impossible to distinguish squeak from squeak.

He turned to face Domino. 'Do you think...' he began.

'...we should take to the hills? Most definitely!'

'No, no. That prospector,' he began again, 'don't you think...'

'...we should follow him? Of course, of course. Here, help me balance the books and I'll dash off.'

'No!' squeaked Monty, 'that's not what I meant!'

'Well it's certainly what I meant! I'm not staying around here any longer. Didn't you hear him? There's been a nut strike at Canine Hollow. We could be rich!'

'Where *have* I seen him before?' Monty's mind was racing. 'Long nose, large ears, small pinky eyes that seem to hide some mysterious secret behind them - I'm sure his face is familiar, where...'

'Will you stop day-dreaming and get these seeds counted!' Domino demanded. 'I'm wasting valuable time, I could be getting rich!'

Montmorenci jumped. 'Sorry. What did you say?'

'What is wrong with you?' she barked. 'A hamster gives us the most important piece of news I've ever heard - it's the sort of thing I lie awake during the day hoping for - and all you can do is night-dream! Get this money counted, now!'

Almost without a moment's hesitation he jumped to attention, scurried over to her side and obediently shuffled through the loose change. But, as his mind raced back to the face, he gradually slowed, grinding to a halt as Domino blurted out 'I can't wait for you all night! I'm off! I want to be rich!'

And, with that, she turned round defiantly, brushed him aside and ran through the door like a lightning bolt destined for earth - and with just as much commotion - until

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Monty was left alone, standing almost motionless with a fistful of peanuts in one hand and a sunflower seed in the other.

'Long nose,' his lips mouthed the words but no sound came out.

'Long nose?' he whispered. 'That's no hamster! Pink eyes and large ears? Oh no!' he let out a shrill gasp that scared even himself. He felt his body begin to shake with fear and trepidation.

'Oh no! The Rat Boys Gang! How stupid could I be?! They've got rid of the inhabitants so they can lay waste to the town!'

He hurried over to the window and gazed anxiously into the empty street.

He saw no-one, no movement, nothing. Just a billboard that swung in the night breeze, the hinges creaking as it rocked slowly back and forth.

'Alone!' he thought. 'All alone!'

It was then that he heard the faintest of gurgles, like a cascade of water rushing down a steepening slope, growing ever louder with each passing moment.

'The rats!' he mouthed his thoughts aloud. 'The rats are coming!'

He lifted his head high and, even though his closest friends would have written him off as a no-hoper, there was a glint in his eye as he raised a defiant paw into the air and shouted with a fierce, courageous voice into the face of the oncoming multitude:

'One small Ham will win the day!
Let all of Ratdom be my prey!
Stand I here for vict'ry's kiss!
Born for such a time as this!'

Montmorenci stood in the middle of the main street as the rats approached, tentatively at first then with increasing boldness as they searched each building, each dwelling, each nook and cranny, making sure that this one hamster was all that remained in town.

Inside Montmorenci there was a strength that wasn't his, a ferocity on loan from Someone, a borrowed boldness. In himself he knew that his meekness wasn't sufficient, that there would only be surrender and defeat except for that fire, that flame, that certain raging compulsion that urged him on to conquer what had no right to conquer.

Monty knew that, although he stood his ground, the capacity to do so came from far beyond him, handed down from One who'd known what it was to stare fear in the face and to press on regardless until the ultimate victory was achieved.

The rats cackled with glee as their numbers gathered smoothly together, facing Monty with wild expectation glinting in their eyes and a nervous twitch on their noses.

'Whose turn is it for a killing?' they gurgled amongst themselves. Eventually, after much ado, their ranks broke apart and a black, wily-looking rat emerged from the menagerie to take his stand no more than a foot away.

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Montmorenci bared his front teeth in a ferocious snarl and was inwardly grateful that he'd always remembered to brush every morning before he started work - just like his mother had taught him.

The rat snarled back, the slime drooling from his mouth like a slug traversing the leaves of a cabbage.

'Draw, Hammy!' scolded the rat.

'How does he know my name?' thought Monty. 'Has someone been talking?'

The rat squealed his command again. 'I said "Draw!" you fur-ball!'

'And what would you like me to draw?' he replied almost nonchalantly. 'I can do a good elephant but it'll take some time.'

The rat cackled with anger and spat obnoxious liquid into the air. 'I've a good mind to kill you here and now and forego all the pleasantries!'

'Pleasantries! Pleasantries!' growled Monty. 'Since when does evil go by the name of good?'

'Why, you little toe-rag! I'll take great pleasure in ki...'

But, before he had a chance to finish, Monty flashed out a small black object from his right pouch and, with lightning speed that caught the entire gang off-guard, he unfolded the object and slapped it tightly across his eyes to reveal...

...the Mask!

The loaded sunflower seed dropped from the hand of the advancing rat as if it had been whipped away. The entire mob began to shake with fear, their tails turning pure white and their coats standing in bristles as they hissed and squealed their displeasure at the sudden turn of events.

'No,' one shouted, 'that's not fair!'

'Of course, it is!' shouted Monty. 'Now the sides are equal!'

'No! You're...you're...'

'The Lone Hamster at your service, my little enemies-in-fur!'

With a blood-curdling whine and in blind panic, the Rat Boys Gang bumbled and staggered into each other, turning in a frenzy of terror to flee from their tormentor who stood, paws on hips, smiling with victory emblazoned in his eyes.

'Ha!' shouted Monty. 'Stay and fight!'

'You don't play fair!' they shouted as they disappeared beyond the city limits and far into the distance.

Domino was gone a couple of days along with the other hamsters of Scratchville. She arrived back just as Montmorenci was opening the blinds to begin business as usual.

'Strike any nuts?' he asked as she glided in to take her usual seat.

'Nothing,' she squeaked, 'absolutely zilch! Must've got there before us, all we found were empty shells!'

'Too bad,' he replied apologetically. 'Maybe next time!'

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"Next time", she repeated, 'you'll jolly well let me go sooner than you did this time! Why, I could at least have polished off some fragments that the early hamsters gleaned!'

'Yes, my dear, whatever you say.'

'Mind you,' she continued, 'I guess you've only got what you deserved, being here alone for a couple of nights.'

'It was terrible,' Monty confessed. 'Nothing at all to do. No excitement, no adventure, nothing.'

And with that, Domino groomed an offending hair and settled down contentedly to a night's work, happy that, though she hadn't struck her fortune, Monty hadn't even been courageous enough to lay hold of that wonderful opportunity.

INTERLUDE

TWENTY THOUSAND WOOD MICE

I'll tell you a tale that's beyond belief though the facts are most definitely true.
'Bout some strange goings-on at the rear of the house where the bulbs and the
flowers both grew.

It's weirder than fact and odder than truth, so my character you may well disparage
But twenty thousand wood mice had made their home underneath Lee and Kath's old
garage.

Late one night when they'd both gone to bed and the moon shone brightly in the sky,
With a cool west wind blowing gently through the grass turning once damp soil bone
dry.

It was then came the teeth of a rodent throng who nibbled flower bulbs and stole,
Til when morning had come all remained in the beds were not plants, nor green
shoots, only holes.

'This puzzles me,' said Kath to Lee, 'not one of my bulbs now remains,
'Though three hundred plants had been carefully bed, I regret all this cash down the
drain.'

'There's no need to worry,' said Lee to Kath, 'I will solve this dilemma you can bet.
'I will wait up all night until morning's first light - a solution I promise I'll get.'

So armed with a torch and a thermos of tea and an axe that he'd sharpened that
day,

Lee sat near the bed with his weapon half-raised to take off something's head come
what may.

The hours they dragged as midnight approached, as the air became frosty and chilly.

The neighbours looked out at this amazing sight and remarked to each other he
looked silly.

But his patience paid off as two o'clock struck for a small rodent head then
appeared

With a pink, twitching nose and brown, shiny fur and two large antenna-like ears.

'I've got you at last,' then said Lee to the mouse. 'I've a good mind to take off your
head!'

But Lee stayed his hand as the rodent replied, 'I will do you no good when I'm dead.

'For I am the one who's been sent up above by the twenty thousand wood mice below,

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'Who, even now, will be trying to seek a way into your house when I go.'
"Into my house?" said Lee to the mouse. 'But why don't you live where you should?
'Like down in your burrow that's under the garage or migrate away to some wood?'

'We would if we could but there's too many hawks and they'd take all our young who'd be fated.

'We need somewhere safe but you threaten our life so this burrow will soon be vacated.'

'But only because you lot eat all our bulbs - I would leave you alone if you left them.'

The wood mouse gave thought as he rubbed both his paws and offered this alternate plan then.

'No bulbs we'll eat,' said the wood mouse to Lee, 'there are plenty of seeds in the garden.

'This small concession we'll gladly give over to you if you'll keep up the bargain.

'For withholding our teeth from this rich crunchy food all we ask is you leave us some nuts out,

'And fill up the pools when the rain doesn't fall and the land has come under a hard drought.'

And so came about the treaty of Woodhouse 'tween the wood mice and humans of Sheffield.

That there year bulbs did grow cos they weren't eaten whole and the flowers gave Kath quite a big yield.

So humans and mice can live hand in paw because of that pre-agreed treaty,

And Lee now leaves out the food every night but leaves more when it's snowing or sleety.

A MEETING WITH HARRIET

[We wouldn't have chosen to reproduce Lee's poem here in normal circumstances due to it's lack of quality but it's vitally important to what follows -Rab and Yafa.]

[I know that some people are interested in times, places, dates and those sorts of facts that help to provide a framework for their experience. For those, then, let me just say that my diary indicates that this following conversation took place on 6 June 1994 (just over a year before we purchased Arlev and Hakeem), the location being our front room at about 1130 in the evening.]

Expectantly at eight fifteen and armed with two bright torches,
A pocket full of peanuts and some hazelnuts in hand;
Clothed in plastic waterproofs, umbrella under arm
And sturdy trainers on my feet with which to take my stand,
I boldly go where brainy man would never think to go,
Across the lawn beside the apple tree.
The object of my purpose, the reason for my trek,
Is that, perhaps, a hedgehog I will see.
The food is laid out gingerly on the spot I've always used,
From where it always disappears by morn.
Twelve feet away I then retreat and wait in dark and quiet
Until the hedgehog rustles through the hawthorn.

Half-an-hour passes, then another and one more:
No hedgehogs - but mosquitoes start to bite.
A daddy-long-legs brushes passed, blinded by the torch,
Straight into my face and gives me fright.
A windy night in Autumn plays such havoc on the mind
For each rustle makes it seem the hedgehog comes;
But nothing's really stirring - only slugs and slimy snails,
And the apples falling earthward sound like drums.

At ten o'clock the rain begins - first drizzle, then it pours,
Then a fork of lightning and a crash.
I can't put up my brolly for fear the bolt will strike
And melt my plastic cover with a flash.
As water drips onto my head, down my face and lower,
It tickles me where ere the water strays,
But I daren't move a muscle, neither sneeze nor scratch an itch

The Legacy of George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

Lest I frighten that poor hedgehog far away.

A half-an-hour's downpour then the skies turn crystal clear.
Two peanuts are now stolen by some mice.
And the mild October evening begins to turn quite cold
As the rain that soaked me starts to turn to ice.

Half eleven rolls around, my body starts to sway
From side to side, my eyelids turn to lead.
It seems that nature knows I'm mad for being here this late.
Perhaps there're vultures circling overhead?

At twelve-o-four, exhausted now, I wander back to warmth,
I put the kettle on and make some tea,
Allow my limbs to come to life and take a well-earned rest
And I wonder deep on just what could've been.
At twelve-o-nine, all quiet now, the garden comes to life
And a twitching nose comes out from under hedge.
And me? I'm sitting quietly away from all the action,
Within ten mins I'm fast asleep in bed.

'I read that poem last week sometime,' squeaked Harriet.

'It's called "The trials of a wildlife watcher",' I informed her, quite pleased that one of my 'minor works' had become the focus of a well-thought-of rodent.

'But it's a little negative, don't you think?'

"Negative"? What do you mean by that?' I was puzzled. How often people have said to me that the obverse of an exhortation to do something is negative - as if Truth has to always command something to be done! If I were to use the same terminology, then I must conclude that Truth has both positive and negative aspects to it, things that are both expedient to do and wise to avoid. Looking back now, I know that Harriet wasn't using the word in the sense that I'd come to hear it so often from people in conversation and, as she went on to elucidate exactly what she meant, it became obvious what she was trying to make me see.

'What I mean is that you seem to have lumped together all those occasions when the hedgehog never showed.'

'Well, yes, that's true. But there've been numerous times when I've tracked one up and down the garden.'

'And that end bit about its emergence is a bit theoretical. How could you know it appeared if you didn't see it?'

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'Artistic licence,' I said. 'It just seems like it happens like that. Almost as if the little blighter [*Rab - I've altered the original word here*] waits for me to disappear before he jumps out from under the hedge.'

Harriet looked at me knowingly.

'It's not like that, I can assure you.' She was obviously speaking from knowledge gleaned.

I put my thoughts into words. 'And what would you know about that, Harriet?'

She smiled (as only hamsters can) and squeaked, 'Well now, I met one of the hedgehogs that visits your garden.'

'One?' I questioned. 'You mean there're "some" that visit us?'

'Oh yes. Just because you've never seen two together doesn't mean there's only one. The hedgehog I spoke to had a brown face with two beady, black eyes and spikes all over its body. Ring any bells?'

'That could be just about any hedgehog in the world!' I thought, but I decided to humour her.

'Yes,' I said, 'now you mention it, I have seen one that answers that description.'

My voice didn't sound convincing (even to me) but, nevertheless, Harriet continued, 'I asked him to describe to me what a typical early night stroll was like and he just happened to include his visit to your garden when you were there.'

'You mean he saw me?'

'Not as such, no. But, there again, I suppose he did, yes.'

That baffled me totally, it didn't seem to make any sense at all. I shook my head with bewilderment.

'You see, hedgehogs don't "see" humans, they witness only their feet if they catch a glimpse of anything. But I'm sure you'll understand when I tell you his side of the story.'

'Go on, then,' I invited her, 'I'm willing to listen.'

And, with that, she began.

Gosh, it's cold tonight. I can feel the frost biting into my paws as I walk on this whitening grass - must be nearly time to go bo-bos for the winter.

The leaves are falling, too, that's a good indication. I must remember that pile of twigs and stuff behind the elm near here - it'll give me a good supply of bedding when I get time tonight to drag it back to the nest site.

But, first things first - I'm hungry. Haven't eaten at all since I went to sleep this morning - it was still dark, too, the nights are getting longer by the day.

Now, around here is where they usually are. Mmm, no sign...yes, yes, here's one, I can smell the trail. It's been along here very recently, perhaps only moments ago, but which way? Let's try this route...yes, there it is, I can see it moving with its antennae in the air.

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A black one, too. Wow, I love black ones, sort of springy they are and they give you a warm feeling as they slip gently down into your stomach.

Caught up.

Got it!

A bit chewy. What's he been eating? Ugh! I wish they'd be a bit more careful what they eat - if it's one thing I hate it's stuffed slug!

Must find some other food quickly to take the taste away. Now, if my memory serves me right, there's usually some a short trot from here in next door's garden.

Through the hedge - have to be careful, the thorns are lying all over the place. No light in this cave of foliage to see where they...Steady! Almost snagged myself there, didn't see that til the last moment.

Phew! Out the other side safely!

Ah! The smell of apples - now I'm near. Along the well-trodden path where the grass is like a wall on my left and right; a rose-bush casts its faint shadow across the way so it should be just...there!

Yep, where the bricks are, that's the place. I must get this ghastly taste out of my mouth.

Noise. Rustling? No, too loud, methodical. Something's coming towards me!

Light. All around. Moving, too. Certainly not the moon, it's too bright.

Stop moving - it might not have seen me. Oh dear, it's coming straight for me - action stations, stand by to curl up...

Silence. The light's still there but silence. Did I imagine it? Strange, this happens quite a bit in this garden - if it wasn't for the unbelievably good food, I think I'd go somewhere else. There are far safer places.

Still, the danger's passed. Must get that food inside me, wonder what's here tonight? Last night it was chicken if I recall rightly and the night before that...er...I'm not quite sure. Was it bread and milk? No, that was someplace else, a long way from here.

I prefer these foods, anyway, instead of the more conventional bugs and slugs. Here we are - right at the first brick, brushing past the overhang and left at the end into the covered enclosure.

Sniff, sniff. Wow! Look what I've found! Peanuts - shelled, too - dried grapes and is that?...yes, some hazelnuts! And here, just like other nights, is that meat stuff.

Mmmm. Liver and something else...what does that smell remind me of? That's it, now I can place it - cow, cooked cow.

I wonder how it gets here? Still, such lofty philosophical questions are hardly my forte. I'll just get on and eat it.

Squidge, squash, squelch, squirt.

Mmm, tasty.

Slabber, slobber, slither, slurp.

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Not there at the bottom, how about the plant cover? Yes, a head! That's Rork, I'm sure! No others - wonder where Blipp and Bloop are? Haven't seen them for at least a couple of weeks.

Now the reason why I came - a few seconds and I'll be there. Must check the hedge with the torch as I go - plenty of gaps through which it could come.

Mmmm...can't see anything.

I do hope the neighbours aren't looking out the window tonight - they already think I'm eccentric, without me giving them cause to change their opinion to 'stark-staring bonkers'!

Ah, the apple tree! Here I am. And there's the feeding station - food not been touched yet. Gosh, he's late tonight.

Wonder if he's...*a hedgehog!*

Panic. Must stand still, perfectly still.

Excitement. Keep the torch steady, Lee, or he'll run.

Movement. Can't realise I'm here. Swallow softly, no loud gulps. Thank goodness I haven't got a cold.

He's facing this way, he's heading for the food!

Five feet...four...three...two...here he is, almost right under my nose and he hasn't a clue I'm here! Making out for the feeding station like a stampeding rhino.

Right. Left. In...

Pause.

Don't hedgehogs make disgusting eating noises? I t's a good job I'm not queasy. Sounds a bit like a hike through a bottomless marsh.

Nice night tonight. Bit frosty - true - but I like it when it's crisp. I t'll be white underfoot by morning, I'm sure. Crunchy.

How long's he gonna be? He's making a right meal of it!

Ta ta tee tum. Tum tum tee tee tata tum. Tum de ta tum tee ta tum. I liked that tape I was listening to today - 'A thousand and one old-time hymns' - very original. Nice arrangements, too. Ta ta tee tum. Tum tum tee tee tata tum. Tum de ta tum tee ta tum.

C'mon, hedgehog, how long you gonna be?

...Out.

Look at him move! I'd get indigestion if I moved as fast as that after a dinner.

Must follow him with the torch, see where he goes.

Rats! He's stopped! He's seen the light move, I'm sure. Stay still - wait for him to make sure the coast...

Oh dear! Dropped the torch! I'll have to gingerly reach down and pick it up...steady...steady...try not to alarm him.

Gone!

Can't blame him, I'd've done the same thing - relatively speaking.

Ah well, back to the house, I guess...

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...but I saw a hedgehog! I actually saw a hedgehog!

'Mmmm, different,' squeaked Harriet.

'You know, it makes me realise that there are two sides to every story. It might not be true for you, Harriet, as it is for us humans, but we tend to judge people by what we see them do. We forget that we're sentient beings with feelings, thoughts, attitudes, intentions - all of which are masked by the frame in which we live. Why, the same action by two different people could be the result of two totally different thought processes but we pigeon-hole deeds as meaning a specific character trait that's within.'

'You can learn something from this?' puzzled Harriet, curious at my pronouncement.

'Oh yes,' I replied, 'there isn't anything that I can't learn from - if I keep my eyes open. There's always learning to be received and change to be implemented.'

Harriet shook her head.

'I knew you humans were strange,' she squeaked, 'but I never realised you were *that* strange.'

RORK AND BLOOP

There once were two frogs called 'Rork' and 'Bloop' who lived in the Smith's garden pond.

It was dug in the summer of ninety-four not in front of the rose but beyond.

'Tis true to say that the names of these frogs appear, at first glance, very strange,
But this rhyme is to tell you the reasons behind and why both of these tags won't be changed.

'Frogs only croak in the spring when they mate,' all the textbooks we've read seem to say,

So when, in late summer, we heard this strange sound we at first put it down to a jay.

But on closer inspection, and with list'ning intently, we found that it came from the pond

In the midst of a plant that had spread far and wide, right across and in front and beyond.

Then up popped a head of reptilian form which stared at me eyeball to eye.

It was then that I realised the 'Rork' noise I'd heard had been this small brown object's cry.

The second frog's timid (while Rork is quite friendly) and he hides in the plants round the edge.

If we hadn't made sure there was adequate cover, he'd've probably sought refuge in t'hedge.

But, if we are treading too close to the spot where he's waiting for sunlight to falter,

Or, if too much noise we make round about, he'll hop and then jump in the water.

'Bloop!' goes the pond and we jump up in fright, while his yellow frame sinks slowly down

And down to the bottom where he waits for some hours - ain't it strange that these frogs never drown?

But when comes the spring and frogs start to mate, it could be that these two will pair

And what shall we call their offspring that year? Are they 'Blorks'? Are they 'Roops'? Will they care?

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[Yafa - It seems so obvious to both Rab and myself that the answer to the final three questions would be that the offspring of the two frogs would be neither 'Blorks' nor 'Roops' but would simply go by the name of 'Tadpoles'!

The illogical nature of this guy's reasoning never ceases to amaze us.]

THE STORIES OF HAKEEM THE HAMSTER

WHERE HEDGEHOGS SNORT

You may well ask me, my son,
why hamsters squeak like mice.
But I will be pleased to answer.
The riddle is a simple one,
the solution obvious,
for we have not been given to roar like lions.

Ancient Chinese (Hamster) Proverb

'Do you have any Rat-flaps?' I asked the saleswoman in the pet shop (not, I hasten to add, the pet shop where Hamsterwoman ruled the shelves).

'Any what?'

'Rat-flaps,' I repeated.

She looked at me puzzled, then turned to look at her colleague standing beside her who threw up his arms in bewilderment and looked round the area to make sure there were no hidden cameras.

'What are Rat-flaps?' she asked, returning to look at me.

'Well, I'm not sure that they're called Rat-flaps - I made up the word - but they're like Cat-flaps that you put into your door so that they can get in and out except they're for rodents.'

'I can't say that we've ever been asked for them before,' she said bewildered, 'but I'll go and ask the manager.'

I waited what seemed like ages while she disappeared into a back room somewhere from which muffled speech reached me without comprehension. Her colleague at the other check-out busied himself with work that was no work, his head buried in a catalogue that he'd read a thousand times before but which, now, held far more interest for him than my acquaintance.

Eventually, a heavily built man in his late forties emerged from the back followed by the saleswoman.

'Can I help you?' he asked.

'I hope so,' I began, realising in that split second that he hadn't believed a word of what his staff had told him - after all, if he'd really heard what she'd said he would've begun 'Are you the gentleman who wants a Rat-flap?' or something similar.

'I'm wanting to know if you sell such a thing as a Rat-flap.'

'And what is a Rat-flap?'

'Dear, oh dear,' I thought to myself, 'have we been here before or what?'

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'They're like Cat-flaps that you put into your door so that they can get in and out except they're for rodents.'

The man fell silent for a moment, then politely asked, 'Has television been advertising them? Have you seen them on sale anywhere else?'

'No. No, I haven't. But you're the biggest store round here - if anyone stocks them then I thought it would be you.'

'Tell me,' he said. 'just what would you be wanting with a Rat-flap?'

'Oh, I'm not winding you up.' I smiled. I could see that he was thinking this was all some sort of joke. 'this is an honest request. Our hamsters like to go out at night to visit the local mouse population down the garden and my wife and I are fed up with keep having to let them in and out - it's a real headache.'

'I've not seen one,' he said abruptly, 'but if you'd like to leave your name and number we'll contact you once we've looked through our catalogues.'

'Yes, sure,' and I took the offered pen into my hands and scribbled down an address and telephone number.

'You've been most kind,' I said as I handed the scrap back to him.

'It's nothing at all,' he smiled, 'we're only too pleased to be of assistance.'

I made it back to the car to the sound of laughter emanating from the slatted louvres that had been opened high up on the back wall of the office. I could catch the sound of someone shouting but only the words 'Beadle' and 'Candid something-or-other' were distinguishable.

As I sat myself in the driver's seat, Kath's head appeared from the back where she'd been hiding.

'Have they called the police yet?'

'Don't be silly,' I said, 'I told you they'd be helpful. The manager asked me to leave our address and phone number so that he can contact us when he's looked through the catalogues.'

'You didn't!' she squealed with fear. 'But they'll be able to trace us!'

'I don't think so,' I replied with a wry smile on my face. 'I gave them Steve and Catrin's.'

'So just what do you do when you go outside, Hakeem?'

'Depends.' He shrugged his shoulders and stared at me with his big black eyes that seemed to defy any attempt of mine to get behind them to see how his mind worked.

'We have to take great care, you understand, we have many predators. But the reward is worth it.'

'And what exactly is the reward, Hakeem?'

'It's difficult to tie down to any one thing,' he began, 'but I suppose it's the same as what you seem to get out of being in the garden in the dead of night when the frost is forming on your whiskers just like it does on ours.'

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I wasn't sure whether Hakeem was poking fun at my night-time journeys into the blackness of the garden armed only with some torches and wildlife food. Perhaps he was commending me - I couldn't tell. Certainly, my escapades had become legendary with the neighbours - that was the problem. The husband always seemed to go out to have a cigarette just as I returned from a reconnaissance mission and, once, we were even taken to be prowlers by his wife when we stood waiting over a mouse hole trying to identify the burrow's occupants.

I'd hoped that I could be regarded as just 'eccentric' but their seeming avoidance of returning the meal they had with us left those nagging doubts in my mind along with the speed with which they got out of the house and drove away when they saw us at the window.

Ah well, if I'd blotted my copybook now there was very little chance of ever making amends.

But what did I actually *get* from my trips? What was Hakeem trying to say to me? Certainly, I enjoyed seeing what most people don't see - the hedgehogs that pass within inches of you when you keep perfectly still; the mice that come up in the torch light when you leave a particularly smelly substance outside one of their burrow entrances; and I'll never forget the commotion when the frogs in the undergrowth near the pond realised that there was a hedgehog coming down to drink.

The owl was frightening - I sincerely thought that it was going to land on my head as it swooped low over our garden in search of movement in the open spaces. I saw that bird a few nights over a period of a couple of weeks. The bats were interesting, too, but they were difficult to spot - they blended so perfectly into the night sky that I was always left wondering whether or not it was only a shadow that was misinterpreted by my over-productive imagination!

All in all, the reward was being there. Being a part of something that was going about its business as it always does. As if I was privileged to be given a window into the lives of creatures that wouldn't have shared a moment of their time with me had they known I was there.

I explained this to Hakeem to see if that was what he meant. He smiled, confirming to me that it'd hit the nail on the head.

'But we're a little more privileged than you are,' he pointed out, 'for we can understand some of the conversations that transpire between the groups of animals you see.'

'You mean you understand what they're saying - like when those two hedgehogs met and started hissing at each other?'

'Of course. To blend in with the backdrop but yet to know what's going on - word for word - is a great reward for the hours when nothing much happens.'

'Let me give you an example,' he continued, 'there's much that you aren't privy to and it's only fair that I give you a taster of what's out there.'

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'Really?'

'Now, listen carefully, Lee, for I will tell you of things that no human eye has ever witnessed and which no ear has ever heard...'

Behind the privet hedge at the rear end of the garden, close to the apple tree that sheds an abundant crop each Fall, there exists a small clearing no bigger than a shoe box where hedgehogs come together to chatter and snort their experiences. No man has ever yet set foot there, no eye has ever seen nor ear heard the strange goings on, the peculiar comings and goings - but ask the stag beetle that sits by the pond in the cool shade of evening, or the cricket that hides in the foliage at dusk and they will point you the way to that most ancient of meeting places.

Humans are not privy to such intimate creature secrets, neither can the mind conceive of so strange an occurrence when hedgehogs gather together to discuss mystical subjects, the hidden depths of creature life that pose perplexing paradoxes and unanswerable enigmas to the finite minds of all who exist on planet earth.

Here, then, I will take you.

Feel privileged, my friend, for you will see things that your eye has never before witnessed; and let your ears drink deeply from this dialogue I recite before you now, from the fellowship that exists between hedgehogs in that most mystical of unions. And plumb the depths, if you will, of these deep spiritual words, carefully thought out in the minds of those that speak long before they ever pierce the darkness of the evening.

'You smell,' grunted a hedgehog.

'No I don't,' said another, 'I t's you.'

'I t's both of you together,' a third butted in.

'Who asked you?' the first retorted. 'You're worse than both of us combined.'

'At least I don't smell of rotten apples...'

'...And very rotten ones at that...'

'...You can almost taste the worms!'

'*You cannot!*' complained the first. 'You're making all this up!'

'Can! Can! Can!' squealed the third. 'You're not facing up to reality.'

'And who are you to talk anyhow, you pear-pong?'

'I am *not* a pear-pong!'

'I'm sorry but you most certainly are!'

'I can tell when you're miles away...' the first took up the description.

'...the breeze carries the whiff...'

'...and all the leaves wither.'

'*They do not!*' the third hedgehog's eyes bulged with anger.

'Some have even dropped off.'

'*They haven't!* You're being unreal!' His face turned red.

'In fact, do you see that elm?' The second pointed far into the distance.

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'Which one?' The first strained his eyes to see.

'The small one there at the bottom of next-door 's garden.'

'Ah yes, I see that.'

'I t's death can be traced back to the night-time visit of old pear-pong here.'

'My name is not pear-pong!'

'Well, it should be!'

'And what makes you think you can go around criticising others?'

'I'm not criticising,' the second objected, 'I'm merely telling the truth.'

'Truth? Truth? What do *you* know about truth? How can you tell me I smell of pears when you smell of cherries?'

'And what's wrong with cherries? I happen to like cherries!' the second defended himself.

'But not cherries gone past their sell-by date,' the first interjected.

'Exactly! My point entirely!'

'"Old and wizened cherries, fermenting into wine",' the first quoted from an old, well-remembered poem, '"that leave a whiff of foulness for ever and a time".'

'You're just jealous that my body odour is pleasant when yours is so nauseous.'

'Nauseous? *Yours* is nauseous, not mine!'

'So, you admit that you *do* smell, then?' pressed the second.

'I *do not*! But even if I did it wouldn't be as bad as old cherries left to rot...*or* rotten apples.'

'Leave me out of this,' the first grunted, 'the issue at hand is the cherry smell.'

'And the apples! You both stink of rotting fruit!'

'*We do not*!' they growled together. 'I t's you! I t's you!'

'Accuse *me* of smelling, do you? Then take that!' and he slapped the first across the cheek with the back of his paw. The victim recoiled with shock, then snarled and bared his gums (for hedgehogs do not have very many teeth), rushing headlong into his opponent with tenacious speed.

The second didn't want to be left out and he paced tactically around the scrap nipping an ear here, boxing a nose there, using his spines to supreme effect as the others locked themselves in combat.

Some people find it hard to differentiate between hedgehogs, except when they compare the size of relative specimens. But no-one would have had difficulty identifying the three animals as they fought and hit and beat and grunted.

For each hedgehog had the respective fruit stuck to its spines. You see, in searching for food, hedgehogs only look earthward for slugs and insects that eke out an existence on the ground. 'Upwards' is not where food lies so they pay little regard to what hangs overhead (even though they're great climbers).

Many a time, hedgehogs have been found with curious objects impaled on their spines, oblivious, seemingly, to their presence. Just at the time when an apple is shaken

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loose from an autumn tree, an unwitting hedgehog is sniffing out a slug that's seeking to attack the already cast fruit.

And, though Newton knew an apple had hit him because he saw it fall to earth, the hedgehog only feels a thump and, looking round, sees nothing.

But the fruit slowly softens and then rots, still attached to the spines.

The three hedgehogs smelt *bad*. But only the others had the capacity to rid their colleague of the smell - a hedgehog simply can't reach the top of its spikes - but they chose to criticise the problem rather than be the one to remove it.

THE FROG KING

'But I say that wisdom is better than strength,
though the poor man's wisdom is despised,
and his words are not acted upon.'

'Why are you and Arlev so different, Hakeem?'

'Why are you and Kath so different, Lee?' he replied.

I hadn't thought of it like that before. I'd always wondered at the diversity of character within 'another' species without ever realising that mine had individuals that were every bit as unique. The question, then, was not why Creation had individuals but why it hadn't identical robotic units that reflected the personality of everything within that same species.

Realising that my question to Hakeem had been fundamentally flawed, I tried the obverse to see what response I might get.

'Let me revise what I've just asked you - why aren't you and Arlev the same?'

'That's a better question,' he began in reply, 'but it still has, as its basis, an observation that leaves out the hand behind Creation. The best question would be "Why did the Creator make such a wide diversity of character and yet still retain the essential elements that identify the individual as part of the same species"?''

'Exactly!' I said bluffing. 'I'm glad you've arrived at the same question that I did.'

Hakeem looked at me disapprovingly but didn't put his facial expression into words. Instead, he fell silent, grabbed a seed that lay close by and began shelling it.

'Well?' I said.

"Well" what?'

'What's the answer, Hakeem?'

'But surely, if you've arrived at the question, you must also have arrived at the answer?'

'Ye...errrr...no. I mean perhaps - I don't know.'

I paused, trying to think where this line of argument had gotten me.

'What was the question again?'

Hakeem sighed despairingly.

'The question was why there is so much variation within an individual species when that same species retains its ancestral identity.'

'Perhaps I told a slight inexactitude when I said I'd arrived at the same question.'

I always think that beating about the bush sounds so much better than a direct humiliating admission that you've lied. Anyway, Hakeem understood me well enough. Besides, he'd probably been waiting for me to come to my senses and admit that I'd really got nowhere at all in my search for a satisfying answer.

'So, what's the answer?'

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Hakeem sat on his rear paws and pushed himself up to his full height. He looked positively distinguished - almost regal - as he took a deep breath before his pronouncement.

'It's a mystery,' he squeaked.

I shook my head in disbelief at his answer (I'd honestly thought he knew!), before he went on, 'But it must tell us something about the nature of the Creator.'

'So,' I said a little impatiently, 'what does it tell us?'

'That the Creator has a consistency of Being but a complexity of expression. The Creation must reflect His character, mustn't it? Doesn't that stand to reason?'

'Er...yes, I suppose it does. But didn't we say that the character of an individual changes? Are you saying that His character alters?'

'No! Most definitely, no! We only used that word at the beginning as a label to describe what it was that changed in an individual but, essentially, it was the wrong word. The Creator's character is unchangeable, it's the expression of that character that's diverse.'

'Oh.'

'I mean, what two humans are the same? Or rodents? Or frogs?'

'Frogs?' I thought. 'Why mention frogs?'

'Because expression changes, there's no way that anyone should try and conform another's character to their own - especially frogs.'

'We call it "eccentricity",' I informed him.

'...but to live in opposition to who you were created to be by Him,' Hakeem pointed skyward, 'is to attempt to radically obliterate the image of the person you were designed to live as.'

'Especially if you're a frog,' I added, finally realising that, perhaps, there was an intention behind his choice of creature.

'Yes,' he concluded, '*especially* if you're a frog.'

'I decree,' croaked the frog-king, 'that all tadpoles must have metamorphosed into adults by the second week in June.'

There was a loud rustle of applause as hand met hand, and nods of approval throughout the crowd would have made any witness doubt whether or not he was present at a wobbly-headed car parcel-shelf dog convention.

'I decree,' the frog-king declared, 'that all spawning must have taken place by the second week in March.'

A host of official royal recorders sat hustled over reams of grass-paper, writing furiously every word uttered by the object of their obedience, every pause being punctuated and wave of the hand interpreted into common frog-speak. It was an arduous affair, a tantalising task that required colossal concentration on everyone's behalf, but

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one which gave each participant the supreme satisfaction to know that he or she was taking part in something unique, something never before known in reptilian history.

'I decree,' the frog-king continued, 'that all hibernation is to be terminated before the end of February and not afterwards.'

Another frenetic fanfare of approval swept over the crowd, hands waving in the air, individuals hopping with gleeful satisfaction at the dictates of their elevated one, the one to whom all allegiance was given and from whom all authority and favour was bestowed.

'Nothing like this has ever happened in our entire history!' one frog close to the front-line of spectators was heard to croak. 'This, surely, is the dawning of a new age of enlightenment!'

His friend responded with large nods of agreement, staying still only a moment before he leapt inches into the air to demonstrate his excitement at the prospect of that unique situation where one frog had been elevated as king over all.

'How did I do?' said the frog-king. 'What are the people saying?'

'With one tongue they proclaim you king,' an advisor offered.

Another was more cautious. 'We have eliminated all opposition to your imperial throne, your majesty, but we fear lest...' he stumbled over his words, '...we fear lest there may be factions and sects that we have not yet prised out from their cover.'

'But the throne is secure! Long live the king!' the first countered.

'Long live the king!' they croaked in unison.

'What...er..."opposition" are we talking about here?' demanded the frog-king. 'Are we talking about serious obstacles to my dominion?'

'No, your majesty,' the advisor bluffed convincingly, 'we are talking minor...' he changed the word, '...minuscule problems - an odd frog here and another one there - but no organisations, no groups that are plotting to overthrow your most glorious imperial purple, your majesty.'

'Then what of these "factions" that you talk about - and these "sects" of which you make mention? Am I not to take those words to mean that there are groups, that there are organisations who would secretly deny what the entire realm of frogdom has demanded that I perform as frog-superior?'

'Your majesty,' the advisor swallowed hard, feeling the sensation in his throat and hoping that it wouldn't be the last time, 'I am assured that nothing stands in our way and I must gravely apologise, your Wetness, for unknowingly misleading one so elevated as yourself.'

There was a long silence as the king sat, legs folded sedately in royal fashion, mulling over the words of his counsellor. Before his mind came to a firm and unequivocal conclusion, another subject croaked out loudly 'Long live the king!', upon which cue all

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present continued the refrain loudly, proclaiming their loyalty to the sovereign until all thought of danger had slipped out of the frog-king's mind.

'You went close to the edge, today,' a concerned frog voiced the worry of many.

'So close I could feel the air around beckoning me to jump.'

'You won't get that close again and risk taking us all over, will you, my friend?'

'That is one path I don't intend to hop.'

'Good!' came the reassurance. 'I'd hate to have to push a fellow reptile over the edge to save myself.'

The frog stared into the advisor's yellow-green reptilian eyes, slowly backing off and breaking free from the gaze as his head gradually disappeared below the water of the stagnant pond.

In the far north, on a hill-top that stood elevated far above the valleys that surrounded it, a hill-top that seemed imposed upon and dwarfed by far greater mountains that lay scattered about its flanks, stood what frogs and toads called 'The city of the great King'.

Here it was in a babbling brook that eddied serenely seaward, amongst the reeds and close to the southernmost bank, that the headquarters of the First Assembly of Reptiles met, a tiny organisation founded since before anyone could remember on 'reptilian principles and amphibious elements' that existed to 'further the true knowledge of the way of frog life'.

Or so their constitution read.

As the sun set slowly and the moon rose as if chasing it away, multitudes of frogs and toads gathered together in a small mud-flat that lent itself well to such a large multitude.

An elderly frog hopped to the front and picked up a large wad of grass-paper that was handed to him by an intelligent-looking dappled reptile that sat in full view of the entire group.

He eyed the contents once, then again, his taut brow wrinkling with emotion as he re-read the points that had been delivered.

'Colleagues,' he began, 'I expect that you have all read the decrees of the first king of reptiles?'

The multitude nodded, croaked and winked. A few angry noises were made by some youngsters who had had time to consider the matter at some length.

'These decrees,' he continued, 'seem ludicrous. It is not right for us to poke holes in such law for the sake of doing so but, to choose only one example,' he cleared his throat before continuing, having recently got over a nasty virus that had debilitated him for a few short days. The last vestiges still clung to his voice but after a couple of short croaks he was soon clear of the man in his throat.

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'Yes, take this one, for instance: "All hibernation is to be terminated before the end of February and not afterwards". The decree of a frog who lives south of our city!' he complained. 'Has no-one told him that our winters are more severe, far longer and potentially more dangerous than anything they experience down there?'

'Why, sometimes I've been known to have to sleep right on through the early part of March when the weather's bad!'

It was obvious that the point was not lost on the crowd, there wasn't a solitary dissenting voice throughout their ranks.

'The only thing we need to do is to decide what our response should be...'

'So what shall we do about the First Assembly of Reptiles?'

'Frogs, we must realise that the stakes we are gambling with are high. The king must know nothing about this group, either now or when we finally deal successfully with them - he might forsake the cause and bring us all to ruin. We can't rule without a figure-head to rule through.'

'They call it "The city of the great king", don't they?' an advisor asked.

'Ha! What a joke! They've never seen a king, known one or served one! Their community has always opposed every step we've taken in order to exalt one frog over all for the furtherance of the true knowledge of the way. And is it without reptilian principles that we do such things? Why, I'd like to...'

'That will be enough! We will not plot constructively if we let ourselves be dragged down into empty words that stir up hatred and strife within our ranks.'

The four advisors settled down calmly to consider the options. Five months ago, who would have dreamed that this meeting would ever have taken place? But through a multiplicity of shrewd dealing and wise campaigns they'd emerged victorious by establishing one frog over the entire land - and him but a puppet - willing to rubber stamp anything that his advisors proposed in the name of the security of the frogdom and his throne.

'Annex the city?' one suggested.

'And we lose territory that rightfully belongs to us! That part of the throne includes numerous waterways that provide a vital route into the land beyond.'

'Perhaps they would agree to a compromise? After all, every frog has his price.'

'Not so, my friend. In spite of all our previous overtures they've stayed resolutely against the establishment of a king. Do you remember our offer of alternative spawning grounds that they could possess if they joined in the campaign? No, they do not strike me as frogs that compromise!'

'Then they must be eliminated...'

'...subjugated...'

'...terminated...'

'...annihilated...'

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'A minor skirmish, your majesty,' the advisor chose his words carefully. 'A handful of restless reptiles needing a demonstration of your strength that they might take pride in serving the rule of your throne.'

It was a circuitous route the delegation took as they set out toward the palace. The wilderness expanse that lay both south and east of their city necessitated it so, their reptilian skin would have been dried to a crisp, even though they travelled at night, without any waterhole in which to immerse themselves.

The great King travelled with them, both in their midst and pressing on fearlessly in the vanguard, searching out a safe route and a pathway that wouldn't be as arduous as a straight overland journey. He served them as rear guard too, as the armour-bearer who protects the undefended back of the advancing warrior.

The King delighted to do this - it was for this purpose that He reigned and it was for this reason that He was considered 'great' by all His subjects who took security in the knowledge that He always had their welfare at the heart of all decisions.

An advancing battalion of frogs is very easy to spot even when you find yourself situated a fair distance from their front line. Thrusting skyward as they hop methodically in unison is a sure way to be seen and, though there were numerous small hillocks between themselves and the delegation, the silhouetted forms of countless reptiles against the backdrop of a starry, moonlit sky were witnessed very quickly when they appeared above the horizon.

'An army!' a delegate pointed far into the distance. 'What?...'

'The king's army!' proclaimed another. 'They've set their faces to march northward!'

'But, where? There's no frog or toad settlement for miles except...' the realisation struck him like a wet slug.

'...except our city,' concluded another.

There was a stony silence as, one by one, they perceived the intents of the crown:

Eliminate.

Subjugate.

Terminate.

Annihilate.

'Can we out-hop them?' one spoke quickly, trying to arrive at a course of action before the army appeared over the furthest hill.

'No chance,' replied another, 'they're trained to hop. They'll overtake us before we have a chance to enter the city - before we even reach the outskirts.'

'Then let me take my chances!' croaked the natterjack. 'Across the dunes and through the wilderness - this is my home! - let me risk the night owl that stalks its prey by wing; let me outrun the rat and outwit the cunning old fox; and may my speed be as the gazelle!'

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'Then go, my friend, and bring the tidings to the city...'
The delegation joined in unison as he croaked, '...and may the King go with you!'

Crawling, creeping, scurrying, sprinting.
Jumping, leaping, vaulting, bounding.
Climbing, clambering, ascending, scaling.
Falling free - but pressing onward.
Staggering - but pushing on.
Hurting now - but fighting pain.
And tired.
Exhausted.

But the city's lights beckoning his weary frame urge him onward to chase the target harder, to struggle against all that rebels against the goal.

At last, the final descent below the summit of the hill. No stopping here to rest aching limbs in the cool spring that spouts along the valley but upwards, ascending the scree that clatters down the hill, echoing sound as it bounces from steep-sided walls.

And in.

In through the gate and into the city - the cool waters of home, his objective achieved.

The city knows.

The city lay becalmed, motionless, the sky's image reflecting off the water into the eyes of all who sought to gaze beneath its glistening surface. The reeds rustled quietly together as the cooling breeze of late night breathed through the foliage and the first brightening rays of sun bent over the horizon to spell out the warning that day approached.

The frog battalion itched to get the job over. Within the hour, light would be upon them, forcing them to seek refuge until the following night and their patience to delay the consummation waned steadily with each passing minute.

But, what to do?

The bright reflection forbade any detail of what lay below the surface - a problem that meant that, as far as the battalion was aware, there could be a host of armed reptiles in wait for the first entrance of the army into the pond.

The frogs shuffled impatiently, waiting for a command to attack, while the leaders discussed amongst themselves which strategy should be employed.

Then, suddenly and very unexpectedly, out popped a frog onto dry land.

The army tensed, waiting for another, then another - but nothing happened.

The frog eyed its surroundings carefully (as reptiles do), checking for food, for predators, for anything that would make it flee the land and seek the security of the

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water. He looked straight into the eyes of the battalion, recognised them as frogs and looked elsewhere.

A couple of minutes passed. The army, unsure what to do, looked at one another for direction.

Then the emergent frog jumped along the well-worn path that led down the hill, oblivious to any danger that he might have put himself in.

The leaders hopped rapidly to catch him, croaking loudly, 'Stop! Stop!'

The frog came to an abrupt halt, looking over his shoulder at the approaching mass of reptiles. His face showed expectancy, understanding and a knowledge that wouldn't have been expected given the situation.

With the leaders' last hop, he shuffled round to face them and, as they folded their legs under their frames, he said calmly, 'Yes?'

His attitude disarmed them as they stammered for the words. They'd expected him to flee and were anticipating the chase, the catch, the kill. But here he was facing them serenely, questioning their purpose in ordering him to stop.

The colonel was the first to wake himself out of puzzlement and croaked almost apologetically but with a note of authority in his voice, 'Are you for the king or for the city?'

The frog looked puzzled as if the question was banal and senseless.

'I am for the King,' he replied. 'I have always been for the King.'

Then he added as an after-thought, 'And the King is for me, also.'

'What do you mean by that?' they responded, the reply puzzling more than satisfying their demand for information.

'I mean what it sounds like - didn't you understand? I am a servant of the King and the King's hand is over me for good. It's a shame that you are not real servants of your king, you would make very good subjects if you were, I'm sure.'

'But we *are!*' they protested loudly. 'We *are* servants of the king! We're the king's army sent with a commission from his very lips this night and willing to perform *all* that he has commanded us!'

The frog looked at them quizzically.

'No, no,' he smiled and shook his hands as if in refusal of the apparent truth of that last statement. 'You most certainly are *not* servants! No amount of loud acclamation can prove to me what is so plainly lacking in your service to the crown!'

And, with that, he shuffled in the pouch that hung loosely at his side.

'Now where is that manuscript? I know I put it in here before I left!'

There was a clunking sound followed by the rustle of leaves and out from the bag emerged a neatly folded pile of grass-papers, bound together with long, thin reed that was bowed artistically behind the last leaf.

'Yes, here it is - "Decrees of the king".' The frog started thumbing through the pages. 'Mmmm, I know I marked it, I read it again this very hour.'

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His webbed hand descended each paragraph as he searched diligently for the words that he was wanting to read aloud.

'Now let's see. This section, I think...Ah yes, *here it is!*' and he quoted, "'I decree that all hibernation must have begun by the second week in November". There we are. Do you see?'

'I'm not sure I follow you, no.'

'Well, what date is it?'

'It's the twenty-third...'

'Twenty-fourth,' another corrected him, 'the first rays of sunlight are visible so it's tomorrow already.'

'Twenty-third, twenty-fourth. What does one day matter? It's late on in November, that's sufficient!'

'Exactly!' croaked the frog. 'It's late on in November. In fact, it's that late on that the second week has long gone. So what are you doing here when you should be hibernating?'

'But...but...we're following the king's orders!'

'And yet, against the king's orders, you are standing here before me!'

They fell silent. Then one spoke, 'Why do we listen to this stupid frog, anyway? Let's ransack the city like we were commanded to do!'

The frog hastily thumbed through to another portion of the law and read, "'I decree that frog shall not hurt frog, neither frog toad, nor toad frog, nor toad toad". How do you intend to carry out the king's orders, then, if you are to stay within the king's law?'

'You can't be telling us the truth - give me that book here!'

Before he had a chance to hand it over, it was snatched away from him and examined in detail. Yes, this really was an authentic copy of the decrees - there was the official stamp on the inside front cover. The seals were intact too, no extra leaves had been added or taken away.

'Get out clauses,' he thought. 'Where are the get out clauses?'

He flicked through to the end. In bold letters, he read 'None of these decrees can be annulled either verbally or in written form'.

He audibly repeated what he'd just found.

'None?' said one.

'None!' smiled the frog. 'At least, not if you want to continue to serve the king.'

It was, indeed, a strange scenario - forbidden to do the king's will by the king himself, whether they obeyed the spoken or written command that issued from the throne.

The unity that they'd aimed for found itself dissolved into meaninglessness, into a contradiction that swept through the entire realm and which brought confusion wherever it came to rest.

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Frogs questioned whether or not they had been so very wise to look for one earthly head who would unite all reptiles and amphibians together for the first time in their illustrious history; whether, perhaps, they'd been extremely foolish not to stop and consider that their actions must inevitably lead to the supremacy of a fallible and finite individual - and him commissioned to take upon himself the decisions which only infallibility could determine.

The dissolution of the frogdom was inevitable - though not for anarchy's sake but for security's - for frogs sought out the old and tried ways that gave a steadfast foundation to existence; that looked to the One who brought meaning out of irrationality, sense out of confusion and purpose out of hopelessness.

So that what was old became new again.

And that one true Experience that pales all others into insignificance, that one true Relationship from which all others are defined, that one true Knowledge that seeks to pervade every life, became the possession of all.

And the King rejoiced.

WISDOM

'You were the very first before the world began,
And the oceans rose, and the rivers ran,
And the waters flowed,
Before the mountains and hills were set in place,
Before stars in the sky and the human race.
You were there.
Wisdom - teach me what is right.'

from the album 'Journey into the Morn' by Iona

'What is wisdom, Hakeem?'

He put down the walnut carefully by his side and fixed his gaze on a distant object that lay somewhere beyond his vision. Before he had a chance to reply, I added, 'And what's knowledge? And understanding? I've read so much literature with those words in but I don't always realise just what the author is getting at. Are they very much different from each another?'

'They can be,' Hakeem began. 'Yes, they usually are. But you must be careful - the words overlap in meaning. There's no universal concept that applies to every occurrence. But there are definitions that hold true for the majority.'

Hakeem paused.

'Let me begin with knowledge,' he continued, 'that seems just about the easiest to define. Knowledge is simply learning or information - facts about subjects and events.'

'Like me knowing about you?' I offered. 'That you...' I racked my brains for a relevant example and was surprised that little came to mind, 'that you, er, like sunflower seeds to eat?'

'Precisely. But, though you have the knowledge, you don't have any idea why we like them.'

'Why do you?'

'Trade secret - besides, I could extol the virtues of all sorts of foods all night and you'd be none the wiser. But I only mention it because the question "Why?" is the foundation of understanding - that's the second concept you asked me about.'

'Sorry, I don't follow you.'

Hakeem sighed deeply but persevered.

'Understanding has to do with the perception of an individual, the insight that's gained from the knowledge that you have. For instance,' it was Hakeem's turn to try and think of an example - he didn't rack his brains for too long, 'the stories that Arlev and I have told you - we've given you knowledge but not everyone will perceive what they mean.'

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Many will gain knowledge by reading them but they won't achieve insight into the teaching they impart.'

'Yes, I think I see,' I smiled. 'That sounds really very simple. So knowledge isn't as important as understanding?'

'Precisely! But knowledge is the foundation stone of understanding, without which it can't be obtained.'

'You know, we have "memory men" in the entertainment world, Hakeem, and their heads are filled with facts and figures that astound those who hear them - but you're saying that knowledge doesn't profit unless it yields understanding?'

'Yes, that's right.'

Hakeem paused without having any intention of beginning another sentence. He was waiting for me to fix the definition in my mind until I was confident that I'd got a sure hold on the principle. I guess he was waiting for me to break the silence, to show him that I was ready to go on.

'So where does wisdom fit into all this, then?'

'Well, it doesn't really fit in anywhere.'

He wriggled about on the spot as if he was uneasy to lump the three words together as I'd done. His face showed me that he was contemplating just how to express the next concept.

'Wisdom - very simply, you understand - is knowing what is right to do in a situation and carrying it out. I must mention that last bit - so many people think that just "knowing" is sufficient, but that's foolishness. Now, wisdom - naturally speaking - is built upon experience.'

Again Hakeem paused to think of a good example.

'Like I know that I shouldn't wake Arlev when he's asleep cos he'll only squeak and scratch. That wisdom didn't come overnight, you know, I have the scars to prove it. But it was an experience that imparted wisdom to me - though I would have been a fool if I hadn't let experience be my teacher.'

'Is that why the old are supposed to be wiser than the young?' I asked.

'Yes. But many's the youngster who's wiser than his elders - wisdom is acquired by experience and some refuse to be taught!'

'So it's not sitting around looking wise that counts?'

'No, no,' Hakeem squeaked with laughter and raised a paw to cover his eyes, 'wisdom is an action word, it can't be passive.'

'Sorry, Hakeem, you seem to have lost me. What do you mean by "it can't be passive"?''

'It's like your word "faith"...'

'What does he know about our word "faith"?' I thought. 'That's a human concept.'

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'...many think of it simply as a creed, a series of beliefs or even a warm feeling - and there are other strange interpretations - but faith makes you do things, it propels its possessor into action.'

'Yes!' I half-shouted. 'That's why it says "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"!'

'What's that you're quoting?'

'Oh, just a verse from the Bible. I see now - you can't "fear God" and not do anything about it, the attitude demands a response!'

'Exactly!'

Again, there was a lengthy pause but, this time, it was Hakeem who broke the silence.

'I have here somewhere...' Hakeem rustled his way through the bedding that covered Arlev as he fidgeted in his sleep. '...Here it is! Wise sayings - ten of them - gained from experience but put into everyday language.'

He pushed the bedding through the bars of the cage. I could see that there were characters on both sides which ran to many inches of material and I inwardly made a note to be careful just what soiled bedding I removed next time I cleaned out the compound.

'Read me them, Hakeem,' I said. 'I'd rather hear you squeak them and, besides, it'll be easier for me to write them down.'

'Yes, sure. But, remember, these sayings might not yield their truth very easily - you may have to think about them for a while before you perceive the meaning, and an even greater while before you gain wisdom from them.'

And with that, he began:

Never underestimate the power of a hamster
though they may, at times, seem dozey:
No mind can perceive what the heart of such an animal is plotting.

Exercise disciplines the body,
melon feeds the frame.
But better by far is a minute's quiet reflection
which builds the character.

Always watch for the silhouette of the eagle
and do not grow weary.
In the flutter of a moment, a life can be lost forever.

Let a sleeping hamster lie
and do not disturb him.

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That cuddly ball of fur, so warm and content,
is a ferocious monster when aroused.

Wisdom is like a sealed walnut:
The more you work at it with the teeth,
the more chance you have of obtaining the prize
that lies within the shell.

When you have an itch, scratch it.
When you hair is matted, groom it.
When you find a peanut, pouch it.
All these things have been given you to do.
There is a time and a place for everything.

Remember what your father taught you
and do not stray from wisdom learnt.
For there is nothing to do that has not already been done
and there is only one sure and safe Way.

A sunflower seed may be hard to open
but it yields oil that is good for the soul.

Do not be alarmed when a hamster sneezes
for sawdust will be scattered everywhere.
Think only on how much more the disturbance when the Wind blows.

Remove not a hamster's bedding,
neither steal a rodent's seeds.
It is better to remain a valued friend
than risk a bite from a sharp tooth.

'Take time to think on their meaning,' instructed Hakeem. 'They will give up their teaching only if you have patience and perseverance.'

I finished committing the last proverb to paper and inwardly made a note of his last words. I filed the sheet away with some other poems I'd been working on, but made sure that it sat on top so I wouldn't lose it amongst a menagerie of thoughts and ideas that had yet to find a fitting conclusion.

My eyes focused back on Hakeem who was, by now, entering a grooming session in the middle of a tube. I tapped the side to attract his attention and he exited into a large, spacious compartment to listen to my next question.

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'What's your philosophy of life?' I asked. Hakeem's face looked blank. 'What do you mean by "philosophy"?'

'Your principles of living, Hakeem. What do you base your wisdom on?'

He looked at me as if I'd suddenly lost what little contact I'd had with the living and replied, 'Common sense, of course, what else?'

'But aren't there any foundational concepts that you apply to situations?'

'Grief!' he exclaimed in a loud squeak that made me jump with shock. 'Common sense is common sense - there's no profit to dream up a whole belief system just so you can interpret everything you experience the way you want to.'

'Sooner or later something will come along that'll be so different and that won't fit in to your preconceived ideas that you'll either make it fit and lose out on change, or else you'll have to change your entire philosophy. It's best to take life the way it is and be real and honest.'

'But don't you often wonder why things happen the way they do, Hakeem?'

'Yes, but not for long - I'd live my life in idleness and wouldn't enjoy it. In the opinion of a hamster...'

He paused and moved his head slightly forward to convey the importance of what he was about to say.

'...Write this down, Lee, don't let this go in one ear and out the other.'

I grabbed the notebook that lay at my side and flicked urgently to a blank page that lay somewhere in the middle of the pad as Hakeem took up his discourse.

'I remember saying this to Arlev about three weeks ago...'

In the opinion of a hamster...

...life is good.

Not the type of life that we've seen many of our owners experience - the struggling and striving after possessions that leaves emptiness behind.

But the simplicity of enjoying the simple taste of a grape or the crunch of a freshly shelled peanut (and it never ceases to amaze me just how they can be fit so perfectly into those shells); to taste the coolness of water on the lips on a hot summer's afternoon or to enjoy a brief siesta when tiredness dogs the frame.

These simple pleasures are good - satisfying. No amount of striving after complicated experiences can ever match that fulfilling simplicity of life.

In the opinion of a hamster...

...life is there to be enjoyed.

We've heard owners scold the mundanity of their existence, growing bored with the sameness that seems to meet them at every turn. We've seen the fraught brow and fevered life that curses what is necessary to do.

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How people would trade all the muchness for a change, for variety or for excitement that catapulted them into adventure.

But it, too, would become boring if it was a continued experience. It's only in repetitiveness that change is greeted with open arms, when a life seems consumed with routine that a break with present experience is contemplated.

Such is the lure of sin.

No, my friend, if your master gives you the same food everyday then at least be content that you won't go hungry. But grasp the opportunity with both paws when he leaves the cage door open!

Be grateful for the security of the monotonous but do not be afraid of adventure when it offers itself, remembering only that, though excitement stimulates the senses and the imagination, there are well-defined boundaries for your experience.

In the opinion of a hamster...

...life brings trials.

It could be the well-known problem of trapping a paw in an exercise-wheel, or forgetting to cling on to the sides of a tube when you speed earthward. And you certainly won't be able to avoid that overpowering rodent who always seems to get the best of every seed that's ever ripened.

All these things - and more - will happen and there is very little that can be done about them. This is part of life, the same part that brings unexpected surprises that thrill and enthrall us.

So, be prepared for them - if you can be - and don't think that anything unusual is happening to you. These incidents come upon all animals and humans and you are in no way being singled out because you think you get more than your own fair share!

But rejoice in so much that they will soon be over - that the trial quickly passes and is replaced with recovery, joy and restoration.

In the opinion of a hamster...

...life is good.

I've already stated that once before but let me repeat myself. If it wasn't so then it wouldn't have been created - if it was evil to be alive then it would have come about purely by chance.

But the design is such that the One who made it stamped it with His own character so that it reflects Himself.

Life is very good.

'Is that your philosophy of life then, Hakeem?'

'If that's what you want to call it - but I'd prefer the label "Wisdom".'

CONCLUSION

'Behold, how good and favourable it is
when brothers live together in unity.'

Hakeem lay in a warm bundle of bedding, his feet pointing to the four corners of the globe and his chest rising and falling serenely. His eyes were oblivious to anything that stirred beside him, his only care being to acquire that precious commodity of sleep that all hamsters find irresistible.

Perhaps he even dreamed of the perfect sunflower seed, the best-tasting walnut in the world or could almost hear the most satisfying crunch of a monkey nut that ever a rodent could - we shall never know.

Arlev had been hunting - not in the usual sense of the word (the sense that pictures streamlined cheetahs racing furiously to stumble game), but he'd worked hard with his nose to find the buried hamster hoop in the lower compartments and the half-opened chestnut that had been tied to the bars of the cage to prevent its removal.

As he boldly entered the nest compartment, he ground to an abrupt halt. Realising that Hakeem was soundly asleep, Arlev gently and quietly disturbed the covers until he, too, had almost disappeared from view. His nose twitched and sounded out his brother's form, locating his head in a few seconds, his ears a little later.

Carefully, he lifted his mouth upwards and let out a most blood-curdling
'SQUEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAK!'

that rocked Hakeem upwards like tossed-up lettuce leaves being prepared for a salad. Arlev was off - exiting out of the bedding with a minimum of decorum and a maximum of acceleration - as Hakeem came crashing down on the pile of cotton tissues, looking around him for some would-be predator.

Nothing.

Arlev was long gone, hiding in the lower level before Hakeem's eyes had even seen the light of day. Restlessly, he scanned the compartment, searching for the cause of his alarm but the solution lay far from his grasp - as did the culprit.

He settled sleepfully down once more and, within a few short moments, was again fast asleep.

The Legacy of George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

Appendix One

APPENDIX ONE - THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LEE'S HAMSTER

INTRODUCTION

Even before George had put together the first volume of Hamster Histories (currently available in print in the first book 'The Stories of George the Hamster'), he had dictated six short articles for use in a local church's magazine within his first few months with us.

I've already made mention of these and it was with little shock that, when the 'Histories' became famous in the early 1990s amongst the human and rodent literary world, the articles were a much sought after possession for re-publication.

I decided to give the rights over to a weekly periodical that was as much concerned with supporting rodents' rights as it had been with making George more well-known than he could have been had his literary genius have been simply spread by squeak of mouth.

It was with the Rodent Weekly that I finally agreed publication terms and conditions during October of 1999, almost five years before the release of George's first book.

I could've opted for companies who offered more - I didn't.

And, much to the world's benefit now, it paid off - for they have graciously allowed me to publish not only the six articles freely in book form but also the editorial introduction that appeared announcing their scoop in their 6 November edition of the same year.

Although the author, Dak, was our resident hamster at the time (and who wrote at least two series of stories about his trips to Eastbourne and America, yet to be published), the Rodent Weekly could have rightfully refused to allow such a reproduction of their own copyrighted article - but such is their commitment to advance worldwide rodent awareness that they laid aside any thought of financial gain.

I just hope they don't hear about how much money this book makes...

WEEKLY BUYS EXCLUSIVE FIRST GEORGE-ARTICLE RIGHTS!

by Dak the Hamster

In an unprecedented editorial coup, the Rodent Weekly can now reveal that it has paid a six figure sum for the rights to the late, great George the Hamster's series of six original articles entitled 'The Gospel According to Lee's Hamster' which appeared in a local church magazine during 1991/2.

The articles, which launched George on his literary career, will be released weekly from now until Christmas beginning with the first in next week's edition.

Lee, George's owner, commented, 'I'm glad that these will be published in the world's premier rodent newspaper - though I'm not sure just what I'm going to do with the 250,000 sunflower seeds that the paper has paid me for sole rights to publish.'

George first began writing through dictation after a series of lengthy episodes with his master in which he made 'contact'. His first piece was as a response to Lee's mother's next-door neighbour's cat, Ginger, who wrote to him to wish him all the best, after she'd heard that he'd been purchased for the house.

A series of letters followed - which have never been released for publication and which many believe to have been destroyed as considered worthless at that time - and a budding friendship grew.

Subsequently, George began to study the hamsterglyphics of ancient hamster kingdoms and, with Lee's help, developed modern hamscript which is still used even today as a precursor to translating the Rodent Weekly articles into human languages.

Lee was nearly arrested in the early days when Police called to take a statement from him to support a local incident when he assured the officer that the picture card of the cat on the mantelpiece had nothing to do with him but was just a fond greeting from a southern cat to his own dear hamster.

Lee wasn't subsequently called as a witness in the case, the Police fearing that no one would believe the testimony of someone who was certifiable. Of course, if this had happened in today's climate, it would have been much different.

'I remember those early days,' Lee told me, 'when everything was just so, er, new. No hamster had written much for the human readership so George had to contend with much misunderstanding and prejudice from just about everyone that encountered his writings.

'They got it so wrong, too - they said I was mad for writing articles in the guise of my pet. Even when I told them I'd only be mad to claim them as my own when, in fact, they were the sole work of George, they seemed to have my madness confirmed and on more than one occasion I had to jump the rear wall to escape the fleet of ambulances which kept arriving at our front door.'

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

When the truth finally came out, Lee became an overnight celebrity and successfully kept George from the limelight when he needed time to produce articles that were being sought after by his new readership.

The Gospels - which run from next week onwards - represented his first attempt at saying anything directly spiritual to the world and, as such, are probably the most blatant example of what George's beliefs were, based, as every hamster's are, on the Creator and Creation.

These articles had been hidden away in a damp and draughty cupboard for well over seven years but, finally, they've come to light for the benefit of all mankind.

A couple of words have needed to be altered as they've changed meaning since 1991/2, but I've tried to be faithful to the original intention of George and, where necessary, have conferred with Lee to try and ascertain if he can remember what George actually said.

I have also tried to keep Lee's comments as they originally appeared - in those days, George was sometimes unsure of what human society meant by certain terms and was glad to let Lee explain where possible misunderstanding could arise (even though some seem to know *exactly* what you meant when the thought never once entered into your mind).

Finally, as news of our coverage spreads, I'm sure that subsequent weeks of the Rodent Weekly may be sold out locally, so please reserve your copy now at the newsagents.

Subscription rates can be found on page 47 of the current edition.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LEE'S HAMSTER - PART ONE

Hi.

My name is George.

Lee and Kath bought me about 2 months ago from a local pet shop and, since then, I've lived with them in the corner of their living room beside the hifi.

I would have contributed to an earlier Church Magazine but Lee has only just managed to speak 'Hamster'.

It isn't an easy language to learn let alone speak (it ranks in the top ten of 'Difficult Animal Languages' along with Skunk, Hippopotamus and Stick insect), with all its squeaks, shrills, sniffs and stares (the latter can often change the meaning of the word entirely) - but Lee has persevered to the point that I'm now able to hold an intelligent conversation with Him.

Squeak (this word is untranslatable - Lee).

We Hamsters like to store things. It's nothing that we learned from anyone - it's part of our nature. When I wake up in the evening, I'll run around my living quarters finding all the new food that Lee's put out for me.

It often means having to dive down cardboard tubes with my legs flailing in the air to reach a sunflower seed at the bottom - Lee likes making it difficult for me. Then I put it in my pouches and take it back to my nest compartment where I store it in a neat pile.

I keep thinking that winter must be just around the corner when there's very little to eat, so I'm hastily trying to store up food in my nest for then. But winter never seems to come, even though something inside me keeps telling me to stockpile any food I find.

That's the way I am, I can't change my nature.

I'll always be this way.

But you believers are different - or, at least, the Creator has called you to be.

When you receive or discover a spiritual truth, a revelation, a teaching, a new song, an answer to prayer, a material asset, a material gain - in short, any tasty nugget - you should share it with another, not hoard it like us hamsters do until winter. There's no point holding on to something if you're withholding it from your brother or sister in Christ.

When your spiritual winter does come, you'll go to your spiritual store and find it bare. But others among you who are experiencing a spiritual summer will be able to minister to your need out of their abundance. So share now in your fruitfulness, that others may bless you in your barrenness.

As one of you humans once wrote (it was Paul the apostle - Lee), '...your excess at the present time should supply your brother's need, so that their excess may supply your need, that there may be equality'.

The Legacy of George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

So, don't be like us hamsters - we can't help ourselves for, by nature, we're hoarders.
Rather, be like the Creator, Jesus, who gives to all out of His great abundance.
Yours in the Rotastak hamster unit,
George

Original Editors' note

We wouldn't normally allow an animal space to write in the pages of the Church Magazine, but felt that George's message as related to Lee was particularly relevant for our congregation.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LEE'S HAMSTER - PART TWO

Greetings, readers, from the Rotastak Hamster unit beside Lee and Kath's hifi and many squeaks (untranslatable word - Lee) from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you for all your words of encouragement after my first article in Fellowship Focus - I know that some of you were surprised to learn of my ability to communicate with my master, Lee, and of our species' high intelligence.

This shouldn't have surprised you, though, for even one of our famous playwrights is well-known by yourselves - namely, the talented William Shakester (among whose plays are "Hamlet", "The taming of the Hamster" and the playlet "Hambeth", about a Scottish hamster with designs on the Rodent throne).

But, in spite of our intelligence, we hamsters have poor eyesight - I cannot see anything in focus past the end of my nose, everything becomes a blur of coloured shapes and contrasts of light and darkness.

The other month, I thought my sunflower seeds were up - honestly, I was terrified. Lee & Kath had let me out from my cage into a large compound (where I can burrow, climb and generally wreak havoc with anything I find) when first one giant pink object, then another, started swooping at me, trying to grab me and drag me off to its nest.

My mind raced, remembering what my grandfather once told me, how in the wild there are creatures called 'Shriekysniffpeckers' (transliterated from the hamster-tongue, I don't know which animal George means - Lee) that swoop down on unsuspecting hamsters from a great height and capture them for chick-feed.

I was terrified.

I darted first this way, then that. At each move, the pink blur came closer and closer until at last it brushed past my whiskers and I let out a squeal of fright. Desperately, I tried to find the entrance to my cage and sanctuary, but it seemed like this pink animal outwitted me at every turn.

I'll spare you all the details of my struggle to find safety behind the bars of my cage, suffice to say that after many minutes I discovered it, totally by accident, and escaped from the clutches of my opponent.

Security restored, I sat up on my rear paws and breathed out a deep sigh of relief.

Looking back at this experience now makes me think how silly I was. Lee explained to me what had happened a few hours afterward and it was then I realised my imperception. There'd been no danger from the pink object as I'd thought, because it was my master's wife's hands trying to direct me into a place of security.

The real danger lay many hamster-strides away from me and it was this danger that my owners were trying to protect me from (I won't go into the details of what that danger was, only to say that Lee uses the word 'arson' to describe it even though I have no concept of such a word in my hamster vocabulary).

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So the situation I thought was a danger was really a situation to move me into a place of security to protect me from a real danger that I was oblivious to.

And then I thought of you, the believer, and the Creator's dealings with you. What you sometimes experience is a terror, a fright - something that, like my experience, seems to be set to consume you totally.

I thought my circumstances were going to kill me but I never saw that it was the only way for my masters to get me into a place of safety.

Similarly, the trials you go through, rather than destroy you, will be the means whereby the Creator moves you on into a place of safety in Him.

I'm still short-sighted, I can't change that.

You believers sometimes are short-sighted too but you can learn, with time, to accept what in the short-term will work out for your long-term security and peace, trusting in the Creator's dealings with you.

And I hope that, until the day I die, I never have to meet a *real* Shriekysniffpecker.

Your furry colleague,

George

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LEE'S HAMSTER - PART THREE

Greetings, humans, from your hamster-colleague, George.

Before I get on with this month's article, do you want to hear a hamster-joke? I made this one up by myself last week when I was grooming.

Q: What do you call hamster holidays?

A: Fur-loughs!

Get it?

Squeak! Squonk! Squink! (these last three words are 'hamster giggles' and are roughly equivalent to our 'Ha', 'Hee' and 'Ho' - Lee).

But, I digress - Let me return to my reason for asking Lee to include this article in your church's magazine.

When Lee first bought me, he was very concerned to make sure that my stay with them would be a happy one - both for me and them. So he bought and borrowed some books all about my kind and our cute little ways.

A couple of books proved incomplete and it wasn't until a fellow hamster owner called Dawn lent him her handbook that Lee finally thought he had everything he needed to know about caring for us - this volume even had a psychology section called 'Understanding Hamsters'.

Lee thought that his knowledge would be complete if he merely applied all that it said between the covers in his care for me. Lee read (so he told me) the instruction to provide as many climbing opportunities as possible so that his pet - that's me - would be 'grateful'.

So he constructed a climbing frame. It was a bit crudely put together, being two cake-cooling racks tied with string, one at an angle and the other upright. Excited, he put it into my compound.

At first, I couldn't understand what it was.

I climbed to the top once in order to gnaw the string that held it together but I was poked in the side by my owners so I gave that up. Then I used to sit underneath it and look out through the slats.

I finally realised that its construction reminded me of lop-sided cake-cooling trays tied together with string - what an unsafe contraption! I certainly wasn't going to risk life and paw trying to climb it!

Besides, I can't stand climbing - even though Lee's manual said that all of us hamsters like climbing, the truth is that we aren't all the same.

He also read the instruction that walking on a seesaw can help keep us trim and occupied and, having been unable to buy one in the pet shop, constructed one from pieces of old wood.

I didn't notice it for a while but, when I did, I cautiously walked up the incline for he'd put a sunflower seed at the top to entice me. When I got over halfway, my weight

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

shifted so that the seesaw flipped over and the sunflower seed went flying - I almost did, too.

I decided it was an advanced hamster trap and now try to avoid it. Even though it was supposed to be an object to keep me 'trim' and one that would suit my character, it was a non-starter.

The same was true of a number of other pieces of information.

Feeding - we love yoghurt (yeuck!), honey (I have no concept of honey and, encountering it, walked through it, consequently getting sawdust stuck to my paws and fur) and fresh fruit (can't stand the stuff).

Apparently, we need a fresh supply of drinking water - some do, some don't. I don't. Lee got very worried thinking that I might dehydrate - as I get my water from the fresh vegetables I eat (even so, a hamster should always be given fresh water even if they ignore it).

The book even outlined four methods of how to pick up a hamster. The truth of the matter is that I'll only allow myself to be picked up if I want to be - and I don't want to be!

And there was a section immediately after 'picking hamsters up' on what to do if a hamster bites. Too true, too true - try picking me up and I bite. Jaws!

My behaviour cannot be dictated to me by a written code, but it springs out of who I am. Understand me? I behave the way I do because of the way I am - if you change the hamster, you change the ways. But, as I can't change, I stay the way I was made.

Now you believers, the Creator's glory, have been 'created in Christ Jesus for doing things that God wants them to do' (this quote comes from Ephesians - Lee).

You shouldn't live the way you think you should but the way that He (re-)created you to be. This might sound like I'm squeaking rebellion, but I'm not. You are 'born-again', you have His nature in you, you have been changed to be like Christ (unlike us hamsters who remain the same - we can't change for good or bad) and it's out of this you should live.

You don't sin because the new creature doesn't sin - not because you suppress the old nature (that's been dealt with by Christ already). You live out of Christ, not from yourself. You live in the Spirit, not in the flesh.

So, my humble plea as a hamster to you is that you be who you are created to be in Christ. Not to be conformed to worldly standards but to be transformed by Christ. I hope this comes across as I intended it to - I have explained it to Lee more fully in case you should need him to expand it.

Yours, the whiskered-one,
George

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LEE'S HAMSTER - PART FOUR

Since I began dictating these articles to my owner many months ago, I have been inundated with requests from yourselves, translated to me by Lee, concerning what a hamster's 'Philosophy of life' is.

Or, to put it more simply, what are our chief concerns? What do we think about? Rather than questions concerning our eating habits and disposition.

'Philosophy' (or, 'Furlosophy' as the hamster branch of it is correctly called) is defined as a search for wisdom, a striving after knowledge, a struggling to understand the true meaning of life - and death.

In fact, in Furlosophy, our greatest search was to find out what happened to a hamster when it died.

Many of our very first Furlosophers, people like Hamistotle and Phurlo (from whom we get the word 'Furlosophy'), presupposed the existence of a hamster-heaven - a sort of happy-exercise-wheel-in-the-sky based upon their desire to believe that the Creator had provided a place for us after death very much like His sure promise to you believers.

Others even went further and divided heaven up into higher and lower levels so that hamsters that had made a more significant contribution to Hamsterdom would attain a high level but others, like myself, would at least scrape in by the skin of our whiskers.

But, alas, we hamsters had really lost our way.

It wasn't until the Great Refurmation many years ago that we began to realise that we'd created a series of beliefs out of pure fiction, instituting an entire religion that was as empty as an eaten sunflower seed. All our Furlosophy had been 'vanity of vanities' because our basis had been upon what we wanted to believe and not upon who the Creator is.

The Creator is who we're to believe, not our desire for immortality or, for that matter, our desire for anything else.

A hamster came from dust and to dust he will return - the famous William Shakester (I've already mentioned this playwright in a previous article) wrote in one of his well-known sonnets:

'Where doest hamsters go to when forsooth they die?
Dost we of feeble-frame go to Hamster-heaven in yonder lofty sky?
Or, dost deteriorate our soul, like iron turneth to rust?
Nay. The answer is but simple - we returneth into dust.'

And I think that his words just about sum it up.

But our experience as a species may well help you believers so that you're prevented from falling into the same trap as we once did. Your relationship with the Creator cannot be based either on a philosophy or a theology.

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I know this statement may sound peculiar but, nevertheless, it's true.

It says somewhere that the Creator is your wisdom (I think George's citation comes from I Corinthians - Lee) so, if you want to be wise, you have to know and experience the Creator - not seek wisdom for wisdom's sake.

If you struggle to obtain knowledge (based upon man's observations - that is, philosophy or theology) you will not know the Creator. It is only by getting to know the Creator, by pursuing Him and His ways, that you will find that you obtain knowledge that is real knowledge. It will be based upon His revelation of Himself to you and not on what you choose to believe.

Yet, I can't leave the story here.

What has happened since the Refuramation that I mentioned?

It was many generations ago that it took place and we have, at least, resigned ourselves to one hope. Just as we were resigned to futility before the Creator came to earth, now we have resigned ourselves to a great and true hope, one that will not be disappointed because it's based upon the Creator and not upon us.

Even one of your writers wrote concerning this glorious hope of ours.

He wrote that the created order waits with eager anticipation and desire for the revealing of the true sons of God (George is quoting Paul the Apostle in his letter to the Romans - Lee).

'The revealing of the true sons of God' - that's our hope.

Why? Because, as the same writer said, it's when this happens that the created order will be set free from its bondage to decay and deteriorate, and obtain the glorious liberty and freedom of the children of God.

These are the concepts and events that us hamsters struggle to understand. No hamster actually knows what this 'liberation' will mean for us, but we're eagerly longing and looking forward to that Day when the Creator will return to establish all the Victory that He won when He walked the earth.

So, as for belief, we have a sure hope based upon the Creator and have forsaken all attempts at forming a theology or philosophy of our own. Likewise, the hope of you believers is sure because it's based upon Him and, further, all that you experience of Him will lead you into real knowledge, real theology and a real philosophy of life.

Life is simple being a hamster since the Refuramation!

Let's all look forward to that final Day!

George

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LEE'S HAMSTER - PART FIVE

A quick message from Lee - Hamster poetry is rated by many experts as one of the most picturesque of all the known animal realm. It's not always easy to convey either the depth of meaning or the colourful metaphors expressed in each squeak or sigh but, in the following poem, translated directly from the hamster-tongue as recited to me by George, I've endeavoured to keep most of its meaning though inevitably lost a lot of its complex symmetry and stanza.

Sunflower seeds are fun to eat - hazelnuts a pleasure.
Monkey nut shells, bitten through, reveal a hidden treasure.
But more important is, to me, the way I find my fare,
Like crawling down a cardboard tube, legs flailing in the air.

Lettuce leaves are crisp and fresh, carrots hard and crunchy.
Coconut is white and moist and is so sweet and munchy.
But, hanging upside-down with legs grasping a metal frame
Means enjoyment's not in eating but in the playing of the game.

And, when I'm feeling lazy, I crawl out of my nest,
And get whatever comes to paw - it may not be the best.
But if I let my master hide me tasty little little treats,
The pleasure is in finding them, not just in what I eat.

Greetings, culture lovers, from your whiskered and furry friend, George.

For those of you who haven't read any of my previous articles, I should perhaps start out by telling you that I'm a hamster, owned and looked after by my two masters, Lee and Kath. I live in a high-rise Rotastak hamster unit in their front room beside their hifi and I first started dictating articles to Lee way back in April '91 when I felt I had a particularly relevant teaching for your church.

That's by way of a brief introduction.

I hope that you enjoyed the hamster poem above - it illustrates well what I want to squeak to you about this time.

We hamsters enjoy food just like all the animal realm. But, for us, the main pleasure lies not in eating but in seeking and finding.

For instance, take an ordinary Squeak-squonk (probably best translated as 'brazil nut' - Lee). It gets a bit boring to find it laying in a food bowl ready for me to pouch and return it to my nest. In the early weeks of my time with Lee and Kath this is what used to happen but I grew weary with the predictability of it so eventually left it where it was and refused to touch it.

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Lee soon got the message - it wasn't long before he'd stick the nut to the inside of its shell so I had to prize it out of its case.

And when that got monotonous, he would bury it at the bottom of three inches of sawdust at the end of a vertical toilet roll tube. Now that was fun - and unpredictable - for you never knew when the roll would overbalance and send you flying.

Monkey nuts are always fun to eat because they take a lot of work on the shells to get to the peanut inside. Hazelnuts are an impossibility with their shells on and intact, so Lee always makes sure there's a crack in them so I can split them open.

Sunflower seeds can be interesting, but I now have to do hamsterobics to get at them - their pleasure is increased many times over.

I could go on ad infinitum but I think I've made my point. The enjoyment of my food is dependent upon the seeking of it, whether it's seeking a nut behind its shell, or a sunflower seed at the top of a pole. Boredom sets in if it's too easy, but satisfaction if I accomplish the task to make some tasty morsel mine.

Now where is this leading me in helping you to understand the Creator's ways more deeply?

Lee tells me that when he first became a believer it seemed so easy. He used to read the Creator's book and truth was there at his fingertips, every word seemed 'anointed' - whatever that's supposed to mean.

Now he often has to persevere in studying to receive spiritual food. But what he learns now is far more valuable and satisfying than anything he received in his early days.

It's the end product that makes it worth the effort - the struggle and endeavour only increase the value of the Truth he receives. The finding of my food became boring after a little while so Lee had to make it interesting for me that I wouldn't find life tedious.

In the same way, continual bottle-feeding for a baby can only be for a little while - everyone must grow up and learn to take solid food - to stand, to walk, to live as an adult.

Therefore, my friend the believer, persevere in your reading of the Creator's book and continue with patience if He seems hard to find. At the end of the road you'll find a better treasure than you ever would have done if it'd been handed to you on a plate.

Your whiskered colleague in the Creator's Kingdom,
George

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LEE'S HAMSTER - PART SIX

Greetings to all of my friends out there who belong to the Kingdom of the Creator. Before I get onto the article for this edition, let me tell you a hamster joke (this one comes from the 'Compendium of Hamster Jokes for Bouncy Rodents' published, quite obviously, by Hamlyn).

Q: How do you know when a hamster's been in your fridge?

A: There are paw prints in the butter!

Let me ask you a serious question, one that I've been contemplating during my rest hours through the day.

Do you believe in time/space warps?

We hamsters read a lot of literature (when humans aren't watching - and when they are watching we pretend to be burrowing but really we're turning over the pages of a book we've hidden underneath the sawdust), a great proportion of it being Science Fiction.

You know the sort of thing? Mad professors inventing sinister machines that threaten to take over the entire realm of Hamsterdom or inter-Rotastak travel (that is, supersonic travel in space between one hamster nest and another) or, as in the case I asked you about, time/space warps.

Do you need me to explain to you what time/space warps are?

Okay. Very simply, it's when you're suddenly removed from one place in time and space to a totally different place in an instant of time - indeed, in no time at all.

In sci-fi books it's usually by some form of machine or other but it could be by a number of methods, known or unknown.

You see, I know the lay-out of my apartment block like the back of my paw. When I go out of my nest there are two food bowls to my left and a vitamin block hanging up from the metal rungs. On my right there's a tube down to a lower level and also a water dispenser - and, directly in front of me, is another tube up to a higher level.

This is how it always is.

But last week, there I was in my nest, minding my own business and quite soundly asleep, when there was what appeared to be an earth tremor and I was transported into another dimension!

When my nest stopped moving, I tentatively got out and discovered a totally different landscape - a sort of square, steep-sided box with material under me. It had a few bits of food in it but, apart from that, it was desolate.

After looking round for a little while, I crawled back into my nest when immediately there was another earthquake and I was transported back into my own dimension where everything was just as I'd left it.

Weird!

Very, very peculiar!

The Legacy of George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

(I have translated George's squeaks faithfully up to here but I feel that I must add a quick word of explanation. This 'time/space warp' that George is getting so excited about is nothing of the sort. All it is is a practicality when I move his nest to a different location so that I can give his apartment a thorough cleaning once every week. What George thinks is a time/space warp is really me trying not to get him too distressed - Lee.)

Although the possibility of this transportation in space excited me, I can't say that I was too thrilled with my surroundings in that desolate steep-sided box where there were only a few pieces of food.

Was I relieved to discover myself back in the land of security where the sunflower seeds flow freely from an unlimited food-trough and where the familiar smells and noises give me a peace that every normal hamster craves for? You betcha!

Security.

Yes, security - that's what my cage gives me. If it's taken away from me, I panic. See me rush about frantically searching for familiar surroundings when they're taken from me, or watch my displacement activities - grooming erratically until I feel secure again.

Yet, like I've said before, that's the way us hamsters were made - we can't change. We find security in our surroundings.

I'm sure you see the significance here for you believers. Where is your security? If you're firmly rooted and trusting in the Creator, then you simply can't be moved but, if your heart is somewhere else, what will happen when that 'security blanket' is removed?

Crisis, that's what!

The Creator will only let you believers have spiritual 'crutches' for a time (unlike us hamsters who're dependent upon them) then He'll begin to remove them, one by one, until your trust and security is totally in Him and Him alone.

And which is better - to rely on material assets or on God the Creator, the Provider, the Deliverer?

Finally, I know that some of you readers don't believe me when I say that I experienced a time-warp (Lee also is cynical). Well, I've just obtained a film for my Hamon Camera. Next time it happens, I'll get documented proof and then you'll have to believe me!

Watch this space,
George

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Appendix Two

APPENDIX TWO - AN INTERVIEW WITH George the Hamster

In early 1993, just after George had completed the epic account of his journey to Paris in our hand luggage (reproduced in the first book under the title 'An English Hamster in Paris') but before his secret trip to Scotland ('A Tail of Two Hamsters'), I thought that it might be advantageous for me to record an interview with him in an attempt to have it printed in a magazine or newspaper.

Although every publication I contacted rejected the manuscript (one even went as far as to ring up the local hospital's psychiatric wing and recommend that someone be sent round - but George wasn't in need of any help, as I said to the doctors who arrived on my doorstep), I kept the cassette at the back of a drawer until just recently and, realising that it shows George in a more 'natural' and, dare I say it, *human* light than do his literary works, I decided to transcribe it once more and include it here as an appendix.

I was going to post an mp3 file of the entire interview onto the web but realised that not many humans would be able to hear ultrasound and comprehend the conversation we had (although I understand that the interview is fairly big amongst bats) - therefore, although far from perfect, this transcription will have to suffice.

[There's the sound of rustling and the graze of fur against plastic as George descends from his nest and onto the wood shavings where the interview was scheduled to take place. Grooming can be heard as he gets his coat into some sort of acceptable shape before waving his paw and allowing me to proceed.]

You sleep quite a bit, don't you, George?

I meditate quite a bit, yes. You often think I'm asleep but I'm very often chewing things over in my mind, trying to work out how to express the hamscripts I've been working on in a way that you humans will understand.

Meditation? What's the difference between that and sleep?

The latter has more zeds in it.

Meditation is to take a morsel of truth or a subject that you have some information on and to think about the implications of it, chew it over, stretch out the possibilities - but to keep consciousness throughout. It's what every writer needs to do to enhance and improve his natural ability.

And that's what you've just been doing in your nest?

Er, no. That was sleep.

Let me move on to some of the questions that my friends have been asking me - and some of the things that've been on my mind, too. Firstly, then, why are most of your hamster heroes male?

That's not so - and you know it!

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We only have one word for 'he', 'she' and 'it' in hamspeak so the gender is determined entirely by the way *you* choose to translate it - which I note with some suspicion is *normally* masculine. Even when I typed our word in to the word processor that I used to record the Paris expedition, it seemed to have a mind of its own and converted it to 'he' almost universally.

Thankfully, it recognised that Madeleine Duphare was female.

The sex of the rodent isn't too much of a problem in Hamsterdom when it comes to stories - but, if it freaks a reader out to read about so many heroes, they can always imagine them to be heroines (although I dare you to be able to make them *all* feminine).

You're saying that the context should determine the gender?

Exactly. Some of the names of those hamsters are neutral - others I changed to represent something in a human language that readers who like to scratch below the surface can discover.

The example I normally give is of 'Arlev' from 'Hamster in the Lions' Den' - we have various names for that hamster in the hamscripts that have come down to us but 'Arlev' means 'Lion heart' and I tried to show readers who had the real lion heart in that place - the hamster's name was reflected in Daniel, the man who had his heart as that of a lion.

Do all the names mean something?

No, not at all. 'Salvina' has no meaning. She's in 'The Master Stroke'.

'Hezro' (The Dark-skinned Stranger) and 'Jozah' (The Final Battle) do, I know. It's just I can't for the life of me remember what they represent right now...

Here's another question I was asked just yesterday. Did the character of Furlock Holmes actually exist?

As surely as I'm standing here squeaking to you now - yes. I didn't know him myself but there are numerous hamsters who knew someone who knew someone else who...well, he just did. There are dental records, birth certificates, that sort of thing.

All my characters are true-to-life. I don't make things up, you know? I will have researched really carefully into hamster history before I ever contemplate putting paw to typewriter - even the stories that were told to me in Paris I checked out.

That brings me on to 'The Lone Hamster'. Boy, oh boy, you certainly stirred up the imagination with this character. Every kid I've ever met wants to hear another story about him. Are there any more forthcoming?

Not in the near future, no. I'm aware of a few stories that are reputed to be about him but I just haven't had the time to research them. I'm actually working on one right now but I need some clarification on some of the text before I can go any further with it [I assume that this must be 'For a Few Peanuts More' that appeared as an Appendix in the first book].

*I could probably compile an entire book with the questions I have here. Let's see...
...what's his real name?*

I'll leave you to wait for the release of the story I'm working on - it'll be in there.

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What colour was he?

Who? The Lone Hamster?

Yes.

Not sure. There are various colours in our records. Most of them say he was three-tone as I am. That's most likely.

What does the mask look like?

People's imaginations are working overtime, I must say. It's simply a black eye mask like people wear to fancy dress parties (actually, it was where humans came up with the idea) with two black ribbons that go behind the head, tied in a knot at the back.

Some people think it was elasticated but it wasn't.

Every time the rats come to a place, does the Lone Hamster always come to save the day?

Well, the Lone Hamster's not omnipresent but, when he hears about trouble nearby, you can be sure he'll do everything in his power to be there. Of course, if the townsfolk believed the truth about themselves as he does, there wouldn't be any need for him.

He's not something like 'Superham' as it's been claimed - a lot of people think that.

He's just an ordinary hamster like you and me - no, like me - who's learnt something special about the way he was meant to be.

And, one final question about him - is he still alive?

Not the original Lone Hamster, no. But there are more and more hamsters who've learnt by his life who can duplicate what he did - and even more than he did.

Some humans are like the Lone Hamster, too - that was the point of recounting 'High Moon'.

You got very 'uptight' - if that's the right word - about giving an explanation of your stories from about the time that Volume Three was being finished. Why was that exactly?

It just seemed to me that people were relying on me to think for them rather than to think through the implications of information that was being presented to them. They do that with the Bible, too - do you remember A and B [I've replaced their names with letters so as not to identify them]?

They seem to believe whatever they're told without checking it out, thinking it through and seeing whether it agrees with the Foundation. Can't have people growing up like that - no way.

This trait will continue, then, in your next work?

If there is a next work. Yes.

Let me take you right back to the beginning, George. When did you first start compiling your 'Histories'?

There wasn't a time I can remember when I wasn't working on them. Of course, in the early weeks when we were in the pet shop, we'd just recount them round the food

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bowl, but I had a near photographic memory and all I needed was to make sure it was developed at a later date.

When I first managed to make contact with you, I already had many of the stories in my head - I just needed to do the work, check them out and then get them across to you so you could accurately record them.

I t always puzzles me - just why did you start wanting to record them in a human world?

Just like other rodents, I was annoyed that history was being explained with a human bias. Haven't we been through all this before?

For the listeners and readers, George.

Oh, okay.

Well, hamsters - being so small - often went unnoticed in the momentous affairs of world history. Just because the humans didn't think or know we were there didn't mean we weren't. So I took it upon myself to correct and enhance history wherever and whenever I could.

And upset a load of people doing it?

If they can't deal with the Truth, what's that to me, huh?

Actually, not very many people got upset - it was only the people who thought that I was wasting my time, people who didn't understand them (even *with* the explanations I offered, too) or people, I guess, who were just plain jealous.

I think some of them looked at me and thought 'Who's this rodent think he is that he can teach *me*, a human?!'

But wisdom is known by her children.

There's another question here about the Histories. How come there's so few of them? A friend of mine said that there were so many important historical events it was surprising that Hamster History recorded so few.

Oh, there're a lot more insights that rodents have into World History. I just haven't got round to researching and writing them up.

Don't you find history strange, though?

Why do you say that?

Well, it's written from the perspective of the rich and famous, of the victorious and over-powering - I mean, if you're one of the ones who pay the scribes, they'll record the slant on history that you're paying them to represent.

We learn from the 'Controllers of History' that King Richard was evil, that their personal enemies were wicked, that they themselves were blameless and righteous. The people accused never seem to have been given the right to put forward their own version of events.

So, you're saying that human history could be distorted?

Exactly.

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That's why Hamster History is all the more vital - cos rodents don't have a secret agenda. We simply tell it like it was. That's gonna be a whole lot more accurate, wouldn't you think?

I mean, what about the great Admiral Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen? Human history really honours him with glory. But, as you know from the rodent records, he did have a little bit of help that went unrecorded.

It's those sorts of issues that the Histories seek to address.

Let's move on to your most recent work. There are a lot of things that puzzle me when I read your Paris diaries. Like, how did you manage to find a place in our hand luggage where we couldn't find you? Or how could you get into and out of our luggage seemingly at will without us - or anyone else (apart from one or two) - seeing you?

It proves my thesis about history, doesn't it? If you didn't know I was there, why should humans have witnessed our presence at other times in the past? Even when they momentarily saw us, they would've blinked and thought nothing more of it.

Let's face it, there's *plenty* of space in most human luggage and the security scans aren't looking for organic material so they don't detect us.

Besides, if you didn't know I was there, what else was there that you didn't know about? You know, ten years from now, there might be an entire library of stories by wasps, grasshoppers or fleas - all with their own unique viewpoint.

I noticed also that some of the hamsters you meet claim to have lived for almost ten years. Is that possible? The average life span is 2 or 3, I thought.

If you lived in a society where everyone died by the time they were forty, would you believe that anyone could be a hundred and ten?

Probably not.

Well, it goes without saying, then. Or - answer me this - do any of the manuals on hamsters say that we can write stories or that we have our own historical tradition?

Er, no.

So does that mean that the stories I've written can't have been from my paw?

Point taken. But what about the historical inconsistencies in a few of your stories?

You must understand that I'm always faithful to the hamscripts that are before me - if they say something that's historically implausible, I don't change it to make it fit.

Some stories were adapted over time to sit more easily into the day in which they were being told. So, yes, they don't sound totally accurate - but that's a storytelling technique and I have to be faithful to what's in front of me actually *on* the hamscript.

I think you'll agree that 'historical inconsistencies' are very rare.

Yes, I would.

Good.

This question from some of the kids I know. Have you found any difficulty in communicating with other species?

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All rodents speak the same basic language - there're a few different dialects but nothing too problematical.

Pigeon I've always found difficult, though - there's a lot of meaning that's conveyed in the odd peck and preen of the feathers and the ruffling of plumage. That's difficult to duplicate with fur.

Duck's a foul language to learn, though - not easy, not easy.

I also had to speak with a lion to get their side of the story for 'Hamster in the Lions' Den'. That wasn't particularly hard linguistically - but it was fairly dangerous as I got licked once or twice and had to be peeled off its tongue. The surface is like Velcro, you know?

No. The bottom line is that all the different species I've had to speak to have been eager to convey what they knew in a way that I'd understand it.

I can see that the tape's coming to an end so I've got a list of 'quick fire' questions here that don't need much more than a one-line answer...

What's your favourite fruit?

Watermelon, definitely. If melon's a fruit - not sure about that.

Favourite vegetable?

Let's see. Er, that would be broccoli.

Favourite meat?

Warm chicken - or beef. No, no - fish. Lamb's good, too.

Which story that you've written is your favourite?

The Master Stroke - has to be. I know that got me into a lot of trouble but I always look back on that one with affection.

Your least favourite?

That would be - let me see - ah yes...The Fatal Fried Rice of Fat Foo Yung's Fish Noodles.

I don't remember that one.

No, I destroyed it.

Your favourite piece of music?

Sheesh! Now you're asking! Certainly nothing that *you* listen to - er, well, er - no, sorry, can't think of one right now.

Favourite plant (who on earth asked me that?)?

White Rock.

Is that a plant?

No, that's a piece of music. I just thought of one.

Favourite plant? Anything that's edible.

Dandelion's not bad. I love the smell of Hemp Agrimony, too.

And, finally, what are you working on at this present time?

You expect me to tell the prison guards where I'm digging the tunnel?

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[This appears to have been a veiled reference to his escape and journey with us to Scotland that same year, recorded in the work 'An English Hamster in Scotland', also known as 'A Tail of Two Hamsters'.]

Thanks, George.

No problem - but where's this piece of melon you enticed me along to do this interview for? A few sunflower seeds wouldn't go...

[click]