

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 11

Pets in School

Pets in school are another source of comedy as well as anxiety. The following tale has both elements.

'Right, off you go now.' Becky Smith signed the class register and watched with a smile on her face as thirty chairs were pushed back with maximum scraping, desk lids were banged shut like rifle shots and 3A bustled out of the room on the way to morning assembly at Much Knowing Primary School. She liked this moment of repose, short as it was, to compose herself, brush back her golden hair and have a last brief thought about the day ahead, before joining her year 6 charges in the school hall. She knew that at the back of the hall she could listen with joy in her heart to the particular rendering of favourite old hymns, sung sweetly by some; bawled with raucous enthusiasm by others; growled out like distant rolling thunder by the rest. It was how it was and how it had always been, and hopefully will always be, she thought.

She came out of her reverie. The noise in the corridor had died down. She could see Old Rob, the caretaker, sauntering past her door, brush in hand. Time to go. She had better hurry. She shut the attendance register, stood, straightened her dress.... and then she saw it. It was just a slight ripple of movement at first, then a sound of scurrying past chairs, and then half view under a desk. A rat! Or was it just a mouse? She was unable to decide. But whatever it was it paralysed her. Whether it was musophobia or murophobia was not relevant for her at that moment. She could not move. Her fear and revulsion for rodents was not rational. She knew that. But it was real enough. It consumed all sense, and roused half-hidden sensibilities. She leapt on the nearest chair and began to shake. She must have screamed because the door burst open and Old Rob dashed in, brandishing his yard brush like a medieval broad sword.

If she had been in a state of cool reflection she might have wondered how Old Rob had got there so quickly. He appeared as though out of a magician's top hat. She did not know that sixty year Old Rob had the kind of crush on Becky that affects some middle-aged romantics. There was nothing he would not do for the gorgeous Miss Smith. He wished he was half his age, but as he was not he could only do the chivalrous thing and make sure that Becky, Miss Becky, his Becky, received his special attention. So, quietly and unobtrusively watching her back, fending off any recalcitrant pupils and leery male colleagues had kept him going since Becky had arrived in the school a year ago. He was 'on call' now. Becky had let out a piercing shriek. Someone, something was frightening her. That was sufficient. Like Sir Lancelot Old Rob '*burn'd like one burning flame together*' as he sought to defend his Lady of Shalott.

'What is it, miss? What's goin' on?' he cried as he twirled round in front of her chair, the brush held firmly in front of him.

'It's a rat, Rob! Over there. Under the desks! Quick! It's making me tremble.'

'Hang on, Miss,' he cried in time-honoured chivalry. It was knight against fowl commoner, right against wrong, Rob against the rat.

Thrusting desks and chairs aside, he caught sight of the rodent cowering in under a desk.

'There it is! Got yer,'" he yelled as he brought his weapon down with a crash. But he had paused a millisecond too long. Rat had ratted, feinted left and scuttled right.

'Missed it! Dammit.' He pushed more chairs aside.

'It's in the corner, miss. I've got it in my sights.'

Becky had not got it in her sights. Her eyes were tightly shut. In the distance she could make out the strains of '*All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small...*'

'Just get rid of it, Rob!' she cried with renewed vigour.

And Old Rob did. The bristles on his brush picked up the creature so that Rob could swing it into the air. He aimed to throw it out of the classroom window, but the body slipped off the brush and fell right below Becky's chair.

'Yeeow..... Move it, Rob. Throw it out!' Becky could feel her feet stamping up and down on the chair. It was stupid, but she could do nothing about it. Uncontrollable shudders took over.

Rob did not hesitate. He scooped it up with one sweep of his arms, marched across the room, flung open a window and deposited the rodent in the shrubbery below. He turned and beamed at Megan.

'It's all right now, miss. All over.'

Becky took a large intake of breath, and held out her hands to be helped off the chair.

Rob thought it had all been worth it. Heaven was his.

'Off you go now, miss.

'Thanks, Rob. I am so grateful. I wish I could just accept rats and mice and things for what they are, but I'm not made that way. That's how it is.'

'I understand, miss. I'll see to everything, don't you worry.'

Becky made for the door.

'And it'll be our little secret, miss. Just ours,' was Old Rob's parting shot.

By the time she had crept into the Hall and slipped into a seat near the back, the deputy head was just finishing her reading of the plague of frogs in Exodus Chapter 8.

'Thank the Lord I missed all that,' thought Becky. The day's started badly enough as it is!

It was time for the Head's reading of daily information and notices. He looked rather troubled.

'Now, school,' said Mr Cheshire in a solemn voice, 'I just have one piece of rather distressing news this morning.' He paused, and appeared to wipe a tear or some grit from his eye. 'I brought in my family's pet gerbil to show the first year infants. We have only had her for a week so she is rather precious to us. Well, I am sorry to have to tell you that little Gemma has somehow escaped from her box and is roaming around the school.'

There were audible sighs and groans from the youngest classes at this point.

Mr Cheshire hurried on. 'She is a greyish colour, with a tail like a mouse, and is rather timid. Hides under chairs a lot. Could you all keep your eyes open and when you spot her let me know immediately. Thank you. Now school, dismiss.' He left the stage brandishing a large white handkerchief, closely followed by his deputy, Miss Terry

And as the classes filed out in orderly fashion Becky sat paralysed, unable to move a muscle. The world seem to have stopped and left her in a cocoon of terror.

She had just witnessed... no, aided and abetted, the murder of the Head's own pet gerbil! The Head's !! It must be....no, it can't be. Surely she would have recognised a non-mouse or a non-rat?... No, she would not. She had no idea what a gerbil looked like, she confessed to herself. She had always kept as far away as possible from little creatures.

What on earth was she to do?

No decision on this was possible at that moment because her class had to be rescued from sitting alone and puzzled in front of her, waiting to be escorted en masse back to the classroom. And nothing could be done for the first hour and a half up to morning break either. She was taking her class for English and though more grammar and punctuation was on the syllabus she just did not have the heart nor inclination, so 'silent reading' was ordered.... and silent it had to be. She was in no mood for any banter from Jacob, nor irritatingly clever questions from Renu. She wanted to be, and therefore was, alone with her thoughts.

When the children had been dismissed for morning break she knew she had to brave the interview with the Head. It could not be put off, even though she could think of fifty different reasons for delay.

Eventually she took a deep breath and marched purposefully down the corridor, staring straight in front, oblivious to the various greetings from children in her class. She passed them by leaving them not a little bewildered. Miss Smith was never like that. What could be wrong? Her own anxiety became matched with theirs. They had no idea why they were worried for her – but they were.

She decided against knocking and then waiting outside Mr Cheshire's door. She knocked and walked right in.

'Oh dear, what's the matter, Miss Smith?' said the Head looking up from his reading. 'What on earth is the hurry for?'

Becky took a deep breath. 'Well, Mr Cheshire, you know that sad news of yours at Assembly?' Mr Cheshire nodded his head. 'Yes, I still haven't...'

'Well, it's like this,' cut in Becky, 'I have a....'

Before she could continue the door burst open and there stood Old Rob framed in the doorway, for all the world like a wild west sheriff entering a saloon bar. His hands were

stuffed into his pockets as though he was about to draw two revolvers. He was panting and finding it difficult to speak.

'There... er... there....' Another deep breath. 'There you are.' He was looking at Becky but realised he should be addressing the Head. 'Oh... you, sir.... You...'

'Well, of course I'm here,' said the Head, 'it's my room!.... what on earth is the matter, man?'

'I've done it, sir!'

'Done what?'

'I mean I've *found* it! I have found your gerbil!' And with that he withdrew his clenched hand from his right pocket and held it out. Poking out of his clasped fingers was a little nose sniffing this way and that.

'Gemma!' cried the Head in delight, leaping up from his seat.

'Crikey!' muttered Becky in disbelief.

'Well done, Rob! That's brilliant!' 'Where did you find her?'

'It's a long story, sir. I will tell you one day, but now I think you had better take her and see she is all right, and gets a square meal, I expect.'

'Yes, yes, you are right, of course. Plenty of time to fill in the details.' Mr Cheshire gently accepted into his hands the little Gemma, who seemed, and probably was, oblivious of all the fuss about her welfare. She seemed sprightly enough.

Becky had sat transfixed once more, not quite believing the unfolding drama. Her mouth was open; she was lost for words. This is what deliverance feels like, she thought.

Mr Cheshire remembered she was there. 'Oh, sorry Miss Smith, please excuse us. You will appreciate all the euphoria I am sure. Now.... You were saying...'

'It was nothing important, sir. It will wait. I can see you have some important and pressing tasks to perform.'

'Thank you so much, Becky. That is very understanding of you. Come back at anytime this afternoon and we will continue our little chat.'

There had been no chat, but Becky was not going to quibble. All need for a chat had disappeared anyway. As she fled through the study door Old Rob called after her.

'I'll call on you in your classroom shortly, Miss Smith. We have some things to discuss.'

But Becky had gone.

Back in her cosy and beloved classroom she sat in her teacher's chair and put her head in her hands. She was trembling. The pace of events was too much for her. What had been going on?

That is how Rob found her a few minutes later.

'Now, miss, no need for fretting. All's well.'

'Oh, Rob, You are a real treasure! I don't know how to thank you,' said Becky lifting her head from her hands.

'Well, you can start by reimbursing me a tenner for young Gemma there,' replied Rob with the hint of a smile.

'What do you mean, 'give you a tenner'...what for?' Becky looked blankly at him.

'Well, to tell you the truth, that's what it has cost me to sort out this business.' Becky made to interrupt him. 'No, just let me explain. I couldn't bear you despairing like that at the end of Assembly. I tried to find Gemma's body in the shrubs but it had gone. Could have been my cat, I supposed. Never shirks meal. But never mind. Something had to be done. So, without thinking very much I got into my car and drove into the city. This town was no good because there is no pet shop, but I knew there was one in Fenborough because I bought our cat there.'

Becky did manage to intervene at this point. 'Don't tell me you bought another gerbil!'

'Yes, I certainly did! There was only one left. The shopkeeper said he had no idea what gender it was. So, Miss Becky, our little Gemma might now be little Gerald!'

'Oh, goodness me!'

'I wouldn't worry if I were you. Old Cheshire was happy enough. I can't see him or his wife and daughter worrying about any gerbil progeny just yet! And look on the bright side. I've saved our bacon, haven't I?'

'Oh, Rob, you certainly have. You will get the tenner, I promise you. But will you make do now with a kiss from me?'

Would he?!!! Becky's brief but heartfelt peck on the cheek made old Rob's day... even week....even ever!

He left the room with a red face and a glow. Becky sat still, staring out of the window, gathering herself for what she hoped would be just an ordinary afternoon, her and her thirty kids.

Just before the bell went for afternoon school Rob was there again at the classroom door. He knocked and entered, hands thrust once more into his trouser pockets, a sheepish look on his face.

'I don't know how to tell you this, Miss,' he began.

'If it's the ten pounds, Rob I...'

'No ,no. It's this.'

He took his right hand from his pocket and opened it. There in the palm of his hand was.... a gerbil. Becky stared at it and then at Rob.

Rob was stroking the little creature's head gently. 'I found it on the front door mat of my office. I dunno how it got there really. I can only think my cat must have brought it back. I saw the little thing was moving her legs so I gave her a drink of water and hey presto she started moving around. Not exactly running, but definitely 'with it'.

He looked up at Becky and grinned. 'First there was one, then none, then one again, and now two! I don't know whether to laugh or cry!'

'I suppose it has to be Gemma?' said Becky lifting her eyebrows.

'Well, it's difficult to believe there is a third gerbil hanging around the school waiting to be found, so I reckon we can be absolutely sure..... And I'm absolutely sure what I am going to do! But don't ask me, miss. It's perhaps better you do not know the full details...'

'You are not going to kill it, Rob, are you?' Becky showed genuine alarm.

'No, I'm not, miss. Just let me give you a hint. Mr Cheshire is teaching this afternoon and he has asked me to look after Gemma. Enough said, eh? Gemma will be back....well fed and watered!'

'OK, Rob, enough said.... But what about the 'other Gemma'?''

'No problem there. The Pet Shop allow you to return a pet if you decide against it... within twenty four hours. A sort of 'money-back guarantee', you see. Leave it to me. Just get on with your teaching.... That'll be good for them.... and you.'

He smiled and turned to leave.

'Oh, one other thing. Have you noted that the last time Gemma was in this room you were screaming for me to catch her and bash with her... and you were trembling all over? You have not batted an eyelid this time. No shaking at all....I think you might even be able to stroke her.'

And so saying, Rob held out his little bundle of fur. Becky did not hesitate. Rob was right. She felt none of the old anxiety about rodents, no tingling when she thought about running fingers through fur. She took Gemma and stroked her. No reaction, no trembling, not even the slightest shake.

'My, my, we've seen changes today,' he said. 'Come on little Gemma,...just one more change.'
