

FIRST PLACE THEY BOLT By David Elliott

'Cat up a tree.'

Surely, the rest of the crew were taking the mick? Not a real shout for ruffy-tuffty firefighters, but the mad dash to the Fire Engine, proved me wrong.

'Go on then up you go.'

Needing no more an invitation, I raced up the ladder as the guv had ordered.

'Easy Son, steady the buffs.'

Floating in the lush crown of the tree, I reached out to the mewling ball of black fur, that had allegedly been stuck up here for three days. 'Here puss, puss, puss.' The scrawny little minx looked me straight back eyeball to eyeball. 'Sod this for a game of soldiers,' she meowed and with a hop, skip and a jump was back safe on terra-firma, much to the delight of her elderly owner.

The Guv took me aside after the ladder was rehoused. My turn to look him straight in the eyes, was he taking the piss?

'Seriously, it's the first place they bolt.'

Half hearted, I stooped and searched under the appliance. Gobsmacked, right between the back wheels, the scrawny minx - a diamond drip from the water tank anointing her fur – stared back like the princess, her owner treated her as.

I coaxed, cajoled, pleaded, sent out for food, before trying my ultimate come hither look, reserved for only the most intimate occasions. Still the obstreperous cow wouldn't budge.

'Come on Son, whats the score?'

'In for the night, we could try the hose?'

The gasp of the owner earnt me a kick in the ribs, as she belatedly offered to get some prawns; 'her princess' favourite'.

Prawns, can I come for tea?

I wriggled and squirmed under as far as I could get and held out the glove of peace, but was jilted for the second time as Princess ran inside; slighted for a prawn.

I reckon that animals, especially female ones must sense my aura, for some reason I can't fathom, they get an aversion and then run a mile. There was the bird of prey trapped by her jesses that miraculously freed herself when I got within two feet and flew home; all because it was tea time. The obstinate cow in the canal, who swam over half-a-mile as we chased it down the towpath, before hauling herself out on the opposite bank, then mooing off over Croxley Moor to lunch; whilst ours was spoiling back at the fire station.

Moving from the light to the dark side, we received one very unusual early-morning call. It had us racing to 'drowning horses' in the depths of Bushey.

After a quick word with the caller, we raced, laden with a kitchen sink worth of equipment (every possibility accounted for) through unfamiliar woods. At the end of the path, we came out to a steeply sloping field where a water main had blown – leaving a bottomless bomb crater, cascading water down to a newly formed swamp at the bottom of the field.

Several distressed horses whinnied at the edge, trampling down the water-boards barriers. We shoed them away several times to reveal a pit of doom. Three more horses were struggling desperately in the water trying to stay afloat, a further four hoofs prayed to the heavens.

I deployed, set up an anchor point with me and one of my crew supporting another firefighter rigged with life jacket and rescue throw. Slipping and sliding in our own personal Somme, we managed to fend off the other horses which kept returning to the pitiful calls of their family and lasso and rescue two of the equine casualties.

The third horse refused to be rescued. Wouldn't leave its dead companion alone. Sweet but it would be its death. Risking everything in a do or die effort all three of us, with War Horse determination managed to get the line around its head and haul with all our might.

'One, two three- haul-away.'

One hoof bit into the turf, then two. The sodden bank crumbled.

We redoubled our endeavours.

The rebirthed horse popped out and collapsed. Can you do CPR on a horse? I've seen it done on dogs and cats, the last time earning one of my crew a trip to A&E for stitches and a Tetanus after the ungrateful mutt bit his lip.

I thanked the lord when the horse struggled bambiesque onto its knees and shot down the field towards its comrades like a bobsled, as our relief crew charged over the hill 'just in time' to help.

I was told that later a 4X4 turned up later and fished the dead horse out and trawled across the grass to an awaiting trailer. Never did find out who owned them.

One of the very next calls we got, was another cat up a tree shout.

I let our new recruit carry out the rescue, then tasked him with checking under the appliance. I could tell by his look, he thought I was taking the Mick?

As he chased the cat out from under the back wheels, he looked up at me as if I was god.

I winked... 'first place they bolt!'

