

Word & Note

A SHORT STORY BY NICK HOOPER

RESCUE



Based on his novels in the Inspector Arnold series

Rescue

He looks very young. It could be because his head is bowed, and he is so emaciated. He is trying to stand up as I kneel down in front of him. His ears are right back against his head, but I look into his eyes – pools of love. He wants to trust.

“Hello.”

I gently put my hand out for him to smell.

“Jip. Come ‘ere.”

Behind me, slouched in a filthy armchair, is his owner, Mr Green. Standing beside Mr Green is my constable Joe Rainer. We have come to take Mr Green in for questioning, though he doesn’t seem to have got the picture yet. We have the picture, and it’s becoming clearer every minute. The flat is a tip – dirt on the walls, the carpet is littered with food and cigarette butts, there’s a bottle of vodka by the armchair, and the smell...

“That’s my fuckin’ dog! Come ‘ere Jip!”

The poor animal looks at me, then bows his head and tries to sidle past. I put my hand against his chest to stop him. He doesn’t resist – just stands there, shaking.

“Mr Green, we’ve come to take you down to the station for questioning,” I turn towards him, and say for the third time: “Your wife is in hospital with a broken arm, fractured ribs, and her face is covered in bruises. She says you did it.”

“Fuckin’ bitch!”

“Mr Green...”

He launches himself off his armchair, and tries to grab the dog. I push the dog out of the way, and Mr Green falls on top of me. He’s heavy, and I can’t push him off. His breath stinks of vodka. He pulls back his fist to punch me in the face, but his fist stays in mid-air, caught by good constable Joe, and he is lifted bodily off me, his arm held behind his back. I stagger to my feet, feeling a bit foolish – hardly the macho man from the MET that I was twelve years ago.

“Thank you Joe,” I say, brushing myself down to gain a degree of self-respect. “Mr Green, you’re coming with us now. You have just resisted arrest, and attempted to assault me, and we want to question you down at the station. Any further action from you will mean we will have to use more force, and you will be in more trouble. Do you understand?”

“Whabout my dog?”

“We’ll take care of your dog. You won’t be needing him for some time.”

You won’t be needing him at all where you’re going, I reflect, as I turn and look at the dog. It just stands there whimpering quietly. Then its legs start to shake uncontrollably, and it collapses on the ground.

I look at Joe; he looks at me. “We’ll have to take Mr Green down to the station and send someone for the dog.”

“Sir?” I can see him thinking that this is an RSPCA job, not a police one.

“Come on. Out we go.” I wrench myself away from the sight of the poor dog, and open the door for Joe and our captive.

Driving back to the station, all I can think about is that dog. Its eyes got through to me. Love. Trust. What are these things worth?

Once we've got Mr Green out of the car, signed in, and put safely in a cell, I make a decision.

"Leave Green in there to cool off. I'll go back and get the dog."

"Sir, but..."

"I won't be long." I walk out of the station to my car. Then walk back inside again.

"Karen?"

The duty officer looks up at me from behind the desk.

"Can you call the RSPCA? Tell them I'm bringing in a dog that's in very poor condition. See if they can send someone round."

"Sir?" Karen looks a bit put out. Dogs? RSPCA? She didn't sign up for this.

"Do it please. I'll be back shortly."

I'm off. Propelled as though by some animal spirit that has lurked inside me from birth.

I walk into the flat, holding my breath to avoid smelling the stench. The dog is still lying where it collapsed. For a moment, I wonder if it's dead. I kneel down next to the sad bundle, and it shifts, slowly lifts its head, and looks at me.

'Look after me,' its eyes say. 'Let me have someone who I can love and trust.'

"Come on boy," I say to him. "Let's get you back to the station."

I lift him up carefully. He's terribly light. He smells of excrement. I feel places where his fur has fallen out. But I wrap him in my arms and take him to the car, laying him gently on the back seat, and drive slowly back to the station.

"Mr Green's kicking up a stink. Says he wants a solicitor, sir," says Karen from behind the desk. She wrinkles up her nose in disgust as I carry the dog in.

"Have you called the RSPCA?" I ask, ignoring her.

"Ah... sorry sir. Couldn't get through." She's lying. She never tried - I can tell. "I'll try now sir."

"Tell them it's urgent."

"And Mr Green's solicitor, sir?"

"Let him call one." For all the good it will do him, I reflect. Still, it will give me more time to do something about this dog. I carry him into my office, and lay him down on the carpet. He's shivering so I get my overcoat off and lay it over him, then kneel down to have a look at him.

"Poor old thing, we'll get you better. Someone's coming soon who'll know what to do." I stroke his shoulder, feeling the bones almost sticking through his skin, and he looks up at me. I'm meant to be a tough policeman with experience - and that's true to an extent - but this dog cut through my defences as soon as I saw him. And there's nothing I can do about it.

There's a knock, and Karen pokes her head round the door. "Inspector Rackham, sir, the RSPCA don't know when they will be able to send someone. All their local officers are out. They said take the dog to a local vet, they'll know what to do. Probably put it down, poor thing."

"They said that? Put it down?" I am outraged.

“No sir, I added the bit about putting it down, I just thought...”

“Well don’t think. Find me the address of the nearest vet. I’ll take him there myself.”

“But sir, Mr Green...” she says sulkily.

“Just do it.” I lean down close to the dog. His rank smell fills my nostrils, but it just makes me all the more determined. “Sorry old chap, we’ll have to go out again.” I lift him up and carry him out of my office. Karen has found me a vet, and I get out as quickly as I can before Karen “but sir”s me again.

Two vets later (the first one said they couldn’t take the dog – in spite of my playing the police card – and sent me onto the other vet on the other side of town), I meet an angel.

Chloe is short, blonde, with sparkling blue eyes and a ceaseless smile. She is the receptionist, and as soon as I come into the waiting room, she comes round from behind the desk to examine the dog. He lets her probe and check his stomach, teeth, ears, eyes, while we wait for the vet to finish with his current customer.

“He is in a bad way.”

“But you won’t put him down...?”

“Depends. If we can save him I’ll take him home, if there’s no-one...”

“Oh there is someone.” I’ve said it now. That someone is me.

“Well, he’s got a lovely personality. How did he...?”

“I’m a policeman. We found him in a flat today. The owner’s in custody, he didn’t treat him very well.”

“You’re not kidding. I don’t suppose the RSPCA...”

“No, we haven’t been able to get anyone to look at him. That’s why I’m here.”

“Well you’ve come to the right place.” Chloe looks up as the door to the consulting room opens. “Mr Baker, we’ve got a rescue here – male. Lab. Very emaciated.”

Mr Baker looks at Chloe and smiles and shrugs his shoulders. This is obviously something that Chloe does – she rescues animals. “Bring him in.” He sighs, though I don’t know whether it’s because of Chloe’s over-generous attitude, or a general sadness about human cruelty. “Let’s have a look at him.”

Chloe picks up the smelly bundle, and carries him into the surgery. They lay him gently down on the examining table. Mr Baker basically does the same as Chloe, and then looks up at me. “Where did you find him?”

“He’s a policeman,” Chloe interjects.

“A policeman?” Mr Baker looks surprised, and I find myself wondering what he thinks a policeman should look like. Not like me, evidently.

“Yes, I’m D.I. Rackham. We found him in a flat in Batside, about an hour ago. Will he make it?”

Mr Baker sighs again. “I don’t know. We’ll have to put him on a drip to start with. Then we’ll see.”

“Will you give him medication?”

“Not at this point. He’s very dehydrated. We’ll keep him in overnight and get that sorted out, then get some good food down him and see how he does. Who’s going to look after him, if..?”

“Um, someone.” I look down at the floor.

“Can you give a contact number to Chloe before you leave. We’ll let them know if he recovers.” He looks at me quizzically – I heard that vets can see through animals, and we’re animals, aren’t we?

“Er, thank you,” I say.

I give a mobile number to Chloe at the desk. It’s mine.

The next day I get a call. It’s Chloe’s voice. “Hello, hello. I’m calling from Baker’s the vet. We have a dog...”

“Oh... thank you. How is he?” I could try and disguise my voice, but I don’t.

“Is that the policeman who brought him in yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s doing really well. We’ve checked him over, and there’s no serious damage. Being a young dog, he’s got a lot of resilience. Do you want to send your friend in to see him?”

“Er, OK. What time?”

“The sooner the better.”

“Right, er, I’ll, they’ll, er, someone will be round soon.”

Why don’t I just say it. There is no-one else who’ll take this dog... except me.

I check that all is well at the station, and any outstanding business can wait, and slope off quietly to the vets.

In the surgery Mr Baker looks at me with that quizzical expression of his.

“The dog is doing very well. He just needs feeding high protein food – a little, and often. Who’s going to look after him?”

“I am. At least until...” There, I’ve really said it now.

I wonder if Mr Baker is surprised by this police involvement in a dog rescue, but he just says: “Chloe will give you something to get you started, but you’ll need to buy in some things from Grundy’s on the High Street. Bring him back in a couple of days, and we’ll see how he’s getting on.”

Chloe does more than that. She takes us out the back, and puts down a bowl of food for the dog. He sniffs at it, and begins to feebly lick at it.

“Do you know his name?” she asks.

“Jip.” Just saying it makes me feel sick – I hear Mr Green in my head yelling at him.

“Jip,” Chloe says gently. He looks up at her. His ears go back, and he gets up shakily. “Come on eat.” She strokes him, encouraging him to take more food.

“This is going to take quite a bit of your time,” she says. “If you..?”

“I’ll manage,” I say. “I’ll manage.” I give her a big regulation Rackham smile.

“Why’s there a dog in your room?” Burt, who’s my senior, calls me into his office, shortly after I arrive back from the vet. “And what are you doing about Green?”

“It’s Green’s dog. We called the RSPCA but they couldn’t make it out. No-one else could take him,” I lie.

“So...?”

“I thought I’d keep him for a bit.”

“So what are you going to do with it, once the RSPCA have seen it?”

“Keep it.”

“Keep it? Here? You can’t keep it here. This is a police station, not a bloody animal rescue centre!”

“Look Burt, there’s no-one else. The poor thing deserves a better life. A chance to be a good companion. He’ll get better soon, and he’s not causing any trouble to anyone.”

Burt sniffs. “He smells.”

“Not for long... Look Burt, I know what I’m doing.” I hope.

Burt shrugs in that way he has of saying ‘OK, whatever’. “I just hope we don’t get a surprise visit from the Chief Constable.”

We both know that won’t happen. Not much happens, in this out-of-the-way commuter town, to attract any special attention.

There’s a knock on the door.

“Sir,” it’s Karen. “Mr Green’s solicitor is here again.”

“Right, let’s get on with the job shall we?” Burt looks at me.

The RSPCA do eventually see the dog. They would have taken Mr Green to court, except he’s already going to court for human cruelty and a number of other offences. If they get their way, he will certainly not be allowed to keep his dog, or any other dog for that matter.

I take the dog in the next day, and the next, ignoring Burt’s raised eyebrows – he is only my senior by a rank – and at least Karen stops wrinkling up her nose as I walk past the desk.

At home, he keeps me company. He explores my small terraced cottage, going carefully, but sniffing everything. The stairs are too much of a challenge, he just smells the bottom step and leaves it at that. My cottage has a small back garden, looking out onto a large piece of common land which stretches all the way down to the town. To start with he is completely overawed by the garden. I doubt that he ever went out of that stinking flat. He comes back in, ears laid back, and sits down in his corner of the kitchen.

‘You expect me to go out there?’ his eyes say. ‘It’s so big.’

“You’re going to have to get used to it,” I say. “You can’t use a litter tray for ever. And it’s full of exciting smells and sounds. You’ll love it soon. And wait till you see the common.”

It’s early spring, and the clocks haven’t changed yet. The next morning, before work, I get out into the garden with a cup of tea, leaving the back door open. I have a couple of dog treats in my pocket, and I know he knows they are there. Maybe their smell will tempt him out.

A nose pokes out of the doorway. I sit perfectly still, to see what will happen. It disappears, and then reappears. Then his head is out, his nose sniffing the fresh morning air. Slowly – anxiously – he walks over to my bench. His ears are forward – this is a good sign.

I have learnt that any sudden movement will make him jump, and cringe down, so I slowly, gently, take a treat out my pocket and offer it to him on my palm. He licks it off, carefully, and looks at me expectantly. I stand up. He turns to go back in. I crouch down, holding out another treat. He comes and takes it. I walk a bit further into the garden, crouch down. He hesitates, then comes forward for another treat.

“This is the garden. It’s perfectly safe. It’s where you can do your business for now, and get your fresh air, until you’re ready to go out into the big wide

world." I say this as I crouch and scratch him behind the ears. He is still very bony, but I can feel an improvement in his fur and skin already.

I walk slowly back to my bench, and sit down to see what he will do. He follows me back, and I worry he will just go straight back into the house, so I hold out another treat. He takes it and stands looking at me, not sure what to do next.

I take another one out, and chuck it a short way into the garden to see if he'll go off on his own to find it. This was a mistake – the sudden movement made him think I was going to hit him. His ears go back, and he cringes, and it takes a few minutes of talking and stroking before I can persuade him to stand up properly again.

Time's getting on, tea's getting cold, but I'm determined to introduce him to his 'outside' freedom. I stand up and walk slowly round the garden, getting him to follow me by stopping every now and then to give him a treat. This way he follows me all the way round its small perimeter, but, I note, he makes no attempt to sniff the plants. The outdoors is still a strange and dangerous world to him. I walk back to my bench. He walks back too. I sit down. He sits down. We look at the rising sun till it's time to go in and get ready for another day.

I am keeping a diary of how he's progressing. It's a visual diary. I do sketches of him every morning. Sitting, standing, eating. It shows how rapidly he's changing: from skeletal to bony, then thin, then slim. I trained and worked as an artist before I joined the force, and I have always kept my sketching and painting going. I get up early in the morning to do this. My hometown, where I work, is a place of small crimes: petty burglary, small-time drug pushers, joy-riders. It's a great police job if you don't want to be in the front line of crime.

He's still too weak and nervous to walk to the station today, so I put him in the car and drive down.

Stewart's behind the desk this morning. He hasn't met my new friend yet.

"Who's this?" he says, coming from behind the counter, bending down and scratching the dog behind the ears.

"I'm just taking care of him while..." I wave my hand vaguely, as if to signal future time.

"What's his name?"

"Jip," I say reluctantly. Did I notice a slight flinch from the dog, or was it my imagination?

"Hello Jip," says Stewart in his warm friendly voice. Was it there again. A flicker of fear?

"Are we going to get on with work, or sit on the floor fussing over a dog?" Burt's voice cuts in suddenly, making the dog cringe. He bends down and pats him.

"Right, better get on. Have you called Mrs Harband yet?" We get on with our day, Stewart offering to keep an eye on the dog when I go out on a call.

I get home in plenty of time to take the dog out in the garden again. It's warm this March, and I don't want to be inside. If I was on my own, and I hadn't brought work home, I'd take a walk on the common, before pottering

down to my local for a pint. Not possible for now. I've got to get my new companion used to the world. Garden first, then common, then pub.

I make a cup of tea while he watches me intently. Next I go to the cupboard where I am keeping his food. Did I notice his tail move in expectation? It wasn't a full-blown, coffee-table-clearing wag, but there was definitely a movement there. He's always very quiet. I guess he's had any tendency to whine or bark beaten out of him. I'm hoping to get him talking again.

We go out into the garden, and I sit with my tea and look at him. He looks back at me with those eyes that melted my heart at our first meeting. Putting my cup of tea down on the bench, I get up and walk to the middle of the garden. He looks at me from the safety of the bench. The back door is open, and he can always go back in if he loses his nerve.

I crouch down and get out a treat, hold it in the palm of my hand for him to see, and wait. He shifts, looks around the garden, sniffing the air, and slowly gets up and walks towards me.

"Good boy." I stroke his shoulders, keeping him there, out in the middle of my small garden, while early spring birds circle overhead.

I get up and walk to one corner, where the dead stalks of last year's hollyhocks still stand, and crouch down again with a treat in my hand. He looks back at the kitchen door, looks at me, and walks cautiously over to pick up his treat. I repeat this a few times, leading him to every edge of the garden.

Out on the common, someone shouts angrily at their dog. Jip's ears go back, and he turns and runs into the house.

This is going to take time, I realise, so I try an experiment.

"Jip," I call. "Jip, come here."

He reappears, and comes towards me with his head down in that cringing way he had when I first saw him.

"Arnold! What *are* you doing?" Betty's voice, from over the fence, cuts into my world like a knife. Jip takes one look at her and runs into the house again.

"I thought you were coming back from Derby tomorrow," I say guiltily. I don't know why I'm guilty. It's not as if she lives with me any more.

Betty is my next-door wife. We are still married, but she decided that separate dwellings and frequent meetings would be good for our relationship. It all started a few years ago when I was working long hours on a case, as sometimes happens, even in this quiet corner of Hertfordshire. So after a particularly persistent spate of burglaries I caught the culprit, but lost my wife. Or at least I ended up next door.

"The course ended early. I thought I'd come back and do some preparation for Monday." Betty's a primary school teacher. "But what are you doing with that dog?"

"Fancy a cup of tea?" I say by way of answer.

"If you've got the T I've got the G." She reaches into a carrier bag, pulls out a large bottle of gin, and holds it up.

"I have. See you in a min." She goes into her back door and I go into mine. The dog has made a puddle on the kitchen floor. He was probably frightened and couldn't make it to the litter tray. He comes towards me, head down, tail between his legs. I gently stroke his head. "Don't worry old chap, you'll soon get the hang of it." He looks up at me with those eyes of his and goes off to his corner while I mop up his mess.

Betty takes her time, and when she turns up she looks refreshed. Something about her makes me wonder how far she travelled today. I give her a hug and a kiss, but reflect that I could do the same to my elderly maiden aunt.

“So... who’s this?” she asks, as I get down to the business of pouring the gin and tonics. It’s a large bottle of gin – the sort you buy in duty-free.

“Where did the gin come from? Looks like it’s duty-free.”

“Oh, Jackie brought it on the course. A friend gave it to her for Christmas, but she doesn’t drink it. Thought she would share it with us, but it never got opened so she gave it to me.”

I imagine these primary school teachers lugging round vast quantities of alcohol in case they decide to have a binge together. Not sure it rings true. But who am I to say? There’s plenty of boozing on police courses.

“Nice of her,” is all I say.

“What’s the dog’s name?”

“Jip,” I don’t like saying it. It’s not the name I would give him.

“Jip. Come here Jip.” She puts her hand out, and he comes to her, tail between his legs.

“He’s terribly thin,” she says as she strokes him.

“You should have seen him a few days ago when we found him in a suspect’s flat. He could barely stand.”

“So what are you going to do with him? Find him a good home? Take him to animal rescue?”

“Well his owner won’t be needing him, where he’s going, so I thought I’d keep him.” Why do I feel so guilty? It’s not as if she’ll have to live with him.

“Keep him? Arnold, have you thought this through? Who’s going to look after him when you’re on a big case?”

“Well, I thought you might be willing to keep an eye on him.”

“But suppose I’ve got to go away on another of these courses? And anyway, how do you know you’ll be able to keep him? There must be procedures you have to go through.”

I haven’t really thought this through, I realise. Betty, always the practical one, has a good point. I look at the dog. He looks at me. No. I can’t give him up. I’m sure there’ll be a way.

“Jip.” Betty calls him back. Again the cowed cringing look. I won’t call him Jip. That name belongs to his painful past.

“Anyway, I intend to keep him,” I say, defiantly. “Whatever it takes.”

“I suppose there’s always Sue down the road. She loves dogs. Always had them. She could help.”

“Good point,” I say. “Better give him his supper now. The vet said feed him frequently until he’s got his proper bodyweight back.”

“Come on,” I say to him. He responds immediately and comes to my side as I get up to go over to the cupboard where his food is kept. His head is up, his tail twitches slightly, and I hear a sort of snuffle-grunt. Could that be the beginning of a bark?

“It smells a bit in here,” is all Betty can say.

“He’s using a litter tray until he’s got the hang of the garden.” I decide not to mention his accident on the kitchen floor.

The next morning, he does his first pee in the garden. The dog has finally got out into the world.

Mr Green is refused bail.

For some strange reason, I feel sorry for him. He is a human being, after all, and one that took a very wrong turn. No longer the despot in his cruel little kingdom, he looks pathetic – deflated – in court. But he’s a danger to his wife, and has threatened violence to a police officer – that would be me. He won’t end up in the Old Bailey, it will be a district court, but like all citizens of our beloved country, he will have the right to a fair trial. Innocent until proven guilty.

The dog doesn’t get a mention, but I know the RSPCA report is there in the prosecution papers, along with our own description of how we discovered him. It’s a good thing there are always two officers on these little visits to the scenes of domestic violence. I dread to think what state my face would be in if it hadn’t been for the intervention of constable Rainer. And it would have been tricky for me to have filed a report about how I discovered the dog, and then have the dog for myself.

Very tricky.

But as things are, I hope to be able to keep him. The RSPCA officer has asked where and how the dog is being looked after, and they know he is with me. They have other fish to fry, so any question of what happens to him next will be left till after the trial.

There is Mrs Green to consider.

When I interviewed her in hospital, following her husband’s arrest, she showed no interest in the dog. It was his idea to have one, apparently. I suspect that anything to do with Mr Green will be taking the fastest of exits out of her life, along with him, hopefully. Our new WPC Peggy McDonald, who came with me to interview her, is looking into how Mrs Green can get help. She’s going to need a lot of support. Not just someone feeding her up and giving her a bit of kindness in their home, though that would help, I’m sure. I’m impressed with WPC McDonald. She really cares about this woman and her future. McDonald has evidently joined the force because she cares about people first and foremost, and she’s intelligent to boot. In fact, I have to confess I liked her company on that visit.

So whether I keep the dog or not depends on the trial – and whether Mrs Green changes her mind and wants the dog.

I look at him with a sort of pride. He has put on an amazing amount of weight in two weeks. I’ve taken him back to the vet a couple of times, and he’s had some medication now that his body is strong enough to receive it. Chloe the angel receptionist gives me the hugest of grins when I come into the surgery.

His coat is looking better too. The raw patches are healing, and a glossiness is there now, replacing the matted, dull colour he had when I first saw him. Only his eyes are the same. They’re full of love, and they still ask that question: ‘Can I trust you?’

He visits the garden on his own now. The litter tray is a thing of the past, and he goes out willingly to check the scents round the borders, and do his

business. He comes to a whistle, if I'm out with him in the garden, and yesterday he barked to come in.

This afternoon, I got home early after the court hearing. I picked the dog up from the police station where he was being made a fuss of by duty officer Karen.

This afternoon, I'm showing the dog a bigger bit of world.

The common.

This rambling bit of countryside spreads down to the town from my garden gate. Bushes and dells, long grass and ponds make it a perfect place for a dog to explore. Exciting scents everywhere. Wide open spaces to run. He's going to love this. Though how long it will take...

I've got treats in my pocket. I put him on the lead and I take him down to the garden gate. I don't want to drag him out, so I open the gate and let him take the lead out of the garden.

He sniffs the air. Looks around. Looks up at me.

Then slowly, cautiously, he goes through the gate and stops. His ears are forward and alert, his tail is up. He is smelling the world. There are no other people or dogs around at this point in the afternoon. He has all this to himself.

Something makes me want to take the risk, and I take his lead off to see what will happen next. Will he turn tail and run back into the garden, or will he go off and explore this new world?

He takes a few steps forward, sniffing the grass. Stops. Looks back at me.

"Go on," I say. My heart is in my mouth.

He sniffs the ground again. He's caught scent of something.

His ears prick up. His back legs are tense as he leans forward. Then he's off, running towards a clump of bushes. It's the first time I've seen him run – such a natural sinuous movement. He disappears into the bushes, and I let him have his new-found freedom. I stand there waiting, and wondering. Will he come back?

I put my fingers to my lips, and whistle.