

Journey to Freedom

Colin Dann

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About the Book

Lingmere Zoo in the north of England is about to close. A home for the zoo's twin lions, Lorna and Ellen, must be found – or else they will be put down. The newspapers take up the cause and a sanctuary in Africa is found that will care for the lions until they are able to fend for themselves. But on the way, Lorna bolts and Ellen is off to Africa on her own. Colin Dann's tale follows the fate of both animals on either side of the world – Ellen's loneliness and confusion in a new home, in a new country, without her beloved sister; and Lorna's adventures as she gains in confidence and discovers her true nature roaming the English countryside.

JOURNEY to FREEDOM

Colin Dann

RHCP DIGITAL

For Janet

Preface

It's always sad when a zoo fails and has to close down. It's sad for the owners who have such high hopes at the beginning. It's sad for the staff who are left without a job. Most of all, it's sad for the animals who suddenly lose their home and perhaps face the prospect of never having another one. Lingmere Zoo in the north of England was one such zoo. It had been staring closure in the face for a long time. It had never been very prosperous; it was too small, with too few exhibits to be of much interest to anyone. You could walk round it in under an hour and most people did. Lingmere relied too much on visits from holiday-makers so that, off season, it scarcely ticked over. As animals died off, they weren't replaced. Despite that, it eventually cost more to feed and look after the remainder than the zoo earned from its visitors and so it had to close.

The Animals Go

The animals were aware that their little world was changing. To begin with, suddenly there were no visitors. They were used to little throngs of people moving around the grounds and frequently stopping to stare, and although most of them ignored the people anyway the animals somehow felt uneasy when there were no visitors at all. The zoo was strangely, eerily quiet. The animals themselves made less noise.

In the lion enclosure there were just two lionesses, Lorna and Ellen. They were twins, and they had the best view of the rest of the zoo. During their habitual roaming around their paddock's perimeter they could see most of the other enclosures and their occupants, and they noticed when the first cage became empty. Then, day by day, they watched the gradual disappearance of their fellow inmates. The lucky ones were transferred to other zoos and collections where homes had been found for them, but many were less lucky. Unwanted, unfit or old animals were removed from their cages and humanely destroyed. There were no homes for these poor creatures.

Ellen was nervous. She looked across to the honey badger's enclosure, the closest to her own on one side. He and the lionesses were friends; they had been neighbours since the sisters were cubs. 'Are you still there?' Ellen called. 'Ratel, are you still there?' She saw no movement, but she continued to call.

‘He’s probably asleep,’ Lorna grumbled. ‘You know he likes the night-time best.’

‘I’ll wake him up then,’ said Ellen. She put her face close to the perimeter fence, opened her jaws wide and roared twice.

Lorna, who had been lying comfortably on her side, got up slowly and yawned. She watched for signs of the honey badger without much interest.

Ellen cried, ‘There he is!’

The little black and white animal had run to his fence. He had a stout stocky body and a large head, and when he stretched up to grasp the wire links with his powerful foreclaws his thick hide hung loose. ‘Call me?’ he barked.

‘Just to see you hadn’t gone like the others,’ Ellen explained.

‘Gone? Gone where? What others?’

‘The koalas, the civet, the owls and the otters . . . all disappeared. Their cages are empty,’ Ellen said.

‘We don’t know where they’ve gone,’ Lorna added, coming up alongside her sister.

‘Oh, yes – I’ve missed the owls’ cries,’ the honey badger said. ‘Are we all to go, then?’

‘Who’s to know?’ Lorna grunted.

‘And where are all the *people*?’ the badger asked, puzzled.

‘Why should they come if there’s nothing to look at?’ Lorna said shrewdly.

‘Don’t they want to look at you any more? You lions were always the favourites.’ He wasn’t at all overawed by the two huge beasts, whom he remembered from their cub days. ‘The rest of us are small fry by comparison.’

No one had any answers. The honey badger dropped back on all fours and the three animals pondered their uncertain future.

‘Whatever happens, I hope we won’t be separated,’ Ellen said earnestly to Lorna. She rubbed her head against her

sister's tawny shoulder. 'We'd miss you too, Ratel, if we didn't have you nearby.'

The honey badger sighed. He had been alone in his cage since his mate died. 'Always hungry, always lonely,' he muttered.

Lorna caught the first part. 'Always hungry?' she echoed with an irritable roar. 'Don't we know it? There's never enough to eat. The koalas and the others must have died of starvation.'

The next day there were more empty cages, and the day after that too. Lorna and Ellen lay on the grass in the shade of the one sickly tree in their enclosure, watching for a sign of their keeper, Joel. It was a hot day, and they had not been fed. Their stomachs rumbled repeatedly. Every so often one of them lurched to her feet and padded to a rather dirty little pond to drink, before returning to the tree and slumping down again. Joel failed to show up. Late in the afternoon they were woken from a doze by Ratel. He was in a fever of excitement.

'Lions! Lions!' he cried as he ran up and down in front of the link fence. 'The animals are being killed! We're all to be killed!' He couldn't keep still.

Lorna and Ellen were quickly on their feet. 'How do you know that? How do you know?' they roared.

'I saw the humans catching the animals in their cages,' the badger cried, 'and then - and then - pressing them down and stinging them until they were quite still and limp and - and - taking them away.'

'My, you're really jumpy,' said Lorna as the honey badger continued to run and leap about.

'We've got to get out, we've got to get out,' he growled in reply. 'We're in a trap!'

'Calm down, Ratel,' said Lorna. She was the bolder of the two sisters and wasn't easily alarmed. 'You can't be sure they were being killed. There's no cause for panic yet.'

If the day comes when they stop feeding us altogether, *then* we'll know we're in danger.' A mighty rumble from Ellen's stomach gave emphasis to her sister's words. 'And then woe betide any creature who strays into *our* space,' Lorna finished.

The honey badger was quieter now. He moved away to a more secluded spot, and the lions lay down again. All three animals remained alert for the feeding cart. Just before dusk, it seemed almost as an afterthought, food was brought. As usual the badger kept out of sight until the keeper had gone on his way. Then he wolfed down his provisions and hid himself again as the man returned on his round.

Joel was now the sole keeper retained at Lingmere. The zoo's business was being wound up, but Joel was trying to persuade the owners to allow Lorna and Ellen to stay until someone offered them another home. He had looked after the lionesses since they were babies and felt a strong attachment to them. Sometimes he supplemented their feed out of his own pocket. However, the chances of rehoming them were slim. Every zoo had its lion quotient and two extra lionesses were not wanted anywhere. So the sisters' days were numbered unless a new home was found for them soon.

The days flicked past and the last possible date for resettlement crept closer. All the other animals, except for the honey badger, had been disposed of. He had been promised a place elsewhere, but at the last minute there had been a change of heart. Now, regrettably, he would end his days at Lingmere. The zoo's owners had no option but to put him in the hands of the vet.

There was now almost total silence in the zoo grounds. Only the occasional roar of frustration as the lions waited for food punctured the quiet. It was evening when the vet arrived, the time of day when the badger was at his most

active. He was not easily caught. Despite his size, he was a powerful animal and Joel and the vet had had a hard time blocking off the escape route to the animal's underground burrow and cornering him against the fence. The badger resorted to a favourite means of defence, and produced an overpowering odour from a special gland near his tail. The men stepped back, rocked by the incredibly potent smell. The badger scuttled away and a second chase began around the cage.

'He should know *you* by now,' the vet panted. 'Can't you do something with him?'

'He's a tricky creature,' Joel replied. 'To tell you the truth I find the lions easier than this one.' He made a dive and got the badger pinned down, but holding him was another matter. The animal was surprisingly strong and Joel needed all his protective clothing to avoid injury from the huge claws and teeth. The vet rushed forward with his hypodermic needle, ready for a hasty injection, but the badger's skin was so tough that the needle fractured. The vet swore.

'We'll have to try and get him to the lab,' he said. 'I'll need another needle.'

The two men thought they had got a firm hold on the difficult animal. They reached the path outside the cage and set off for the main building. The badger squirmed desperately. All at once he made his body twist violently inside his very loose skin and wrenched himself free from the men's grip. He dropped to the ground and ran off into some bushes inside the grounds. Dusk enveloped him and the men knew they were beaten.

'He may not go far,' said Joel. 'We can't do anything until the morning.'

The vet sighed and shrugged his shoulders. 'Is it a dangerous animal?'

'No; at least, not to people.'

'What news of the lions?'