

Bird Feed Balls

You should have seen them when Moley left the shop. And heard them. The trouble was, young Prof P. can read a little. Slowly, a little. But they say a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. So when the boy came in and asked for Moley, and Moley was lifted out from our cage and placed in a box clearly labelled

Bird Feed Balls
- Pure Natural Ingredients -
Recommended by the Danish Ornithological Society

which was all right really, because Miss Tocher always used empty delivery boxes for humans to take their pets away, well, young Prof P. took it into his silly head to spell out the first three words on the side of the box, and Mrs Christmas, the elder hamster, heard those words and set up a shrieking "Oh poor dear boy! Poor Moley!" and all the others crowded around her and listened while Prof P. spelled the three words out loud again.

Well, there was no stopping them then. All were quite convinced that young Moley was being taken off to become lunch for a bird - preferably one of those huge ones with hooked bill, all the more terrible to think about - instead of a happy home where he would be looked after and fed and allowed to run up and down the staircase. I tried, I really did: I said that Miss Tocher always sent out hamsters and mice, even gerbils, in boxes like that. Remember, I said, remember that the last clutch of youngsters came in to the shop disguised as

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and they were none the worse for the experience - were you, Prof P.? And then I said that only last week a rabbit went out in a box of

Meaty Chunx

and no one suggested then that the poor daft creature was going to end up in Fido's bowl.

Well, that was a mistake, of course. 'Meaty Chunx!' screamed Mrs Christmas, trembling fit to burst. All the other hamsters crowded around, fanning her, biting her tail, trying to calm her down, but only succeeding in over-exciting themselves. It was hopeless - I tried to talk to them again, but they were convinced that Miss Tocher was intent only on one cruel purpose: to make mincemeat out of all of them, to feed them one by one to the larger mammals.

There was no point in suggesting that Miss Tocher would find a box with no writing on the side if she really wanted to do something like that, so as not to frighten anyone.

"We're all doomed!" shouted Donald, nibbling the bars in terror, "Doomed! We're lost! Lost!" And then he burst into tears.

"Oh MoleyMoleyMoleyMoleyMoleyMoleyMoleyMoley...." babbled Moley's friends, convinced beyond reason that he was gone for ever, to end up as some feathered Dane's breakfast.

Mrs Christmas had by then passed out in a swoon, pouches full of cotton-wool.

An Emergency Meeting of the Committee was called. The Committee was a bunch of the more boisterous animals, who thought they should organise everyone else. They huddled together in the food bowl over in the corner there and chattered and squeaked. After about five minutes, they broke up and Chair-Hamster Lord Kitchener made an announcement.

"Quiet, everyone, quiet please. Donald! Quiet there, man! Hush now, Mrs X. Now, the Committee has held an Extraordinary Emergency Meeting and has decided that our best plan is to organise a mass break-out. Tonight at seven o'clock. Now, everyone get some rest and fill up your pouches - it could be a long night!"

There were murmurs of satisfaction - everyone appeared to think that it was a good plan. I thought it was nuts, myself; but I wasn't going to say so.

For the rest of the day, everyone lay low, hiding under cotton-wool, newspaper and sawdust - in case they were chosen by the next child to enter the shop, to be carried off in a box labelled

Snak-u-Like

(HAMSTER FLAVOUR)

or some such.

At six o'clock, Miss Tocher shut up shop and the lights went out. One by one, all my fellow-hamsters woke up, stretched, raced in the wheel or sharpened their teeth on the sticks of wood which Miss Tocher kindly leaves lying around; then they set to work..

I tell you, if you have never seen a Hamster Escape Committee at work, you haven't lived! There were little volcanoes of activity everywhere. One group took it in turns to gnaw away at the bars of the cage. I could have told them - generations of hamsters had gnawed away desperately at the same spot and had never got anywhere. But, I didn't; and neither did they. Another group was acting a bit more sensibly - turning and turning at the water bottle which was jammed in between the bars, easing it slowly sideways. At about 8:15, the bottle fell out, and a gap was opened up which all save the fattest hamsters could squeeze through. By 10:25, the hole was large enough even for Mrs Christmas. Probably most of the rabbits in the next cage too, if the truth be told.

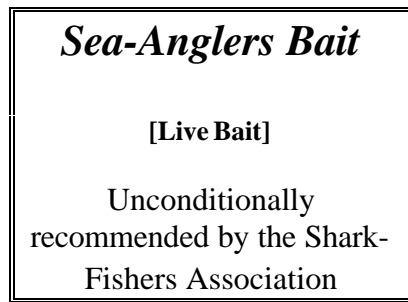
By 10:40, all the hamsters were out, scurrying across the floor, much to the interest of the budgies and the guinea-pigs. Hannibal, the Long-Haired Golden Syrian, led them over the floor in the general direction of the door.

Prof P. was up there alongside him. Hannibal asked Prof P. to read the label on a large empty box they came up against. Fatal mistake that.

"I think it says '*Seaside Bathing*'", announced Prof P. after five minutes, struggling with his letters. Exhausted, he was.

"Great!" they all shouted, "That'll do us - the seaside, on board a ship, home to Syria!" They clambered up on the shelves and dropped into the box. No turning back - the sides of the box were too steep. By 10:44 pm, all the escapees were safely inside.

Good thing I stayed behind, really. I think I'll leave them there until about two o'clock. Then I'd better go and help them out of the box labelled



before Miss Tocher finds them. Or worse...