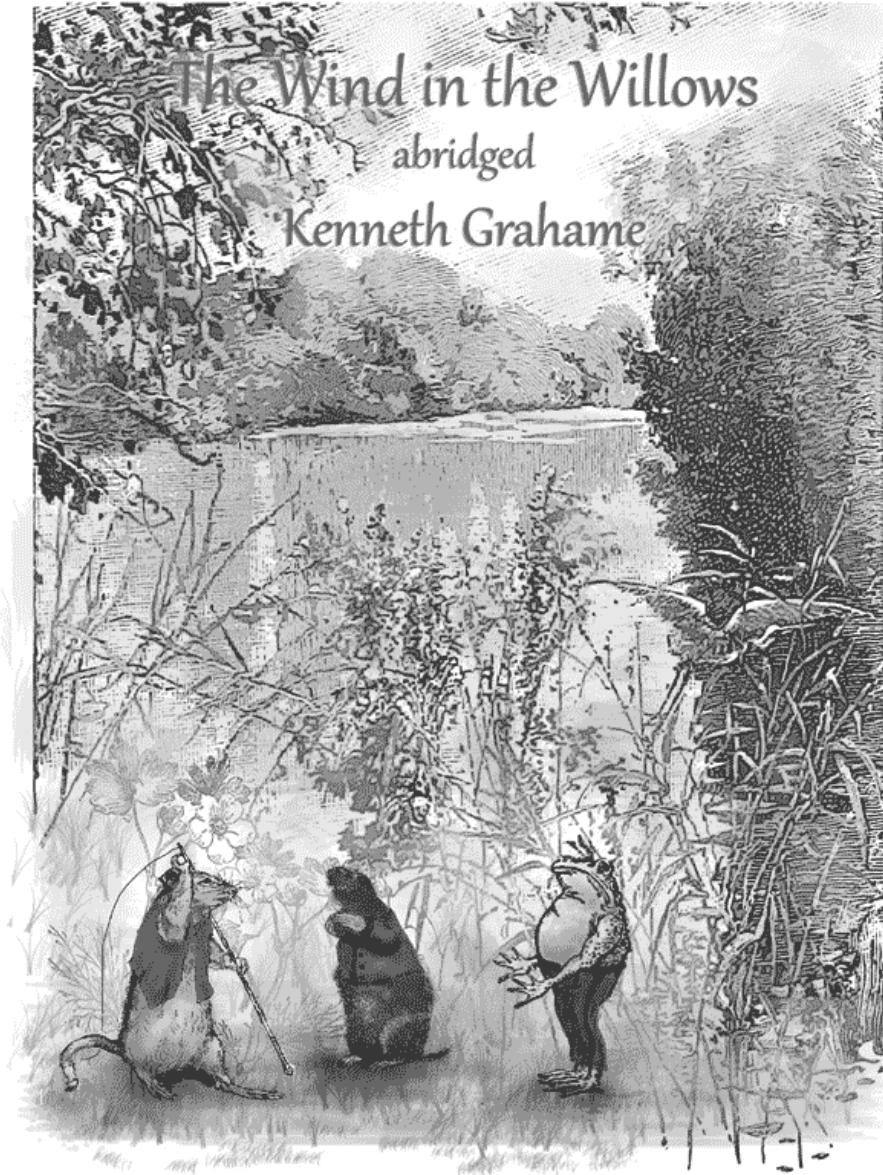


The Wind in the Willows

abridged

Kenneth Grahame



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Adapted and abridged by Emma Laybourn

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The Wind in the Willows

Chapter One The River Bank

The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his little home. He had used brooms and dusters, standing on ladders and steps and chairs, till he had dust in his throat and eyes, and an aching back and weary arms.

Spring was moving in the air above and in the earth below and around him, filling his dark and lowly little house with its sense of longing. He suddenly flung down his brush on the floor, said “Bother!” and “O blow!” and also “Hang spring-cleaning!” and bolted out of the house without even putting on his coat. Something up above was calling him imperiously, and he made for the steep little tunnel which led from his house up to the sun and air.

So he scraped and scratched and scabbled, working busily with his little paws and muttering to himself, “Up we go! Up we go!” till at last, pop! his snout came out into the sunlight, and he found himself rolling in the warm grass of a great meadow.

“This is fine!” he said to himself. “This is better than spring-cleaning!” The sunshine warmed his fur, soft breezes caressed him, and after the solitude of his underground house the song of happy birds sounded to him almost like a shout. In the joy of living and the delight of spring without its cleaning, he scurried across the meadow till he reached the hedge on the far side.

“Halt!” said an elderly rabbit at the gap. “It’s sixpence to go by the private road!” He was bowled over in an instant by the impatient Mole, who trotted along the side of the hedge laughing at the other rabbits as they peeped from their holes.

“Onion-sauce! Onion-sauce!” he remarked jeeringly, and was gone before they could think of a satisfactory reply. Then they all started grumbling at each other. “Why didn’t you tell him—” “Well, why didn’t you say—” and so on; but, of course, it was much too late.

The Mole rambled through the meadows, along the hedgerows, across the copses, finding everywhere birds building, flowers budding, leaves thrusting, everything happy and busy. And instead of having an uneasy conscience pricking him and whispering “spring-cleaning!” he could only feel how jolly it was to be idle amidst all these busy citizens.

He thought his happiness was complete when, as he meandered aimlessly along, suddenly he stood by the edge of a river. Never in his life had he seen a river before – this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh. All was a-shake

and a-shiver with glints and gleams, sparkles and swirls, chatter and bubble. The Mole was entranced. By the side of the river he trotted, spell-bound by the river's bewitching chatter; and when, tired at last, he sat down on the bank, the river still chattered on to him, a babbling series of the best stories in the world, sent down from the hills to be told at last to the insatiable sea.

As he sat and looked across the river, a dark hole in the bank opposite, just above the water's edge, caught his eye. Dreamily he thought of what a nice snug little home it would make for an animal. As he gazed, something bright and small seemed to twinkle down in the heart of it, vanished, then twinkled once more like a tiny star. But it could hardly be a star... Then, as he looked, it winked at him, and he realised it was an eye; and then he saw a small face appear round it, like a frame around a picture.

A brown little face, with whiskers.

A grave round face, with that twinkle in its eye.

Small neat ears and thick silky hair.

It was the Water Rat! The two animals stood up and looked at each other cautiously.

"Hullo, Mole!" said the Water Rat.

"Hullo, Rat!" said the Mole.

"Would you like to come over?" asked the Rat.

"I would if I could," said the Mole.

The Rat stooped and unfastened a rope and hauled on it; then lightly stepped into a little boat which the Mole had not noticed. It was painted blue outside and white inside, and was just the size for two animals; and the Mole's whole heart went out to it at once, even though he was not used to boats, and did not fully understand them.

The Rat rowed smartly across and tied the boat up. Then he held out his paw as the Mole stepped gingerly down. "Lean on that!" he said; and the Mole to his surprise and delight found himself actually seated in a real boat.

"This has been a wonderful day!" said he, as the Rat shoved off from the bank again. "Do you know, I've never been in a boat before in all my life."

"What?" cried the Rat, open-mouthed: "Never – well, I – what have you been doing, then?"

"Is it so nice as all that?" asked the Mole shyly, though he was quite prepared to believe it as he leant back in his seat and surveyed the cushions, the oars, and all the fascinating fittings, and felt the boat sway lightly under him.

"Nice? It's the only thing," said the Water Rat solemnly, as he leant forward to row. "Believe me, my friend, there is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so good as simply messing about in boats. Simply messing," he went on dreamily: "messing – about – in boats; messing—"

"Look out, Rat!" cried the Mole suddenly.

It was too late. The boat struck the bank full tilt. The Rat lay on his back at the bottom of the boat, his heels in the air.

“—about in boats,” he went on composedly, picking himself up with a pleasant laugh. “In or out of ’em, it doesn’t matter. Nothing seems really to matter, that’s the charm of it. Whether you get anywhere, or whether you don’t, you’re always busy, and you never do anything in particular; and when you’ve done it there’s always something else to do, and you can do it if you like, but you don’t have to. Look here! If you’ve nothing going on this morning, supposing we float down the river together?”

The Mole waggled his toes from sheer happiness, and leaned back blissfully into the soft cushions. “What a day I’m having!” he said. “Let us start at once!”

“Hold on a minute, then!” said the Rat. He looped the rope through a ring in his landing-stage, climbed up into his hole above, and after a short time reappeared staggering under a fat, wicker lunch-basket.

“Shove that under your feet,” he told the Mole, as he lifted it into the boat. Then he untied the rope and took the oars again.

“What’s inside it?” asked the Mole.

“There’s cold chicken inside it,” replied the Rat; “coldtongue coldham coldbeef pickledgherkins salad frenchrolls cresssandwiches pottedmeat gingerbeer lemonade sodawater——”

“O stop, stop,” cried the Mole in ecstasies: “This is too much!”

“Do you really think so?” enquired the Rat seriously. “It’s only what I always bring on these little trips; and the other animals are always telling me that I don’t take enough!”

The Mole never heard a word he was saying. Intoxicated with the sparkle, the ripple, the scents and the sounds and the sunlight, he trailed a paw in the water and dreamed long day-dreams. The Water Rat rowed steadily on and did not disturb him.

“I like your clothes awfully, old chap,” he remarked after half an hour or so. “I’m going to get a black velvet suit myself some day, as soon as I can afford it.”

“I beg your pardon,” said the Mole, pulling himself together. “You must think me very rude; but all this is so new to me. So this is a River!”

“The River,” corrected the Rat.

“And you really live by the river? What a jolly life!”

“By it and with it and on it and in it,” said the Rat. “It’s brother and sister to me, and company, and food and drink, and (naturally) washing. It’s my world, and I don’t want any other. What it hasn’t got is not worth having, and what it doesn’t know is not worth knowing. Lord! the times we’ve had together! Whether in winter or summer, spring or autumn, it’s always got its fun and its excitements. When the floods are on in February, and my cellars and basement are brimming, and the brown water runs by my bedroom window; or again when it all drops away, and shows patches of mud that smells like plum-cake,

and weeds clog the channels, and I can potter about over the river bed, and find things careless people have dropped out of boats!”

“But isn’t it a bit dull at times?” the Mole asked. “Just you and the river, and no one else to have a word with?”

“No one else to – well, I mustn’t be hard on you,” said the Rat. “You’re new to it, and of course you don’t know. The bank is so crowded nowadays: otters, kingfishers, dabchicks, moorhens, all of them about all day long and always wanting you to do something!”

“What lies over there?” asked the Mole, waving a paw towards woodland that darkly framed the water-meadows on one side of the river.

“That? O, that’s just the Wild Wood,” said the Rat shortly. “We don’t go there very much, we river-bankers.”

“Aren’t they – aren’t they very nice people in there?” said the Mole, a little nervously.

“Well,” replied the Rat, “the squirrels are all right. And the rabbits – some of ’em, but rabbits are a mixed lot. And then there’s Badger, of course. He lives right in the heart of it. Dear old Badger! Nobody interferes with him. They’d better not,” he added significantly.

“Why, who might interfere with him?” asked the Mole.

“Well, of course – there are – others,” explained the Rat hesitantly. “Weasels – and stoats – and foxes – and so on. They’re all right in a way – I’m very good friends with them – chat when we meet, and all that – but there’s no denying it – you can’t really trust them, and that’s the fact.”

The Mole politely dropped the subject. “And beyond the Wild Wood again?” he asked. “Where it’s all blue and dim, and one sees what may be hills, and something like the smoke of towns, or is it only clouds?”

“Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wide World,” said the Rat. “And that’s something that doesn’t matter, either to you or me. I’ve never been there, and I’m never going, nor you either, if you’ve got any sense. Don’t ever refer to it again, please. Now then! Here’s our backwater at last, where we’re going to lunch.”

Leaving the main stream, they now passed into what looked like a little lake. Green turf sloped down to either edge, brown snaky tree-roots gleamed below the surface of the quiet water, while ahead of them the silvery foamy tumble of a weir, and a restless dripping mill-wheel, beneath a grey mill-house, filled the air with a soothing murmur of sound. It was so very beautiful that the Mole could only gasp, “O my! O my! O my!”

The Rat brought the boat alongside the bank, tied it up, helped the awkward Mole safely ashore, and swung out the lunch-basket. The Mole begged to be allowed to unpack it by himself; and the Rat was very pleased to allow him. The excited Mole shook out the table-cloth and spread it, took out all the mysterious packets one by one and arranged them, still gasping, “O my! O my!”

When all was ready, the Rat said, "Now, pitch in, old fellow!" and the Mole was very glad to obey, for he had not eaten since very early in the morning.

"What are you looking at?" said the Rat presently, when the Mole had eaten enough to look up from the table-cloth.

"I am looking," said the Mole, "at a funny streak of bubbles that I see travelling along the surface of the water."

"Bubbles? Oho!" said the Rat, and he chirruped in an inviting way.

A broad glistening muzzle showed itself above the edge of the bank, and the Otter hauled himself out and shook the water from his coat.

"Greedy beggars!" he said, making for the food. "Why didn't you invite me, Ratty?"

"This was an impromptu affair," explained the Rat. "By the way: my friend Mr. Mole."

"Proud, I'm sure," said the Otter. "Such a rumpus everywhere! All the world seems out on the river today. I came up this backwater to try and get a moment's peace."

There was a rustle behind them, in a hedge, and a stripy head peered out at them.

"Come on, old Badger!" shouted the Rat.

The Badger trotted forward a pace or two; then grunted, "Hmm! Company," and turned his back and disappeared from view.

"That's just the sort of fellow he is!" observed the disappointed Rat. "He hates Society! Now we shan't see any more of him today. Well, who's out on the river?"

"Toad, for one," replied the Otter. "In his brand-new boat; new togs, new everything!"

The two animals looked at each other and laughed.

"Once, it was sailing," said the Rat, "Then he got tired of that and started punting. He punted all day and every day, and a nice mess he made of it. Last year it was house-boating, and we all had to go and stay with him in his house-boat, and pretend we liked it. He was going to spend the rest of his life in a house-boat. But whatever he takes up, he gets tired of it, and starts on something fresh."

"He's a good fellow," remarked the Otter. "But no stability – especially in a boat!"

From where they sat they could get a glimpse of the main stream; and just then a racing-boat flashed into view, the rower – a short, stout figure – splashing badly and rolling a good deal, but working his hardest. The Rat stood up and hailed him, but Toad – for it was he – shook his head and settled sternly to his work.

"He'll be out of the boat in a minute if he rolls like that," said the Rat.

"Of course he will," chuckled the Otter. "Did I ever tell you that story about Toad and the lock-keeper? It happened this way..."

A May-fly swerved unsteadily over the river's surface. A swirl of water and a "cloop!" and the May-fly was visible no more.

Neither was the Otter. But again there was a streak of bubbles on the surface of the river.

The Rat hummed a tune, and the Mole recollected that animal etiquette forbade any sort of comment on the sudden disappearance of one's friends, for any reason.

"Well, well," said the Rat, "I suppose we ought to be moving. I wonder which of us should pack the lunch-basket?"

"O, please let me," said the Mole. So, of course, the Rat let him.

Packing the basket was not quite such pleasant work as unpacking the basket. But the Mole was determined to enjoy everything; although just when he had got the basket packed, he saw a plate staring up at him from the grass, and when he thought he had finished again the Rat pointed out a stray fork; and last of all, he found the mustard pot, which he had been sitting on without knowing it – still the job got done at last, without much loss of temper.

The afternoon sun was getting low as the Rat rowed gently homewards in a dreamy mood, murmuring poetry to himself, and not paying much attention to Mole. But the Mole was very full of lunch, and self-satisfaction, and pride, and already quite at home in a boat (so he thought). So he said, "Ratty! Please, I want to row, now!"

The Rat shook his head with a smile. "Not yet, my young friend," he said, "wait till you've had a few lessons. It's not so easy as it looks."

The Mole was quiet for a minute or two. But he began to feel jealous of Rat, rowing so strongly and so easily, and his pride began to whisper that he could do it every bit as well. He jumped up and seized the oars, so suddenly that the Rat was taken by surprise and fell backwards off his seat with his legs in the air, while the triumphant Mole took his place.

"Stop it, you silly ass!" cried the Rat, from the bottom of the boat. "You can't do it! You'll have us over!"

The Mole flung the oars back with a flourish, and made a great dig at the water. He missed the surface altogether, his legs flew up above his head, and he found himself lying on the top of the Rat. Greatly alarmed, he grabbed at the side of the boat, and the next moment – Sploosh!

Over went the boat, and he found himself struggling in the river.

O, how cold the water was, how very wet it felt! How it sang in his ears as he went down, down, down! How welcome the sun looked as he rose to the surface coughing and spluttering! How black was his despair when he felt himself sinking again!

Then a firm paw gripped him. It was the Rat, and the Mole could feel him laughing, right down his arm and through his paw.

The Rat shoved an oar under the Mole's arm; and, swimming behind him, propelled the helpless animal to shore, hauled him out, and set him down on the bank, a squelchy lump of misery.

When the Water Rat had rubbed him down a bit, he said, "Now, then, old fellow! Trot up and down the towing-path as hard as you can, till you're warm and dry again, while I dive for the lunch-basket."

So the dismal Mole, wet and ashamed, trotted about till he was fairly dry, while the Rat plunged into the water again, righted the boat, and finally dived for the basket and struggled to land with it.

When all was ready for a start once more, the Mole, limp and dejected, took his seat in the back of the boat; and said in a low voice, broken with emotion, "Ratty, my generous friend! I am very sorry indeed. My heart quite fails me when I think how I might have lost that beautiful lunch-basket. Will you forgive me, and let things go on as before?"

"That's all right, bless you!" responded the Rat cheerily. "What's a little wet to a Water Rat? I'm more in the water than out of it most days. Don't think any more about it. I really think you had better come and stay with me for a little time. It's very plain, you know – not like Toad's house – but I can teach you to row, and swim, and you'll soon be as handy on the water as any of us."

The Mole was so touched by his kindness that he could not answer, and had to brush away a tear or two with the back of his paw. But the Rat kindly looked in another direction, and soon the Mole's spirits revived again, and he was even able to give a sharp retort to a couple of moorhens who were sniggering about his bedraggled appearance.

When they got home, the Rat made a bright fire in the parlour, and planted the Mole in an arm-chair in front of it. He found a dressing-gown and slippers for him, and told him river stories till supper-time. Very thrilling stories they were, too, to an earth-dwelling animal like Mole. Stories about weirs, and sudden floods, and leaping pike, and about herons, and how particular they were whom they spoke to; and about adventures down drains, and night-fishings with Otter, or excursions far afield with Badger.

Supper was a most cheerful meal; but very shortly afterwards a terribly sleepy Mole had to be escorted upstairs to the best bedroom, where he laid his head on his pillow in great contentment, knowing that his new-found friend the River was lapping at his windowsill.

This day was only the first of many days that to Mole were full of interest as the ripening summer moved onward. He learnt to swim and to row, and entered into the joy of the river; and with his ear to the reed-stems he caught, at intervals, something of what the wind went whispering so constantly among them.

Chapter Two The Open Road

“Ratty,” said the Mole suddenly, one bright summer morning, “if you please, I want to ask you a favour.”

The Water Rat was sitting on the river bank, singing a little song. He had just composed it himself. That morning he had been swimming in the river, along with his friends the ducks. When the ducks put their heads underwater suddenly, as ducks will, he would dive down and tickle their necks, till they were forced to come to the surface again in a hurry, spluttering and angry and shaking their feathers at him. At last they implored him to go away and leave them alone.

So the Rat went away, and sat on the river bank in the sun, and made up a song about them, which he called:

“DUCKS’ DITTY.”

All along the backwater,
Through the rushes tall,
Ducks are a-dabbling,
Up tails all!

Ducks’ tails, drakes’ tails,
Yellow feet a-quiver,
Yellow bills all out of sight
Busy in the river!

Slushy green undergrowth
Where the roach swim—
Here we keep our larder,
Cool and full and dim.

Everyone for what he likes!
We like to be
Heads down, tails up,
Dabbling free!

High in the blue above
Swifts whirl and call—
We are down a-dabbling
Up tails all!

“I don’t think much of that little song, Rat,” observed the Mole cautiously. He was no poet himself.

“Nor do the ducks,” replied the Rat cheerfully. “They say, ‘Why can’t we do what we like without people sitting on banks and watching us and making up poetry about us? What nonsense it is!’ That’s what the ducks say.”

“So it is,” said the Mole.

“No, it isn’t!” cried the Rat indignantly.

“Well, then, it isn’t,” replied the Mole soothingly. “But what I wanted to ask you was, won’t you take me to call on Mr. Toad? I’ve heard so much about him, and I so want to meet him.”

“Why, certainly,” said the good-natured Rat, jumping to his feet. “Get the boat out, and we’ll paddle up there at once. It’s never the wrong time to call on Toad. Early or late, he’s always glad to see you, and always sorry when you go!”

“He must be very nice,” observed the Mole, as he got into the boat and took the oars.

“He is indeed the best of animals,” replied Rat. “So simple, good-natured, and affectionate. Perhaps he’s not very clever; and maybe he is boastful and conceited. But he has got some great qualities, has Toady.”

Rounding a bend in the river, they came in sight of a handsome, dignified old house of mellowed red brick, with lawns reaching down to the water’s edge.

“There’s Toad Hall,” said the Rat; “and that creek on the left, where the notice-board says ‘Private,’ leads to his boat-house, where we’ll leave the boat. The stables are to the right. That’s the banqueting-hall you’re looking at now – very old, that is. Toad is rich, you know, and this is one of the nicest houses in these parts, though we never admit as much to Toad.”

They glided up the creek to a large boat-house. Here they saw many handsome boats, slung on ropes from the cross beams or hauled up on a slip, but none in the water; and the place had an unused air.

The Rat looked around. “I understand,” said he. “Boating is finished. He’s tired of it. I wonder what new fad he has taken up now? Come along; we shall hear all about it soon enough.”

They left their boat, and strolled across the flower-decked lawns in search of Toad. They found him resting in a wicker garden-chair, with a preoccupied expression on his face, and a large map spread out on his knees.

He jumped up on seeing them. “Hooray!” he cried, “this is splendid!” He shook their paws warmly. “How kind of you!” he went on. “I was just going to send a boat down the river for you, Ratty, to fetch you up here at once. I want you badly – both of you. Now come inside and have something to eat! You don’t know how lucky it is, your turning up just now!”

“Let’s sit quiet a bit, Toady!” said the Rat, throwing himself into an easy chair. The Mole took another, and made a civil remark about Toad’s “delightful residence.”

“Finest house on the whole river,” cried Toad boisterously. “Or anywhere else, for that matter,” he could not help adding.

The Rat nudged the Mole. Unfortunately the Toad saw him do it, and turned very red. There was a moment’s painful silence.

Then Toad burst out laughing. “All right, Ratty,” he said. “It’s only my way, you know. And it’s not a bad house, is it? Now, look here. You are the very animals I wanted. You’ve got to help me. It’s most important!”

“It’s about your rowing, I suppose,” said the Rat. “You’re getting on fairly well, though you splash a good bit still. You may—”

“O, pooh! boating!” interrupted the Toad, in great disgust. “Silly boyish stuff. I’ve given that up. Sheer waste of time, that’s what it is. It makes me downright sorry to see you fellows spending all your energy in that aimless manner. No, I’ve discovered the real thing, the only genuine occupation for a lifetime. Come with me, dear Ratty, and your friend also: come to the stable-yard, and you shall see what you shall see!”

The Toad led the way to the stable-yard, with the mistrustful Rat following. There, just outside the coach house, they saw a gipsy caravan, shining with newness, painted canary-yellow, with green and red wheels.

“There you are!” cried the Toad. “There’s real life for you. The open road, the dusty highway, the heath, the hedgerows, and the rolling downs! Here today, up and off to somewhere else tomorrow! Travel, change, excitement! The whole world before you! And mind! this is the very finest cart of its sort that was ever built! Come inside – I planned it all myself, I did!”

The Mole was tremendously interested, and followed him eagerly up the steps and into the caravan. The Rat only snorted and thrust his hands deep into his pockets, remaining where he was.

It was indeed very compact and comfortable. It had little sleeping bunks; a little table that folded up against the wall; a cooking-stove, lockers, bookshelves, a bird-cage with a bird in it; and pots, pans, jugs and kettles of every size.

“All complete!” said the Toad triumphantly, pulling open a locker. “You see – biscuits, potted lobster, sardines – everything you can possibly want. Soda-water here – writing paper there – bacon, jam, and dominoes – you’ll find,” he continued, as they went outside again, “you’ll find that nothing has been forgotten, when we make our start this afternoon.”

“I beg your pardon,” said the Rat slowly, “but did I hear you say something about ‘we,’ and ‘start,’ and ‘this afternoon?’”

“Now, good old Ratty,” said Toad, imploringly, “don’t begin talking in that sniffy sort of way, because you know you’ve got to come. I can’t possibly manage without you, so please don’t argue. You surely don’t mean to stick to your dull fusty old river all your life, and just live in a hole in a bank? I want to show you the world! I’m going to make an animal of you, my boy!”

“I don’t care,” said the Rat, doggedly. “I’m not coming, and that’s flat. And I am going to stick to my old river, and live in a hole, as I’ve always done. And what’s more, Mole’s going to stick to me too, aren’t you, Mole?”

“Of course I am,” said the Mole, loyally. “I’ll always stick to you, Rat. All the same, it sounds as if it might have been – well, rather fun, you know!” he added wistfully.

Poor Mole! Adventure was so new a thing to him, and so thrilling; and he had fallen in love at first sight with the canary-coloured caravan and all its little fitments.

The Rat could tell what he was thinking. He hated disappointing people, and he was fond of the Mole. Toad was watching both of them.

“Come along in, and have some lunch,” Toad said, “and we’ll talk it over. We needn’t decide anything in a hurry. Of course, I don’t really care. I only want to give pleasure to you fellows. ‘Live for others!’ That’s my motto.”

During lunch – which was excellent – the Toad let himself go. He played upon the inexperienced Mole as on a harp. Naturally talkative, he painted the prospects of the trip and the joys of the open road in such glowing colours that the Mole could hardly sit still for excitement. Somehow, it seemed taken for granted that the trip was settled; and the Rat, though still unconvinced, was too good-natured to object. He could not bear to disappoint his two friends, who were already deep in schemes, planning out each day for several weeks ahead.

When they were ready, the triumphant Toad led his companions to the paddock and set them to capture the old grey horse, who had not been consulted, and to his own extreme annoyance, had been told by Toad that he would have the dustiest job in this dusty expedition. The horse frankly preferred the paddock, and took a good deal of catching.

Meantime Toad hung nosebags, nets of onions, bundles of hay, and baskets from the bottom of the cart. At last the horse was caught and harnessed, and they set off, all talking at once, each animal either trudging by the side of the caravan or sitting on the shafts.

It was a golden afternoon. The smell of the dust they kicked up was rich and satisfying; out of thick orchards beside the road, birds whistled to them cheerily; good-natured wayfarers, passing them, called out “Good-day,” or stopped to say nice things about their beautiful cart; and rabbits, sitting in the hedgerows, held up their fore-paws, and said, “O my! O my! O my!”

Late in the evening, tired and happy and miles from home, they drew up on a remote common far from any houses, turned the horse loose to graze, and ate their supper sitting on the grass. Toad talked about all he was going to do in the days to come, while the stars grew fuller, and a yellow moon came to keep them company and listen to their talk.

At last they turned in to their little bunks in the cart; and Toad sleepily said, "Well, good night, you fellows! This is the real life for a gentleman! Talk about your old river!"

"I don't talk about my river," replied the patient Rat. "But I think about it," he added pathetically, in a lower tone: "I think about it all the time!"

The Mole reached out from under his blanket, felt for the Rat's paw in the darkness, and gave it a squeeze. "I'll do whatever you like, Ratty," he whispered. "Shall we run away tomorrow morning, and go back to our dear old hole on the river?"

"No, no, we'll see it out," whispered back the Rat. "Thanks, but I ought to stick by Toad till this trip is ended. It wouldn't be safe for him to be left to himself. It won't take very long. His fads never do. Good night!"

The end was indeed nearer than even the Rat suspected.

After so much open air and excitement the Toad slept very soundly, and no amount of shaking could rouse him out of bed next morning. So while the Rat saw to the horse, and lit a fire, and cleaned last night's dishes, the Mole trudged to the nearest village, a long way off, for milk and eggs and other things the Toad had, of course, forgotten. The two tired animals were resting by the time Toad appeared, fresh and happy, remarking what an easy life they were all leading now, after the fatigue of housekeeping at home.

They had a pleasant ramble that day over grassy downs and along narrow lanes. They camped as before, on a common, only this time the two guests took care that Toad should do his fair share of work.

In consequence, the next morning Toad was not so rapturous about the simplicity of this easy life, and indeed attempted to go back to bed and had to be hauled out. Their way lay, as before, across country, and it was not till the afternoon that they came out on the high-road, their first high-road. And there disaster sprang out on them – disaster unforeseen, but overwhelming in its effect on Toad.

They were strolling along the high-road, the Mole by the horse's head, talking to him, the Toad and the Rat walking behind the cart talking together – at least Toad was talking, and Rat was saying "Oh, yes," and thinking of something very different – when far behind them they heard a faint warning hum, like the drone of a distant bee.

Glancing back, they saw a small cloud of dust, advancing on them at incredible speed, while from out of the dust a faint "Poop-poop!" wailed like an uneasy animal in pain. In an instant (as it seemed) the peaceful scene was changed, and with a blast of wind and a whirl of sound that made them jump for the nearest ditch, It was on them!

The "Poop-poop" rang with a brazen shout in their ears. They had a moment's glimpse of an interior of glittering glass and rich leather; and the magnificent motor-car, immense, breath-snatching, with its driver hugging his

wheel, flung a blinding cloud of dust around them, and then dwindled to a speck in the far distance, changing back into a droning bee once more.

The old grey horse, who had been dreaming of his quiet paddock, naturally took fright. Rearing, plunging, and backing steadily, in spite of all the Mole's efforts, he drove the cart backwards towards the deep ditch at the side of the road. It wavered an instant – then there was a heart-rending crash – and the canary-coloured cart, their pride and joy, lay in the ditch, a hopeless wreck.

The Rat danced furiously up and down in the road. "You villains!" he shouted, shaking both his fists, "You scoundrels, you highwaymen, you road-hogs! I'll have the law on you! I'll take you through the Courts!" His homesickness had quite slipped away, and he was trying to remember all the fine and biting things he used to say to steam-launches when the waves of their wash used to flood his parlour-carpet back at home.

Toad sat straight down in the middle of the dusty road, his legs stretched out before him, and stared fixedly in the direction of the disappearing motor-car. He breathed short, his face was placid, and at intervals he faintly murmured "Poop-poop!"

The Mole was busy trying to quiet the horse. Once he succeeded, he went to look at the cart, on its side in the ditch. It was a sorry sight, with panels and windows smashed, axles hopelessly bent, one wheel off, sardine-tins scattered around, and the bird in the bird-cage calling pitifully to be let out.

The Rat came to help him, but together they could not pull the cart upright. "Hi! Toad!" they cried. "Come and lend a hand!"

The Toad did not answer. He did not budge from his seat in the road; so they went to see what was the matter with him. They found him in a sort of a trance, a happy smile on his face, his eyes still fixed on the dusty wake of their destroyer. And he was still murmuring, "Poop-poop!"

The Rat shook him by the shoulder. "Are you going to help us, Toad?" he demanded.

"Glorious, stirring sight!" murmured Toad. "The real way to travel! The only way to travel! Here today – in next week tomorrow! O bliss! O poop-poop! O my! O my!"

"O stop being an idiot, Toad!" cried the Mole despairingly.

"And to think I never knew!" went on the Toad dreamily. "All those wasted years, I never knew! But now – now that I know – what a bright track lies before me! What dust-clouds I shall leave behind as I speed on my reckless way! What carts I shall fling carelessly into the ditch with my magnificent rush! Horrid little carts – common carts – canary-coloured carts!"

"What shall we do with him?" the Mole asked the Water Rat.

"Nothing at all," replied the Rat firmly. "Because there is nothing to be done. I know Toad; and he is now possessed. He has got a new craze, and he'll continue like that for days now, in a happy dream, quite useless for all practical purposes. Never mind him. Let's go and see what we can do about the cart."

A careful inspection showed them that the cart would travel no longer. The axles were in a hopeless state, and the missing wheel was shattered into pieces.

So the Rat took the horse's reins to lead it, carrying the bird cage in his other hand. "Come on!" he said grimly to the Mole. "It's five or six miles to the nearest town, and we shall just have to walk it."

"But what about Toad?" asked the Mole anxiously. "We can't leave him here, sitting in the middle of the road by himself, in the distracted state he's in! It's not safe. Supposing another Thing were to come along?"

"O, bother Toad," said the Rat savagely; "I've done with him!"

They set off, but had not gone very far when there was a pattering of feet behind them, and Toad caught them up and took their arms. He was still breathing short and staring into vacancy.

"Now, look here, Toad!" said the Rat sharply: "as soon as we get to the town, you'll have to go straight to the police-station, and see if they know who that motor-car belongs to, and lodge a complaint against it. And then you'll have to go to a wheelwright's and arrange for the cart to be fetched and mended. Meanwhile, the Mole and I will go to an inn and find comfortable rooms where we can stay till the cart's ready, and till your nerves have recovered from their shock."

"Police-station! Complaint!" murmured Toad dreamily. "Me complain of that beautiful, that heavenly vision! Mend the cart! I've done with carts for ever. I never want to see the cart again. O, Ratty! You can't think how obliged I am to you for coming on this trip! I wouldn't have gone without you, and then I might never have seen that – that swan, that sunbeam, that thunderbolt! I might never have heard that entrancing sound, or smelt that bewitching smell!"

The Rat turned from him in despair. "You see?" he said to the Mole, over Toad's head. "He's hopeless. I give up. When we get to the town we'll go to the railway station, and with luck we may get a train that'll take us back to the riverbank tonight!"

On reaching the town they went straight to the station and left Toad in a waiting-room, giving a porter twopence to keep a strict eye on him. They then left the horse at an inn stable, and gave what directions they could about the cart. Eventually, a slow train carried them to a station not very far from Toad Hall. They escorted the spell-bound, sleep-walking Toad to his door, and instructed his housekeeper to feed him and put him to bed.

Then they got out their boat from the boat-house, rowed home, and at a very late hour sat down to supper in their own cosy riverside parlour, to the Rat's great joy.

The following evening the Mole, who had taken things easy all day, was sitting on the bank fishing, when the Rat came strolling along to find him.

"Heard the news?" he said. "There's nothing else being talked about, all along the river bank. Toad went up to Town by an early train this morning. And he has ordered a large and very expensive motor-car."

Chapter Three

The Wild Wood

The Mole was longing to meet the Badger. He seemed to be such an important person, even though he was not often seen. But whenever the Mole mentioned his wish to the Water Rat, he always found himself put off.

"It's all right," the Rat would say. "Badger'll turn up some day or other, and then I'll introduce you."

"Couldn't you ask him here to dinner?" said the Mole.

"He wouldn't come," replied the Rat simply. "Badger hates Society, and invitations, and dinner, and all that sort of thing."

"Well, then, supposing we go and call on him?" suggested the Mole.

"O, he wouldn't like that at all," said the Rat, quite alarmed. "He's so very shy, he'd be sure to be offended. I've never called on him at his own home, though I know him so well. Besides, we can't. It's quite out of the question, because he lives in the very middle of the Wild Wood."

"That doesn't matter," said the Mole. "You told me the Wild Wood was all right."

"O, I know, I know," replied the Rat evasively. "But I think we won't go there just now. It's a long way, and Badger wouldn't be at home at this time of year anyhow. He'll come along some day, if you wait quietly."

The Mole had to be content with this. But the Badger never came along, and soon summer was long over. Cold and frost kept them much indoors, and the swollen river raced past outside their windows with a speed that mocked at boating of any sort. Mole found his thoughts dwelling again on the solitary grey Badger, who lived by himself in the middle of the Wild Wood.

In the winter time the Rat slept a great deal, going to bed early and rising late. During the day he sometimes scribbled poetry or did small jobs around the house; and, of course, there were always animals dropping in for a chat, and a good deal of story-telling and comparing notes on the past summer and all its doings.

Such a rich chapter it had been on the river-bank, when one looked back on it all! With so many scenes, and so brightly coloured! Purple loosestrife had arrived early, shaking luxuriant tangled locks along the edge of the water. Willow-herb, tender and wistful, like a pink sunset cloud, was not slow to follow. Comfrey, the purple hand-in-hand with the white, crept forth next; and at last the diffident dog-rose stepped delicately on the stage, and one knew that June at last was here. Then came meadow-sweet, and the play was ready to begin.

And what a play it had been! Drowsy animals, snug in their holes while the wind and rain battered at their doors, recalled still mornings, an hour before

sunrise, when the white mist clung closely along the surface of the water; then the shock of the early plunge in, the scamper along the bank, and the radiant transformation when suddenly the sun was seen again, and the grey earth and water turned to gold. They recalled the languorous siesta of hot mid-day, deep in green undergrowth, the sun striking through in tiny golden shafts; the boating and bathing of the afternoons, the rambles along dusty lanes and through yellow cornfields; and the long, cool evenings of friendly chat. There was plenty to talk about on those short winter days.

Even so, the Mole had a good deal of spare time on his hands. So one afternoon, when the Rat was dozing in his arm-chair with his verses on his knee, he decided to go out by himself and explore the Wild Wood, and perhaps strike up an acquaintance with Mr. Badger.

It was a cold, still afternoon with a steely sky overhead, when he slipped out of the warm parlour into the open air. The country lay bare and entirely leafless around him, and he thought that he had never seen so far into the copses, dells, quarries and the hidden places, which now in the winter exposed all their former secrets. It was pitiful in a way, and yet exhilarating. The Mole liked the country undecorated, hard, and stripped of its green finery. He had got down to the bare bones of it, and they were fine and strong and simple. He did not want the billowy drapery of beech and elm; and cheerfully he pushed on towards the Wild Wood, which lay before him low and threatening, like a black reef in a southern sea.

There was nothing to alarm him on first entering the wood. Twigs crackled under his feet, logs tripped him, strange funguses on stumps startled him for the moment; but that was all fun, and exciting. It led him on to where there was less light, and trees crouched nearer and nearer, and holes made ugly mouths at him on either side.

Everything was very still now. The dusk advanced on him steadily, rapidly, gathering in behind and before; and the daylight seemed to be draining away like flood-water.

Then the faces began.

It was over his shoulder, and indistinctly, that Mole first thought he saw a face; a little evil wedge-shaped face, looking out at him from a hole. When he turned and confronted it, the thing had vanished.

He quickened his pace, telling himself not to begin imagining things. He passed another hole, and another, and another; and then – yes! – no! – yes! A little narrow face, with hard eyes, had flashed for an instant from a hole, and was gone. He hesitated, braced up his courage and strode on. Then suddenly every hole, far and near, and there were hundreds of them, seemed to possess its face, all fixing on him glances of malice and hatred: all hard-eyed and sharp and evil.

If he could only get away from the holes in the banks, he thought, there would be no more faces. He swung off the path and plunged into the untrodden places of the wood.

Then the whistling began.

Very faint and shrill it was, and far behind him, when first he heard it; but somehow it made him hurry forward. Then, still very faint and shrill, it sounded far ahead of him, and made him hesitate and want to go back. As he halted in indecision it started on either side, and seemed to stretch throughout the whole length of the wood. They were alert and ready, whoever they were! And he – he was alone, and unarmed, and far from any help; and the night was closing in.

Then the pattering began.

He thought it was only falling leaves at first, so slight and delicate was the sound. But then it took on a regular rhythm, and he knew it could be nothing else but the pat-pat-pat of little feet a very long way off. Was it in front or behind? It appeared to be first one, and then the other. It grew and it multiplied, till as he listened anxiously, it seemed to be closing in on him from every side.

While he stood still to listen, a rabbit came running hard towards him through the trees. The Mole waited, expecting it to slow down, or to swerve away from him. Instead, the animal almost brushed him as he dashed past, his face set and hard, his eyes staring.

“Get out of this, you fool, get out!” the Mole heard him mutter as he disappeared down a friendly burrow.

The pattering increased, till it sounded like hail on the dry leaf-carpet spread around him. The whole wood seemed running now, running hard, hunting, chasing, closing in round something or somebody. In panic, he began to run too, aimlessly, he knew not where. He ran up against things, he fell over things, he darted under things and dodged round things.

At last he took refuge in the deep dark hollow of an old beech tree, which offered shelter and concealment – perhaps even safety, but who could tell? He was too tired to run any further, and could only cower and hide in the dry leaves which had drifted into the hollow. And as he lay there panting and trembling, and listened to the whistlings and the patterings outside, he knew it at last, in all its fullness – that thing which the Rat had vainly tried to shield him from – the Terror of the Wild Wood!

Meantime the Rat, warm and comfortable, dozed by his fireside. His paper of half-finished verses slipped from his knee, his head fell back, and his mouth opened as he dreamt of green-banked rivers. Then the fire crackled, and he woke with a start. Remembering his verses, he reached down for them, pored over them for a minute, and then looked round for the Mole to ask him if he knew a good rhyme for something or other.

But the Mole was not there.

The Rat listened for a time. The house seemed very quiet.

Then he called “Moly!” several times, and, receiving no answer, got up and went into the hall.

The Mole’s cap was missing from its peg. His boots were also gone.

The Rat left the house, and carefully examined the muddy surface of the ground outside. There were the Mole’s tracks, fresh and sharp. He could see the imprints of them in the mud, running along purposefully, leading straight to the Wild Wood.

The Rat looked very grave, and stood in deep thought for a minute or two. Then he re-entered the house, strapped a belt round his waist, shoved a pair of pistols into it, took up a stout cudgel that stood in a corner of the hall, and set off swiftly for the Wild Wood.

It was already getting towards dusk when he reached the first fringe of trees and plunged into the wood without hesitation, looking anxiously for any sign of his friend. Here and there wicked little faces popped out of holes, but vanished immediately at the sight of the Rat with his pistols, and the great ugly cudgel in his grasp. The whistling and pattering, which he had heard plainly on his first entry, died away, and all was very still.

He made his way boldly through the length of the wood, to its furthest edge; then, leaving the paths, he set himself to criss-cross it, laboriously working over the whole ground, and all the time calling out cheerfully. “Moly, Moly! Where are you? It’s me – it’s old Rat!”

He had patiently hunted through the wood for an hour or more, when at last to his joy he heard a little answering cry. Following the sound, he made his way through the gathering darkness to the foot of an old beech tree, with a hole in it. From out of the hole came a feeble voice.

“Ratty! Is that really you?”

The Rat crept into the hollow, and there he found the Mole, exhausted and still trembling.

“O Rat!” he cried, “I’ve been so frightened, you can’t think!”

“I quite understand,” said the Rat soothingly. “You shouldn’t really have done it, Mole. We river-bankers hardly ever come here by ourselves. If we have to come, we come in couples, at least; then we’re generally all right. Besides, there are a hundred things one has to know, which we understand all about and you don’t yet. I mean passwords, and signs, and plants you carry in your pocket, and verses you repeat, and dodges and tricks you practise; all simple enough when you know them, but you need to know them if you’re small, or you’ll find yourself in trouble. Of course if you were Badger or Otter, it would be quite another matter.”

“Surely the brave Mr. Toad wouldn’t mind coming here by himself, would he?” asked the Mole.

“Old Toad?” said the Rat, laughing heartily. “He wouldn’t show his face here alone, not for a whole hatful of golden guineas.”

The Mole was greatly cheered by the sound of the Rat's careless laughter, as well as by the sight of his stick and his gleaming pistols. He stopped shivering and began to feel more like himself again.

"Now then," said the Rat, "we really must make a start for home while there's still a little light left. It will never do to spend the night here, you understand. Too cold, for one thing."

"Dear Ratty," said the poor Mole, "I'm dreadfully sorry, but I'm simply dead beat. You must let me rest here a while longer, and get my strength back, if I'm to get home at all."

"O, all right," said the good-natured Rat. "It's pretty nearly pitch dark now, anyhow; and there ought to be a bit of a moon later."

So the Mole got well into the dry leaves and presently dropped off into a troubled, broken sleep; while the Rat covered himself up, too, as best he might, and lay patiently waiting, with a pistol in his paw.

When at last the Mole woke up, much refreshed, the Rat said, "Now then! I'll just take a look outside and see if everything's quiet, and then we must be off."

He went to the entrance of the hole and put his head out. Then the Mole heard him saying quietly to himself, "Hullo! hullo! Here's a fix!"

"What's up, Ratty?" asked the Mole.

"Snow is up," replied the Rat briefly; "or rather, down. It's snowing hard."

The Mole came and crouched beside him to look out. He saw that the wood that had been so dreadful was quite changed. The black hollows and pitfalls were vanishing fast, and a gleaming carpet was springing up everywhere, looking too delicate to be trodden upon by rough feet. A fine powder filled the air and caressed the cheek with a tingle in its touch, and the snowy ground seemed to glow.

"Well, well, it can't be helped," said the Rat. "We must make a start, and take our chance. The worst of it is, I don't exactly know where we are. And this snow makes everything look so very different."

It did indeed. The Mole would not have known that it was the same wood. However, they set out bravely, in the direction that seemed most promising, holding on to each other and pretending cheerfully that they recognized the trees that grimly and silently greeted them, or saw gaps or paths with a familiar appearance, in the endless unvarying scene of black tree-trunks and white space.

An hour or two later – they had lost all count of time – they halted, dispirited, weary, and hopelessly lost, and sat down on a fallen tree-trunk to recover their breath and consider what to do. They were aching with fatigue and bruised with tumbles; they had fallen into several holes and got wet through. The snow was getting so deep that they could hardly drag their little legs through it, and the trees were more like each other than ever. There seemed to be no end to this wood, and no way out.

“We can’t sit here very long,” said the Rat. “We shall have to move, or do something. The cold is awful, and the snow will soon be too deep for us to wade through.” He peered about. “Look,” he went on, “there’s a sort of dell down here, where the ground seems all hilly and humpy. We’ll make our way down into that, and try and find some shelter, a cave or hole with a dry floor, out of the snow and the wind, and there we’ll rest before we try again, for we’re both pretty dead beat. Besides, the snow may stop, or something may turn up.”

So once more they got on their feet, and struggled down into the dell, where they hunted about for a cave or some corner that would protect them from the wind and the whirling snow. Suddenly the Mole tripped up and fell forward on his face with a squeal.

“O my leg!” he cried. “O my poor shin!” and he sat up on the snow and held his leg in both his front paws.

“Poor old Mole!” said the Rat kindly. “Let’s have a look at your leg. Yes, you’ve cut your shin, sure enough. Wait till I get out my handkerchief, and I’ll tie it up for you.”

“I must have tripped over a hidden tree stump,” said the Mole miserably. “O, my! O, my!”

“It’s a very clean cut,” said the Rat, examining it attentively. “That was never done by a tree stump. Looks as if it was made by a sharp edge of something metal. Funny!” He pondered awhile, looking at the humps and slopes that surrounded them.

“Well, it hurts just the same, whatever did it,” said the Mole.

But the Rat, after carefully tying up the leg with his handkerchief, began busily scraping in the snow. He scratched and shovelled, while the Mole waited impatiently, remarking, “O, come on, Rat!”

Suddenly the Rat cried “Hooray!” and then “Hooray-oo-ray-oo-ray-oo-ray!” and started to dance a feeble jig in the snow.

“What have you found, Ratty?” asked the Mole.

“Come and see!” said the delighted Rat.

The Mole hobbled up to the spot and had a good look.

“Well,” he said at last, slowly, “I see it right enough. Seen lots of them before. It’s a door-scraper. So what? Why dance jigs around a door-scraper?”

“But don’t you see what it means, you – you dull-witted animal?” cried the Rat impatiently.

“Of course I do,” replied the Mole. “It simply means that some very careless person has left his door-scraper lying about in the middle of the Wild Wood, just where it’s sure to trip everybody up. Very thoughtless of him.”

“O, dear! O, dear!” cried the Rat, in despair at his obtuseness. “Here, stop arguing and come and scrape!” And he set to work again, making the snow fly in all directions.

After a while his efforts were rewarded, and a very shabby door-mat lay exposed to view.

“There, what did I tell you?” exclaimed the Rat in great triumph.

“Absolutely nothing whatever,” replied the Mole, with perfect truthfulness. “You’ve found another piece of domestic litter that’s been thrown away, and I suppose you’re happy. Go ahead and dance your jig round that if you’ve got to, and get it over, and then perhaps we won’t waste any more time over rubbish-heaps.”

“Do you mean to say,” cried the excited Rat, “that this door-mat doesn’t tell you anything?”

“Really, Rat,” said the Mole peevishly, “I think we’ve had enough of this foolishness. Who ever heard of a door-mat telling anyone anything?”

“Now look here, you thick-headed beast,” replied the Rat, really angry, “not another word. Just scratch and dig if you want to sleep dry and warm to-night, for it’s our last chance!”

The Rat attacked a snow-bank beside them, poking with his cudgel and then digging with fury; and the Mole scraped busily too, more to oblige the Rat than for any other reason, for he thought that his friend was getting light-headed.

After ten minutes’ hard work, the point of the Rat’s cudgel struck something that sounded hollow. He worked till he could get a paw through; then he called the Mole to come and help him. The two animals dug together, till at last the result of their labours stood in view of the astonished Mole.

In the side of the snow-bank stood a solid-looking little door, painted dark green. An iron bell-pull hung by the side, and below it, on a small brass plate, neatly engraved in capital letters, they could read by the moonlight:

MR. BADGER.

The Mole fell backwards on the snow from sheer surprise and delight.

“Rat!” he cried, “you’re a wonder! I see it all now! You worked it out, step by step, in that wise head of yours, from the very moment that I fell and cut my shin, and you looked at the cut, and at once your majestic mind said to itself, ‘Door-scraper!’ And then you set to work and found the very door-scraper! Some people would have been satisfied with that; but not you. ‘Let me just find a door-mat,’ says you to yourself, ‘and my theory is proved!’ And of course you found your door-mat. ‘Now,’ says you, ‘that door exists, and we must find it!’ If I only had your head, Ratty—”

“But as you haven’t,” interrupted the Rat, “I suppose you’re going to sit on the snow all night and talk? Get up and ring that bell-pull as hard as you can, while I hammer on the door!”

While the Rat attacked the door with his stick, the Mole sprang up at the bell-pull, and swung there, both feet off the ground. From a long way off they could faintly hear a deep-toned bell respond.

Chapter Four

Mr. Badger

They waited patiently for what seemed a very long time, stamping in the snow to keep their feet warm. At last they heard the sound of slow shuffling footsteps approaching inside. It sounded, as the Mole remarked to the Rat, like someone walking in carpet slippers that were too large for him and worn out; which was intelligent of Mole, because that was exactly what it was.

There was the noise of a bolt shot back, and the door opened a few inches, enough to show a long snout and a pair of sleepy blinking eyes.

“Now, the very next time this happens,” said a gruff and suspicious voice, “I shall be exceedingly angry. Who is it, disturbing people on such a night? Speak up!”

“Oh, Badger,” cried the Rat, “let us in, please. It’s me, Rat, and my friend Mole, and we’ve lost our way in the snow.”

“What, Ratty, my dear little man!” exclaimed the Badger, in quite a different voice. “Come in, both of you. Why, you must be perished. Lost in the snow! And in the Wild Wood, too, and at this time of night! But come in.”

The two animals tumbled over each other in their eagerness to get inside, and heard the door shut behind them with great joy and relief.

The Badger, who wore a long dressing-gown, and whose slippers were very down at heel, carried a candlestick in his paw and had probably been on his way to bed. He looked kindly down on them and patted both their heads.

“This is not the sort of night for small animals to be out,” he said. “I’m afraid you’ve been up to some of your pranks again, Ratty. But come into the kitchen. There’s a good fire there, and supper.”

He shuffled on in front of them, carrying the light, and they followed him down a long, gloomy and decidedly shabby passage, into a central hall; out of which they could dimly see other long tunnel-like passages branching, looking mysterious and without apparent end. There were doors in the hall as well – sturdy oak doors. One of these the Badger flung open, and they found themselves in the glowing warmth of a large fire-lit kitchen.

The floor was well-worn red brick, and on the wide hearth burnt a fire of logs. A couple of high-backed settles faced each other on either side of the fire. In the middle of the room stood a long plain trestle table, with benches down each side. At one end of it, where an arm-chair stood pushed back, were spread the remains of the Badger’s supper.

Rows of spotless plates winked from the shelves of the dresser at the far end of the room, and from the rafters overhead hung hams, bundles of dried herbs, nets of onions, and baskets of eggs. It seemed a place where heroes could feast after victory, or weary harvesters could celebrate their Harvest

Home, or where two or three friends could sit about as they pleased and eat and talk in comfort. The ruddy brick floor smiled up at the smoky ceiling; the oaken settles, shiny with long wear, exchanged cheerful glances with each other; and the merry firelight flickered and played over everything.

The kindly Badger thrust them down on a settle to toast themselves at the fire, and told them to remove their wet coats and boots. Then he fetched dressing-gowns and slippers, and he bathed the Mole's shin with warm water and mended the cut with sticking-plaster. In the embracing warmth and light, warm and dry at last, with weary legs propped up in front of them, and a clink of plates being arranged on the table behind, it felt as if the cold and trackless Wild Wood was miles and miles away, and all that they had suffered in it seemed a half-forgotten dream.

When at last they were thoroughly warmed up, the Badger summoned them to the table, where he had been busy setting out a meal. They had felt hungry before, but when they saw the supper that was spread for them, it was only a question of what they should attack first when all the food was so attractive.

Conversation was impossible for a long time; and when it was slowly resumed, it was that regrettable sort of conversation that results from talking with your mouth full. The Badger did not mind that sort of thing, nor did he take any notice of elbows on the table, or everybody speaking at once. He sat in his arm-chair at the head of the table, and nodded gravely as the animals told their story; and he did not seem surprised or shocked at anything, and he never said, "I told you so," or remarked that they ought to have done so-and-so. The Mole began to feel very friendly towards him.

When supper was finished at last, and each animal felt as full as possible, they gathered round the glowing embers of the great wood fire, and thought how jolly it was to be sitting up so late, and so well-fed. After they had chatted for a time about things in general, the Badger said heartily,

"Now then! tell us the news from your part of the world. How's old Toad going on?"

"Oh, from bad to worse," said the Rat gravely, while the Mole, basking in the firelight with his feet up, tried to look properly mournful. "Another smash-up only last week, and a bad one. You see, he will insist on driving himself, and he's hopeless at it. If he'd only employ a decent, well-trained animal, pay him good wages, and leave the driving to him, he'd get on all right. But no; Toad's convinced he's a heaven-born driver, and nobody can teach him anything."

"How many has he had?" inquired the Badger gloomily.

"Smashes, or machines?" asked the Rat. "Oh, well, it's the same thing with Toad. This is the seventh. As for the others – you know that coach-house of his? Well, it's piled up to the roof with fragments of motor-cars! That's the remains of the other six."

“He’s been in hospital three times,” put in the Mole; “and as for the fines he’s had to pay, it’s simply awful to think of.”

“Yes, and that’s part of the trouble,” continued the Rat. “Toad’s rich; but he’s not a millionaire. And he’s quite regardless of law and order. He’ll be killed or ruined, sooner or later. Badger! We’re his friends – oughtn’t we to do something?”

The Badger thought hard for a while. “Look here!” he said at last, rather severely; “of course you know I can’t do anything now?”

His two friends agreed, for they quite understood that no animal is ever expected to do anything strenuous, or heroic, or even moderately active during winter. All are sleepy – some are actually asleep. All are weather-bound, more or less; and all are resting from the arduous days and nights of summer.

“Very well then!” continued the Badger. “But, once the year has really turned, and the nights are shorter, and one starts to feel fidgety and wanting to be up and doing by sunrise – you know!”

Both animals nodded. They knew.

“Well, then,” went on the Badger, “the three of us will take Toad seriously in hand. We’ll stand no nonsense. We’ll bring him back to reason. We’ll make him be a sensible Toad. We’ll – you’re asleep, Rat!”

“Not me!” said the Rat, waking up with a jerk.

“He’s been asleep two or three times since supper,” said the Mole, laughing. He himself was feeling quite wakeful and even lively, though he didn’t know why.

The reason was, of course, that he was naturally an underground animal, so the Badger’s house exactly suited him and made him feel at home; while the Rat, who slept every night in a bedroom with windows that opened onto a breezy river, naturally felt the atmosphere too still and oppressive.

“Well, it’s time we were all in bed,” said the Badger, getting up and fetching candlesticks. “Come along, you two, and I’ll show you your room. And take your time tomorrow morning – breakfast is at any hour you please!”

He led the two animals to a long room that seemed half bedchamber and half loft. The Badger’s winter stores took up half the room – piles of apples, turnips, and potatoes, baskets full of nuts, and jars of honey; but the two little white beds on the remainder of the floor looked soft and inviting, and the linen on them smelt beautifully of lavender. The Mole and the Water Rat, shaking off their garments in thirty seconds, tumbled in between the sheets in great contentment.

The two tired animals came down to breakfast very late next morning, and found a bright fire burning in the kitchen, and two young hedgehogs sitting on a bench at the table, eating porridge out of wooden bowls. The hedgehogs dropped their spoons, rose to their feet, and ducked their heads respectfully as the two entered.

“Sit down, sit down,” said the Rat pleasantly, “and go on with your porridge. Where have you youngsters come from? Lost your way in the snow, I suppose?”

“Yes, please, sir,” said the elder of the two hedgehogs respectfully. “Me and little Billy here, we was trying to find our way to school, and we lost ourselves, sir, and Billy he got frightened and cried. And at last we came up against Mr. Badger’s back door, and made so bold as to knock, sir, for Mr. Badger he’s a kind-hearted gentleman, as everyone knows—”

“I understand,” said the Rat, cutting some rashers from a side of bacon, while the Mole dropped eggs into a pan. “And what’s the weather like outside?”

“O, terrible bad, sir, terrible deep the snow is,” said the hedgehog. “No getting out for the likes of you gentlemen today.”

“Where’s Mr. Badger?” inquired the Mole, as he warmed the coffee-pot before the fire.

“He’s gone into his study, sir,” replied the hedgehog, “and he said he was going to be particular busy this morning, and on no account was he to be disturbed.”

This explanation, of course, was thoroughly understood by every one present. The fact is, as we have said, that when you live a life of intense activity for six months in the year, and of sleep and rest for the other six, you cannot be continually pleading sleepiness when there are people about. The animals knew well that Badger, having eaten a hearty breakfast, had retired to his study and settled in an arm-chair with his legs up and a red cotton handkerchief over his face, and was being “busy” in the usual way at this time of the year.

The front-door bell clanged loudly, and the Rat, who was very greasy with buttered toast, sent Billy, the smaller hedgehog, to see who it might be. There was a sound of much stamping in the hall, and soon Billy returned with the Otter, who hugged the Rat with a shout of affectionate greeting.

“Get off!” spluttered the Rat, with his mouth full.

“Thought I’d find you here all right,” said the Otter cheerfully. “They were all in a great state of alarm along River Bank this morning. Rat never been home all night – nor Mole either – something dreadful must have happened, they said; and the snow had covered up your tracks, of course. But I knew that when people were in any fix they mostly went to Badger, so I came here, through the Wild Wood!

“My! It was fine, coming through the snow as the red sun was rising and showing against the black tree-trunks! Every now and then masses of snow slid off the branches suddenly with a flop! making you jump and run for cover. Snow-castles and snow-caverns had sprung up out of nowhere in the night – I could have stayed and played with them for hours. Here and there great branches had been torn away by the sheer weight of the snow, and robins hopped on them in their perky conceited way, just as if they had done it themselves.

“A few rooks whirled over the trees, inspected the place, and flapped off homewards with a disgusted expression; but I met no sensible animal to ask for news. I found a rabbit sitting on a stump: he was pretty scared when I crept up behind him and placed a paw on his shoulder. But I managed to get out of him that Mole had been seen in the Wild Wood last night by a rabbit. It was the talk of the burrows, he said, how Mole was in a bad fix; how he had lost his way, and ‘They’ were up and out hunting. ‘Then why didn’t any of you do something?’ I asked. ‘There are hundreds of you, big stout fellows, as fat as butter, and you could have taken him in and made him safe and comfortable, or tried to, at any rate.’ ‘What, us?’ he said: ‘do something? us rabbits?’ So I left him. At any rate, I had learnt something; and if I had had the luck to meet any of ‘Them’ I’d have learnt something more.”

“Weren’t you at all nervous?” asked the Mole, some of yesterday’s terror coming back to him at the mention of the Wild Wood.

“Nervous?” The Otter showed a gleaming set of strong white teeth as he laughed. “I’d give ’em nerves if any of them tried anything on with me. Here, Mole, fry me some ham, like the good little chap you are. I’m frightfully hungry, and I’ve got loads to say to Ratty here. Haven’t seen him for ages.”

So the good-natured Mole, having cut some slices of ham, set the hedgehogs to fry it, and returned to his own breakfast, while the Otter and the Rat eagerly talked river-talk, which runs on and on like the babbling river itself.

The ham had been eaten when the Badger entered, yawning and rubbing his eyes, and greeted them all in his quiet, kind way. “It must be getting on for lunch time,” he remarked to the Otter. “Better stay and have it with us. You must be hungry, this cold morning.”

“Rather!” replied the Otter, winking at the Mole. “The sight of these greedy young hedgehogs stuffing themselves with fried ham makes me feel positively famished.”

The hedgehogs, who were just beginning to feel hungry again after their porridge, looked timidly up at Mr. Badger, but were too shy to say anything.

“Here, you two youngsters be off home to your mother,” said the Badger kindly. “I’ll send some one with you to show you the way.” He gave them sixpence each and a pat on the head, and they went off.

Presently the four animals all sat down to lunch together. The Mole found himself sitting next to Mr. Badger, and, as the other two were still deep in river-gossip, he took the opportunity to tell Badger how comfortable and home-like it all felt to him. “Once well underground,” he said, “you know exactly where you are. Nothing can happen to you, and nothing can get at you. You’re entirely your own master. Things go on overhead, and you let ’em, and don’t bother about ’em. When you want to, up you go, and there the things are, waiting for you.”

The Badger beamed on him. “That’s exactly what I say,” he replied. “There’s no security, or peace, except underground. And then, if you want to extend –

why, a dig and a scrape, and there you are! If you feel your house is a bit too big, you block up a hole or two, and there you are again! No tradesmen, no fellows looking over your wall, and, above all, no weather. Look at Rat, now. A couple of feet of flood water, and he's got to move into hired lodgings. Take Toad. I say nothing against Toad Hall; quite the best house in these parts, as a house. But supposing a fire breaks out – or tiles are blown off the roof – or walls crack, or windows get broken – where's Toad? No, up and out of doors is good enough to roam about in; but underground to come back to at last – that's my idea of home!"

The Mole agreed heartily; and the Badger became very friendly with him. "When lunch is over," he said, "I'll take you all round this little place of mine. I can see you'll appreciate it."

So, after lunch, when the other two had settled themselves into the chimney-corner and had started arguing about eels, the Badger lit a lantern and asked the Mole to follow him.

Crossing the hall, they walked down one of the main tunnels. The wavering light of the lantern gave glimpses on either side of rooms both large and small, some mere cupboards, others nearly as imposing as Toad's dining-hall. A narrow passage led them into another corridor, and here the same thing was repeated. The Mole was staggered at the size and extent of it all; the length of the dim passages, the solid vaultings of the store-chambers, the pillars, the arches, the pavements.

"How on earth, Badger," he said at last, "did you ever find time and strength to do all this? It's astonishing!"

"It would be astonishing indeed," said the Badger simply, "if I had done it. But as a matter of fact I did none of it. I only cleared out the passages and rooms that I needed. There's lots more of it. You see, very long ago, on the spot where the Wild Wood is now, before it had started growing, there was a city of people. Here, where we are standing, they lived, and walked, and talked, and slept, and carried on their business. They were a powerful people, and rich, and great builders. They thought their city would last for ever."

"But what has become of them all?" asked the Mole.

"Who can tell?" said the Badger. "People come – they stay for a while, they flourish, they build – and they go. But we remain. There were badgers here, I've been told, long before that city ever came to be. And now there are badgers here again. We are an enduring lot, and we may move out for a time, but we wait, and back we come."

"Well, and when they went, those people?" said the Mole.

"When they went," continued the Badger, "the strong winds and rains worked ceaselessly, year after year. Perhaps we badgers helped a little – who knows? The city sank down, down, in ruin, and disappeared. Then it was all up, up, gradually, as seeds grew to saplings, and saplings to forest trees, and bramble and fern came creeping in to help. Streams brought sand and soil to

clog and to cover, and in course of time our home was ready for us again, and we moved in. Up above us, on the surface, the same thing happened. Animals arrived, liked the look of the place, settled down, spread, and flourished. The place was a bit humpy and hillocky, naturally, and full of holes; but that was rather an advantage. The Wild Wood is pretty well populated by now; with all the usual lot, good, bad, and indifferent. I name no names. But I fancy you know something about them yourself by this time.”

“I do indeed,” said the Mole, with a slight shiver.

“Well, well,” said the Badger, patting him on the shoulder, “it was your first experience of them, you see. They’re not so bad really; and we must all live and let live. But I’ll pass the word around tomorrow, and I think you’ll have no further trouble. Any friend of mine walks where he likes in this country, or I’ll know the reason why!”

When they got back to the kitchen again, they found the Rat walking up and down, very restless. The underground atmosphere was getting on his nerves, and he seemed really to be afraid that the river would run away if he wasn’t there to look after it. So he had his overcoat on, and his pistols thrust into his belt.

“Come along, Mole,” he said anxiously. “We must get off while it’s daylight. Don’t want to spend another night in the Wild Wood.”

“It’ll be all right,” said the Otter. “I’m coming along with you, and I know every path blindfold; and if there’s a head that needs punching, you can rely upon me to punch it.”

“You really needn’t fret, Ratty,” added the Badger placidly. “My passages run further than you think, and I’ve bolt-holes to the edge of the wood, though I don’t care for everybody to know about them. You can leave by one of my short cuts.”

And the Badger, taking up his lantern, led the way along a damp and airless tunnel that wound and dipped for a weary distance that seemed to be miles. At last daylight began to show itself through tangled growth overhanging the mouth of the passage; and the Badger, saying a hasty good-bye, pushed them hurriedly through the opening, made everything look as natural as possible again, with creepers and dead leaves, and retreated.

They found themselves standing on the very edge of the Wild Wood. Behind them were rocks and brambles and tree-roots; in front, a great space of quiet fields, with lines of hedges black on the snow, and, far ahead, a glint of the familiar old river, while the wintry sun hung red and low on the horizon.

The Otter, who knew all the paths, took charge, and they walked to a distant stile. Pausing there to look back, they saw the whole Wild Wood, dense, menacing, grimly set in vast white surroundings; then they turned and made swiftly for home, for firelight and familiar things, for the voice of the river that they knew and trusted in all its moods.

As he hurried along, eagerly anticipating the moment when he would be at home again, the Mole understood that he was an animal of tilled fields and hedge-rows, and gardens. He did not enjoy Nature in the rough; he must be wise, and keep to the pleasant places he was used to, and which held adventure enough, in their own way, to last a lifetime.

Chapter Five
Dulce Domum
(“Sweet Home”)

The sheep ran huddling together against the walls of the sheep-pen, puffing and stamping with delicate fore-feet, as the two animals hurried past in high spirits, with much chatter and laughter.

They were returning across country after a long day’s outing with Otter, exploring the wide uplands where streams that led into their own River had their first small beginnings. Now the shades of the short winter day were closing in on them, and they had still some distance to go. Plodding at random across the land, they had heard the sheep and had made for them; and now, leading from the sheep-pen, they found a beaten track which made walking easier and seemed to say to them: “Yes, this leads home!”

“It looks as if we’re coming to a village,” said the Mole somewhat dubiously, slackening his pace. The track had developed into a lane, and now led them into a well-metalled road. The animals did not care for villages; and their own highways, busy though they were, avoided post offices, or churches, or inns.

“Oh, never mind!” said the Rat. “At this time of the year they’re all safe indoors by this hour, sitting round the fire. We shall slip through all right, without any bother, and we can have a look through their windows if you like, and see what they’re doing.”

The rapid nightfall of mid-December shadowed the little village as they approached it on soft feet over a first thin fall of powdery snow. Little was visible except squares of dusky orange-red on either side of the street, where the firelight or lamplight of each cottage showed through the windows. The animals, looking in, could see people gathered round their tea-tables, or absorbed in handiwork, or talking and laughing. Moving from one house to another, the two spectators, so far from home themselves, felt wistful as they watched a cat being stroked, or a sleepy child picked up and carried off to bed.

But it was from one little window, with its blind drawn down, a mere blank pale square, that the sense of home was strongest. Close to the white blind hung a bird-cage, clearly silhouetted. On the perch the fluffy occupant, head tucked well into feathers, seemed so near to them that they could stroke him if they tried. As they looked, the sleepy little bird stirred, woke, and raised his head. They could see the gape of his tiny beak as he yawned, looked round, and then settled his head down again, subsiding into perfect stillness.

A gust of bitter wind hit the back of their necks, a small sting of frozen sleet woke them as if from a dream; and they knew their toes to be cold and their legs tired, and their own home a weary, long way off.

Once beyond the village, they could smell through the darkness the friendly fields again; and they braced themselves for the last long stretch, the home stretch, that is bound to end some time, in the rattle of the door-latch and the sudden firelight. They plodded along steadily and silently, each thinking his own thoughts.

The Mole's thoughts ran a good deal on supper. This was a strange country to him, and in the dark he was obediently following the Rat, leaving the navigation up to him. As for the Rat, he was walking a little way ahead, his shoulders hunched, his eyes fixed on the straight grey road in front of him. So he did not notice poor Mole when suddenly a summons reached him, like an electric shock.

We humans have long lost the more subtle of the physical senses; we have only the word "smell" for the whole range of delicate thrills which murmur in the nose of the animal night and day, summoning, warning, beckoning, repelling. It was one of these mysterious calls from out of the void that suddenly reached Mole in the darkness, making him tingle through and through with its very familiar appeal, although he could not clearly remember what it was.

He stopped dead in his tracks, his nose searching for the fine thread of scent that had so strongly moved him. A moment later he had caught it again; and with it this time came a flood of memory.

Home! That was what it meant, that soft touch wafted through the air, those invisible little hands pulling and tugging him! Why, it must be quite close to him at that moment, his old home that he had hurriedly left and never sought again, that day when he first found the river! And now it was sending out its messengers to capture him and bring him in.

Since the Mole's escape on that bright morning he had hardly given it a thought, so absorbed had he been in his captivating new life. Now, with a rush of memories, how clearly it stood before him, in the darkness! A small and shabby home: yet his, the home he had made for himself, the home he had been so happy to get back to after his day's work. And the home had been happy with him, too, and was missing him, and wanted him back, and was telling him so, through his nose, with sorrow but no anger; only with a plaintive reminder that it was there.

The call was clear, the summons was plain. He must obey it instantly, and go.

"Ratty!" he called, full of joyful excitement, "Wait! Come back! I want you, quick!"

"Oh, come along, Mole, do!" replied the Rat, still plodding along.

"Please stop, Ratty!" pleaded the poor Mole, in anguish. "You don't understand! It's my home, my old home! I've just come across the smell of it, and it's really close. And I must go to it, I must, I must! Oh, come back, Ratty! Please come back!"

The Rat was by this time very far ahead, too far to hear clearly what the Mole was calling. And he was thinking about the weather, for he too could smell something – something suspiciously like approaching snow.

“Mole, we mustn’t stop now!” he called back. “We’ll come for it tomorrow, whatever it is you’ve found. But I daren’t stop now. It’s late, and the snow’s coming on again, so hurry up, there’s a good fellow!” And the Rat pressed forward without waiting for an answer.

Poor Mole stood alone in the road, his heart torn asunder, and a big sob gathering somewhere low down inside him. But even under such a test his loyalty to his friend stood firm. Never for a moment did he dream of abandoning the Rat. Meanwhile, the wafts from his old home pleaded, whispered, and claimed him imperiously. He dared not linger within their magic circle. With a wrench that tore his very heartstrings he set off down the road and followed the Rat, while faint, thin little smells reproached him for his callous forgetfulness.

With an effort he caught up to the unsuspecting Rat, who began chattering cheerfully about what they would do when they got back, and the supper he meant to eat; never noticing his companion’s silence and distress. At last, however, when they had gone some way further, he stopped and said kindly,

“Look here, Mole old chap, you seem dead tired. No talk left in you, and your feet are dragging like lead. We’ll sit down here for a minute and rest. The snow has held off so far, and the longest part of our journey is over.”

The Mole sank forlornly onto a tree-stump and tried to control himself, but the sob he had fought with for so long refused to be beaten. It forced its way up and up, and then another sob followed, and another; till poor Mole at last gave up the struggle, and cried helplessly, now that he knew it was all over and he had lost his chance of going home.

The Rat, astonished and dismayed at the strength of the Mole’s grief, did not dare to speak for a while. At last he said, very quietly, “What is it, old fellow? What’s the matter? Tell me, and let me see what I can do.”

Poor Mole found it difficult to get any words out between the sobs. “I know it’s a – shabby, dingy little place,” he sobbed, brokenly: “not like – your cosy quarters – or Toad’s beautiful hall – or Badger’s great house – but it was my own little home – and I went away and forgot all about it – and then I smelt it suddenly – and I called and you wouldn’t listen, Rat – and everything came back to me with a rush – and I wanted it! – O dear, O dear! – and when you wouldn’t turn back, Ratty – and I had to leave it – I thought my heart would break. We might have just gone and had one look at it, Ratty – just one look – it was close by – but you wouldn’t turn back, Ratty! O dear, O dear!” A fresh wave of sorrow prevented him from saying any more.

The Rat stared straight in front of him, patting Mole gently on the shoulder. After a time he muttered gloomily, “I see it now! What a pig I have been! A pig – that’s me! A plain pig!”

He waited till Mole's sobs became gradually less stormy; at last they turned to sniffs. Then he rose from his seat, and, remarking, "Well, now we'd better be getting on, old chap!" he set off up the road again, back the way they had come.

"Wherever are you (hic) going to (hic), Ratty?" cried the tearful Mole in alarm.

"We're going to find that home of yours, old fellow," replied the Rat pleasantly; "so come along, for it will take some finding, and we shall need your nose."

"Oh, come back, Ratty!" cried the Mole, hurrying after him. "It's no good! It's too late, and too dark, and too far off, and the snow's coming! And – and I never meant to let you know I was feeling that way – it was an accident! Think of River Bank, and your supper!"

"Hang River Bank, and supper too!" said the Rat heartily. "I'm going to find this place now, if I stay out all night. So cheer up, old chap, and take my arm, and we'll very soon be there again."

Still snuffling, pleading, and reluctant, Mole allowed himself to be dragged back along the road. The Rat kept up a flow of cheerful talk to try and make the weary way seem shorter. When at last it seemed that they must be nearing the right part of the road, he said, "Now, no more talking. Business! Use your nose, and give your mind to it."

They moved on in silence for a little way, when suddenly the Rat felt, through his arm that was linked in Mole's, a faint sort of electric thrill. Instantly he unlinked himself, fell back a pace, and waited. The signals were coming through!

Mole stood a moment rigid, while his uplifted nose, quivering slightly, felt the air.

Then a short, quick run forward – a fault – a try back; and then a slow, steady, confident advance.

The excited Rat kept close to his heels as the Mole, with something of the air of a sleep-walker, crossed a dry ditch, scrambled through a hedge, and nosed his way over an open field that was bare in the faint starlight.

Suddenly, without warning, he dived; but the Rat was ready, and promptly followed him down the tunnel to which his nose had faithfully led him.

It was close and airless, and the earthy smell was strong. It seemed a long time to Rat before the passage ended and he could stand up and stretch and shake himself. The Mole struck a match, and by its light the Rat saw that they were standing in a kind of courtyard, neatly swept; and facing them was Mole's little front door, with "Mole End" painted over the bell-pull at the side.

Mole took down a lantern from a nail on the wall and lit it. The Rat, looking around, saw a garden-seat on one side of the door, and on the other side a roller; for the Mole, who was a tidy animal, could not stand having his ground kicked up by other animals into little earth-heaps. On the walls hung wire baskets with ferns in them, and brackets carrying plaster statues – Garibaldi,

and the infant Samuel, and Queen Victoria. Down one side ran a skittle-alley, with benches along it. In the middle of the courtyard was a small round pond containing goldfish and surrounded by a cockle-shell border, with a pole in the middle topped by a large silvered glass ball that reflected everything all wrong and had a very pleasing effect.

Mole's face beamed at the sight of all these objects so dear to him. He hurried Rat through the door, lit a lamp in the hall, and took one glance round his old home. He saw the dust lying thick on everything, saw the cheerless, deserted look of the long-neglected house, its smallness and its worn and shabby contents – and collapsed again on a hall-chair.

“O Ratty!” he cried dismally, “why did I do it? Why did I bring you to this poor, cold little place, when you might have been at River Bank by now, toasting your toes before a blazing fire!”

The Rat paid no heed. He was running here and there, opening doors, inspecting rooms and cupboards, and lighting lamps and candles.

“What a capital little house this is!” he called out cheerily. “So compact! So well planned! Everything in its place! We'll make a jolly night of it. The first thing we want is a good fire; I'll see to that. So this is the parlour? Splendid! Your own idea, those little sleeping-bunks in the wall? Capital! Now, I'll fetch the wood and the coals, and you get a duster, Mole, and try and smarten things up a bit. Bustle about, old chap!”

Encouraged by this, the Mole roused himself and dusted and polished with energy, while the Rat soon had a cheerful blaze roaring up the chimney. He called the Mole to come and warm himself; but Mole promptly had another fit of the blues, dropping down on a couch in dark despair and burying his face in his duster.

“Rat,” he moaned, “what about your supper, you poor, cold, hungry, weary animal? I've nothing to give you – not a crumb!”

“What a fellow you are for giving in!” said the Rat reproachfully. “Why, just now I saw a sardine-tin-opener on the kitchen dresser; so there are sardines about somewhere in the neighbourhood. Pull yourself together, and come with me and forage.”

They went and foraged accordingly, hunting through every cupboard and turning out every drawer. The result was not so very depressing after all, though it might have been better; a tin of sardines, a box of captain's biscuits, nearly full, and a German sausage wrapped in silver paper.

“There's a banquet for you!” observed the Rat, as he arranged the table. “I know some animals who would give their ears to be sitting down to supper with us tonight!”

“No bread!” groaned the Mole dolorously; “no butter, no—”

“No pâté, no champagne!” continued the Rat, grinning. “And that reminds me – what's that little door at the end of the passage? Your cellar, of course! Every luxury in this house! Just you wait a minute.”

He went to the cellar-door, and soon reappeared, somewhat dusty, with a bottle of beer in each paw and another under each arm. "Self-indulgent beggar you are, Mole," he observed. "This is really the jolliest little place I ever was in. Now, wherever did you find those pictures? Make the place look so home-like, they do. Tell us all about it, Mole."

Then, while the Rat busied himself fetching plates, and knives and forks, and mixing mustard in an egg-cup, the Mole, still full of emotion, related – somewhat shyly at first, but then more freely as he warmed to his subject – how his home had been planned, with some wonderful finds and bargains, and certain amount of saving up and "going without." He took up a lamp to go round and caress his possessions, and show them off to his visitor, quite forgetful of supper. Rat, who was desperately hungry but trying to conceal it, nodded seriously, saying, "wonderful," and "most remarkable," when he had the chance to say anything.

At last the Rat succeeded in decoying the Mole to the table. He had just got to work with the sardine-tin-opener when sounds were heard from outside the door – the scuffling of small feet in the gravel and a confused murmur of tiny voices, while broken sentences reached them:

"Now, all in a line – hold the lantern up a bit, Tommy – no coughing after I say one, two, three – where's young Bill? – come on, do, we're all waiting–"

"What's up?" inquired the Rat.

"I think it must be the field-mice," replied the Mole, with a touch of pride. "They go round carol-singing regularly at this time of the year. They never miss me out – they come to Mole End last; and I used to give them hot drinks, and supper too, when I could afford it. It will be like old times to hear them again."

"Let's have a look at them!" cried the Rat, jumping up and running to the door.

It was a pretty sight that met their eyes. Outside, lit dimly by a lantern, eight or ten little field-mice stood in a semicircle, red woollen scarfs round their throats, their fore-paws thrust deep into their pockets, their feet jiggling for warmth. With bright beady eyes they glanced shyly at each other, giggling, sniffing and wiping noses on coat-sleeves.

As the door opened, at once their shrill little voices rose on the air, singing one of the old-time carols that their forefathers composed in frosty fields, and handed down to be sung to lamp-lit windows at Yule-time.

CAROL

Villagers all, this frosty tide,
Let your doors swing open wide,
Though wind may follow, and snow beside,
Yet draw us in by your fire to bide;
Joy shall be yours in the morning!

Here we stand in the cold and the sleet,
Blowing fingers and stamping feet,
Come from far away to greet
You by the fire and we in the street—
 Bidding you joy in the morning!

For ere one half of the night was gone,
Sudden a star has led us on,
Raining bliss and benison,
Bliss tomorrow and more anon,
 Joy for every morning!

Goodman Joseph toiled through the snow,
Saw the star o'er a stable low;
Mary she could not further go—
Welcome thatch, and litter below!
 Joy was hers in the morning!

And then they heard the angels tell
“Who were the first to cry Noel?
Animals all, as it befell,
In the stable where they did dwell!
 Joy shall be theirs in the morning!”

The voices ceased. The singers were bashful but smiling; and there was silence – but only for a moment. Then, from up above and far away, down the tunnel was carried to their ears the sound of distant bells ringing joyfully.

“Very well sung, boys!” cried the Rat heartily. “And now come along in, and warm yourselves by the fire, and have something hot!”

“Yes, come along, field-mice,” cried the Mole eagerly. “This is quite like old times! Shut the door after you. Pull up that settle to the fire. Now, you just wait a minute, while – O, Ratty!” he cried in despair, almost in tears. “Whatever are we doing? We’ve nothing to give them!”

“You leave that to me,” said the masterful Rat. “Here, you with the lantern! Come over here. I want to talk to you. Tell me, are there any shops open at this hour of the night?”

“Why, certainly, sir,” replied the field-mouse respectfully. “Our shops keep open to all sorts of hours.”

“Then look here!” said the Rat. “You go off at once, and you get me—”

Here there was a muttered conversation, and the Mole only heard bits of it, such as: “Fresh, mind! – no, a pound of that will do – only the best – if you can’t get it there, try somewhere else – yes, of course, home-made – well, do

the best you can!” Finally, there was a chink of coins passing from paw to paw, the field-mouse was handed a basket, and off he hurried with his lantern.

The rest of the field-mice, perched in a row on the settle, their small legs swinging, were enjoying the warmth of the fire; while the Mole made each of them recite the names of his numerous brothers, who were too young, it appeared, to be allowed to go out a-carolling this year.

The Rat, meanwhile, was busy examining the label on one of the beer-bottles. “Old Burton,” he remarked approvingly. “Sensible Mole! The very thing! Now we shall be able to make some mulled ale! Get the spices, Mole.”

It did not take long to warm the spiced ale over the fire; and soon every field-mouse was sipping and coughing (for a little mulled ale goes a long way) and wiping his eyes and laughing and forgetting he had ever been cold in his life.

“They act plays too, these fellows,” the Mole explained to the Rat. “Make them up all by themselves, and act them. And very well they do it, too! They gave us a capital one last year, about a field-mouse who was captured at sea by a pirate; and when he escaped and got home again, his lady-love had gone into a convent. Here, you! You were in it, I remember. Get up and recite a bit.”

The field-mouse got up on his legs, giggled shyly, looked round the room, and remained absolutely tongue-tied. His comrades cheered him on, Mole encouraged him, and the Rat went so far as to take him by the shoulders and shake him; but nothing could overcome his stage-fright. They were all busily working on him when the latch clicked, the door opened, and the field-mouse with the lantern reappeared, staggering under the weight of his basket.

There was no more talk of play-acting once the very real contents of the basket had been tumbled out onto the table. Rat organised everybody, and in a very few minutes supper was ready. Mole, as he sat down in a sort of a dream, saw his previously empty table covered with savoury comforts; saw his little friends’ faces brighten as they began to eat; and then let himself loose – for he was very hungry – on the food so magically provided, thinking what a happy home-coming this had turned out, after all.

As they ate, they talked of old times, and the field-mice gave him the local gossip, and answered as well as they could the hundred questions he had to ask them. The Rat said little or nothing, only taking care that each guest had whatever he wanted, and that Mole had no trouble or anxiety about anything.

The field-mice clattered off at last, very grateful and repeating wishes of the season, with their jacket pockets stuffed with mementos for the small brothers and sisters at home. When the door had closed on them, Mole and Rat drew their chairs in, brewed themselves a last nightcap of mulled ale, and discussed the events of the long day.

At last the Rat, with a tremendous yawn, said, “Mole, old chap, I’m ready to drop. Sleepy is not the word. That your own bunk over on that side? Very well, then, I’ll take this. What a ripping little house this is! Everything so handy!”

He clambered into his bunk and rolled himself well up in the blankets, and fell straight into sleep.

The weary Mole also was glad to go to bed, and soon had his head on his pillow in great joy and contentment. But before he closed his eyes he let them wander round his old room in the mellow glow of the firelight, looking at the familiar and friendly things which seemed to smile back at him. He was now in just the frame of mind that the tactful Rat had quietly worked to bring about in him. He saw clearly how plain and simple his home was; but clearly, too, how much it meant to him, and its special value as an anchorage in his life.

He did not want to abandon the new life and its splendid spaces, to turn his back on the sun and air to creep home and stay underground; the upper world was too strong, it called to him still, even down here, and he knew he must return to it. But it was good to think he had this to come back to; this place which was all his own, these things which were so glad to see him and could always be counted upon for the same simple welcome.

Chapter Six

Mr. Toad

It was a bright morning in early summer; the river had resumed its usual pace, and the hot sun seemed to be pulling everything green and bushy and spiky up out of the earth towards him, as if by strings. The Mole and the Water Rat had been up since dawn, very busy with the boat; painting and varnishing, mending paddles, repairing cushions, and so on; and were finishing breakfast in their little parlour and eagerly discussing their plans for the day, when a heavy knock sounded at the door.

“Bother!” said the Rat, all over egg. “See who it is, Mole, like a good chap, since you’ve finished.”

The Mole went to the door, and the Rat heard him utter a cry of surprise. “Mr. Badger!”

This was a wonderful thing, indeed, that the Badger should pay a formal call on them, or indeed on anybody. He generally had to be caught, if you wanted him badly, as he slipped quietly along a hedgerow at dawn or dusk; or else you hunted for him in his own house in the middle of the Wood, which was a serious undertaking.

The Badger strode heavily into the room, and stood looking at the two animals with a very serious expression.

“The hour has come!” he said with great solemnity.

“What hour?” asked the Rat uneasily, glancing at the clock.

“Whose hour, you should rather say,” replied the Badger. “Why, Toad’s hour! I said I would take him in hand as soon as the winter was over, and I’m going to take him in hand today!”

“Of course!” cried the Mole delightedly. “Hooray! I remember now! We’ll teach him to be a sensible Toad!”

“This very morning,” continued the Badger, sitting down in an arm-chair, “another new and exceptionally powerful motor-car, so I am told, will arrive at Toad Hall. At this very moment, perhaps, Toad is busy dressing up in those singularly hideous clothes so dear to him, which transform him from a good-looking Toad into a ridiculous Object. We must act, before it is too late. You two animals will accompany me instantly to Toad Hall, and the work of rescue shall be accomplished.”

“Right you are!” cried the Rat, jumping up. “We’ll rescue the poor unhappy animal! We’ll convert him! He’ll be the most converted Toad that ever was!”

They set off up the road on their mission of mercy, Badger leading the way as they walked in single file. They reached the carriage-drive of Toad Hall to find, as the Badger had said, a great big shiny new motor-car, painted a bright red (Toad’s favourite colour), standing in front of the house. As they neared the

door, it was flung open, and Mr. Toad, arrayed in goggles, cap, gaiters covering his shoes, and an enormous overcoat, came swaggering down the steps, drawing on his gloves.

“Hullo, you fellows!” he cried cheerfully. “You’re just in time to come with me for a jolly – to come for a jolly – for a – er – jolly—”

His hearty tone faltered and fell away as he noticed the stern unbending look on the faces of his silent friends.

The Badger strode up the steps. “Take him inside,” he said to his companions. Then, as Toad was hustled through the door, struggling and protesting, he turned to the chauffeur in charge of the new motor-car.

“I’m afraid you won’t be wanted to-day,” he said. “Mr. Toad has changed his mind. He will not require the car. Please understand that this is final. You needn’t wait.” Then he followed the others inside and shut the door.

“Now then!” he said to the Toad, when the four of them stood together in the Hall, “first of all, take off those ridiculous things!”

“Shan’t!” replied Toad, with great spirit. “What is the meaning of this gross outrage? I demand an instant explanation.”

“Take them off him, you two,” ordered the Badger.

They had to lay Toad out on the floor, kicking and calling all sorts of names. The Rat sat on him, while the Mole got his motor-clothes off him bit by bit. When they stood him up again, his blustering spirit seemed to have evaporated with the removal of his fine outfit. Now that he was merely Toad, and no longer the Terror of the Highway, he giggled feebly and looked from one to the other appealingly.

“You knew it must come to this, sooner or later, Toad,” the Badger explained severely. “You’ve ignored all the warnings we’ve given you, you’ve gone on squandering the money your father left you, and you’re getting us animals a bad name with your furious driving and your smashes and your rows with the police. Independence is all very well, but we animals never allow our friends to make fools of themselves beyond a certain limit; and that limit you’ve reached. Now, you’re a good fellow in many respects, and I don’t want to be too hard on you. I’ll make one more effort to bring you to reason. Come with me into the parlour, for a talk.”

He took Toad firmly by the arm, led him into the parlour, and closed the door behind them.

“That’s no good!” said the Rat contemptuously. “Talking to Toad’ll never cure him. He’ll say anything.”

The others made themselves comfortable in armchairs and waited patiently. Through the closed door they could just hear the long continuous drone of the Badger’s voice, rising and falling; and then the sermon began to be punctuated by long-drawn sobs, coming from Toad, who was a soft-hearted and affectionate fellow, very easily converted – for the time being – to any point of view.

After three-quarters of an hour the door opened, and the Badger reappeared, solemnly leading by the paw a very limp and dejected Toad. His legs wobbled, and his cheeks were furrowed by tears.

“Sit down there, Toad,” said the Badger kindly, pointing to a chair. “My friends,” he went on, “I am pleased to inform you that Toad has at last seen the error of his ways. He is truly sorry for his misguided conduct, and he has promised solemnly to give up motor-cars entirely and for ever.”

“That is very good news,” said the Mole gravely.

“Very good news indeed,” observed the Rat dubiously, “if only....” He was looking very hard at Toad as he said this, and could not help thinking he perceived something like a twinkle in that animal’s sorrowful eye.

“There’s only one thing more to be done,” continued the Badger. “Toad, I want you to repeat, before your friends, what you just said to me. First, you are sorry for what you’ve done, and you see the folly of it?”

There was a long, long pause. Toad looked desperately this way and that, while the other animals waited. At last he spoke.

“No!” he said, a little sullenly, but stoutly; “I’m not sorry. And it wasn’t folly at all! It was simply glorious!”

“What?” cried the Badger, greatly scandalised. “You backsliding animal, didn’t you tell me just now, in there—”

“Oh, yes, yes, in there,” said Toad impatiently. “I’d have said anything in there. You’re so eloquent, dear Badger, and so convincing – you can do what you like with me in there, and you know it. But now that I think, I find that I’m not a bit sorry or repentant really, so it’s no good saying I am; now, is it?”

“Then you don’t promise never to touch a motor-car again?”

“Certainly not!” replied Toad emphatically. “On the contrary, I faithfully promise that the very first motor-car I see, *poop-poop!* Off I go in it!”

“Told you so, didn’t I?” observed the Rat to the Mole.

“Very well, then,” said the Badger firmly, rising to his feet. “Since you won’t yield to persuasion, we’ll see what force can do. I feared it would come to this. You’ve often asked us three to come and stay with you, Toad, in this handsome house of yours; well, now we’re going to. When we’ve converted you to a proper point of view we may leave, but not before. Take him upstairs, you two, and lock him up in his bedroom.”

“It’s for your own good, Toady, you know,” said the Rat kindly, as Toad, kicking and struggling, was hauled up the stairs by his two faithful friends. “Think what fun we shall all have together, just as we used to, once you’ve got over this – this painful attack of yours!”

“We’ll take great care of everything for you,” said the Mole; “and we’ll see your money isn’t wasted, as it has been.”

“No more of those regrettable incidents with the police, Toad,” said the Rat, as they thrust him into his bedroom.

“And no more weeks in hospital, being ordered about by nurses, Toad,” added the Mole, turning the key on him.

They descended the stairs, Toad shouting abuse at them through the keyhole; and the three friends then conferred.

“It’s going to be a tedious business,” said the Badger, sighing. “I’ve never seen Toad so determined. However, we will see it through. He must never be left unguarded. We shall have to take it in turns to be with him, till the poison has worked itself out of his system.”

So each animal took it in turns to sleep in Toad’s room at night, and they divided the day up between them. At first Toad was very aggravating to his guardians. When the need seized him he would arrange bedroom chairs in the rough shape of a motor-car and would crouch on the front one, staring fixedly ahead, making ghastly noises; until at last, turning a complete somersault, he would lie prostrate amidst the ruins of the chairs, satisfied for the moment.

As time passed, however, these painful episodes became gradually less frequent, and his friends tried to distract him. But his interest in other matters did not revive, and he grew languid and depressed.

One fine morning the Rat, whose turn it was to go on duty, went upstairs to relieve Badger, whom he found fidgeting to go and stretch his legs in a long ramble round his wood.

“Toad’s still in bed,” he told the Rat, outside the door. “Can’t get much out of him, except, ‘O leave him alone, he’ll be better soon, it may pass off in time, don’t be too anxious,’ and so on. Now, look out, Rat! When Toad’s quiet and submissive, then he’s at his most artful. I know him. Well, now, I must be off.”

As he approached Toad’s bedside, the Rat asked cheerfully, “How are you today, old chap?”

He waited for an answer. At last a feeble voice replied, “Thank you so much, dear Ratty! So good of you to inquire! But how you are yourself, and the excellent Mole?”

“O, we’re all right,” replied the Rat. “Mole,” he added incautiously, “is going out for a walk with Badger. They’ll be out till lunchtime, so you and I will spend a pleasant morning together. Now jump up, there’s a good fellow, and don’t lie moping on a fine morning like this!”

“Dear, kind Rat,” murmured Toad, “you do not realise how weak I am, and how very far I am from ‘jumping up’ now – if ever! But do not trouble about me. I hate being a burden to my friends, and I do not expect to be one much longer. Indeed, I almost hope not.”

“Well, I hope not, too,” said the Rat heartily. “You’ve been a fine bother to us all this time, and I’m glad to hear it’s going to stop. And with the boating season just beginning! It’s too bad of you, Toad! It isn’t the trouble we mind, but you’re making us miss such an awful lot.”

"I'm afraid it is the trouble you mind, though," replied the Toad languidly. "I can quite understand it. You're tired of bothering about me. I'm a nuisance, I know."

"You are, indeed," said the Rat. "But I'd take any trouble on earth for you, if only you'd be a sensible animal."

"If I thought that, Ratty," murmured Toad, more feebly than ever, "then I would beg you – for the last time, probably – to step round to the village as quickly as possible – although it may be too late – and fetch the doctor. But don't you bother. Perhaps we may as well let things take their course."

"Why, what do you want a doctor for?" inquired the Rat, coming closer and examining Toad. He lay very still and flat, and his voice was weaker.

"Surely you have noticed," murmured Toad. "But, no – why should you? Noticing things is only a trouble. Tomorrow, indeed, you may be saying to yourself, 'O, if only I had noticed sooner! If only I had done something!' But no; it's a trouble. Forget that I asked."

"Look here, old man," said the Rat, beginning to get rather alarmed, "of course I'll fetch a doctor, if you really think you need him. But you can hardly be bad enough for that. Let's talk about something else."

"I fear, dear friend," said Toad, with a sad smile, "that *talk* can do little in a case like this – or doctors either; still, one must grasp at the slightest straw. And, by the way – I hate to give you additional trouble, but would you mind at the same time asking the lawyer to come? It would be helpful to me, and at such a moment one must face disagreeable tasks, now matter how exhausted one feels!"

"A lawyer! O, he must be really bad!" the worried Rat said to himself, as he hurried from the room; not forgetting, however, to lock the door behind him.

Outside, he stopped to consider. The other two were far away, and he had no-one to consult.

"It's best to be on the safe side," he decided. "I've known Toad fancy himself frightfully ill before, without the slightest reason; but I've never heard him ask for a lawyer! If there's nothing really the matter, the doctor will tell him so, and cheer him up. I'd better humour him and go; it won't take long." So he ran off to the village on his errand of mercy.

The Toad, who had hopped lightly out of bed as soon as he heard the key turned in the lock, watched the Rat eagerly from the window till he disappeared. Then, laughing heartily, Toad dressed as quickly as possible in a smart suit, and filled his pockets with cash from a small drawer in the dressing-table. Next, knotting the sheets from his bed together, he tied one end of the improvised rope round the central part of the window-frame. He scrambled out, slid lightly to the ground, and taking the opposite direction to the Rat, marched off light-heartedly, whistling a merry tune.

It was a gloomy lunchtime for Rat when the Badger and the Mole returned, and he had to face them with his pitiful and unconvincing story. The Badger's

caustic remarks may be imagined; but it was painful to the Rat that even the Mole could not help saying, "You've been a bit of a duffer this time, Ratty! Toad, too, of all animals!"

"He did it awfully well," said the crestfallen Rat.

"He did *you* awfully well!" rejoined the Badger. "However, talking won't mend matters. He's got clear away for now; and he'll be so conceited with his own cleverness that he may commit any folly. One comfort is, we're free now, and needn't waste any more of our precious time on sentry-duty. But we'd better continue to sleep at Toad Hall for a while longer. Toad may be brought back at any moment – on a stretcher, or between two policemen."

So spoke the Badger, not knowing what the future held in store, or how much was to happen before Toad should sit at ease again in his ancestral Hall.

Meanwhile Toad was walking gaily and briskly along the high road, some miles from home. At first he had taken field-paths, and changed his course several times, in case of pursuit; but now, feeling safe from recapture, and with the sun smiling brightly on him, he almost danced along the road in his self-satisfaction and conceit.

"Smart piece of work!" he remarked to himself, chuckling. "Brain against brute force – and brain came out on top. Poor old Ratty! Won't Badger scold him! A good fellow, Ratty, but with very little intelligence and no education. I must take him in hand some day, and see if I can make something of him."

Filled with thoughts such as these he strode along, his head in the air, till he reached a little town, where the sign of "The Red Lion," halfway down the main street, reminded him that he had not breakfasted that day, and that he was exceedingly hungry. He marched into the inn, ordered the best lunch that could be provided, and sat down to eat it in the coffee-room.

He was about halfway through his meal when an all too familiar sound, approaching down the street, startled him and made him tremble all over. The *poop-poop!* drew nearer and nearer, the car could be heard to turn into the inn-yard and come to a stop, and Toad had to hold on to the leg of the table to conceal his emotion.

Soon the group entered the coffee-room, hungry and talking loudly about the experiences of their morning and the good points of the car that had brought them. Toad listened eagerly for a time; at last he could stand it no longer. He slipped out of the room, and as soon as he got outside sauntered round quietly to the inn-yard.

"There cannot be any harm," he said to himself, "in my just looking at it!"

The car stood in the middle of the yard, quite unattended. Toad walked slowly round it, inspecting, and musing deeply.

"I wonder," he said to himself, "I wonder if this sort of car starts easily?"

Next moment, hardly knowing how it happened, he found he had hold of the starting-handle and was turning it. At the familiar sound of the engine starting, the old passion seized on Toad and completely mastered him, body

and soul. As if in a dream he found himself seated in the driver's seat; as if in a dream, he swung the car round the yard and out through the archway; and, as if in a dream, all sense of right and wrong seemed temporarily suspended.

He increased his pace, and as the car sped down the street and leapt forth on the road through the open country, he was only conscious that he was Toad once more – Toad the terror, the traffic-queller, the Lord of the lone trail, before whom all must give way or be smitten into nothingness. He chanted as he flew, and the car responded with a roar; the miles were eaten up under him as he sped he knew not whither, fulfilling his instincts, living his hour, reckless of what might come to him...

*

“To my mind,” observed the Chairman of the Bench of Magistrates cheerfully, “the only difficulty in this otherwise very clear case is, how we can sufficiently punish the hardened ruffian whom we see cowering in the dock before us. Let me see: he has been found guilty, first, of stealing a valuable motor-car; secondly, of driving to the public danger; and, thirdly, of gross impertinence to the rural police. Mr. Clerk, will you tell us, please, what is the very stiffest penalty we can impose for each of these offences?”

The Clerk scratched his nose with his pen. “Some people would consider,” he observed, “that stealing the motor-car was the worst offence. But cheeking the police undoubtedly carries the severest penalty; and so it ought. Supposing you were to say twelve months for the theft, which is mild; and three years for the furious driving, which is lenient; and fifteen years for the cheek, which was pretty bad sort of cheek, judging by what we've heard from the witness-box, even if you only believe one-tenth of what you heard, and I never believe more myself. Those figures, if added together, tot up to nineteen years—”

“First-rate!” said the Magistrate.

“—So you had better make it a round twenty years and be on the safe side,” concluded the Clerk.

“An excellent suggestion!” said the Magistrate approvingly. “Prisoner! Pull yourself together and stand up straight. It's going to be twenty years for you. And if you appear before us again, upon any charge whatever, we shall have to deal with you very seriously!”

Then the brutal servants of the law fell upon the hapless Toad; loaded him with chains, and dragged him from the Court House, shrieking and protesting; across the marketplace, where the people assailed him with jeers and carrots; and past hooting school children, their innocent faces lit up with pleasure at the sight of a gentleman in difficulties.

They dragged him across the hollow-sounding drawbridge, below the spiky portcullis, under the frowning archway of the grim old castle whose ancient towers soared overhead; past guardrooms and sentries; up time-worn winding

stairs; across courtyards, where guard dogs strained at their leash and pawed the air to get at him; past ancient warders, dozing over a pasty and a flagon of brown ale; on and on, past the old torture-chamber, till they reached the door of the grimmest dungeon that lay in the heart of the innermost fortress. There at last they paused, where an ancient gaoler sat fingering a bunch of mighty keys.

“Oddsbodikins!” said the sergeant of police, taking off his helmet and wiping his forehead. “Here is the vile Toad, a criminal of deepest guilt and matchless artfulness. Watch and guard him with all your skill!”

The gaoler nodded grimly, laying his withered hand on the shoulder of the miserable Toad. The rusty key creaked in the lock, the great door clanged behind them; and Toad was a helpless prisoner in the remotest dungeon of the strongest castle in all the length and breadth of Merry England.

Chapter Seven

The Piper at the Gates of Dawn

The Willow-Wren was twittering his thin little song, hidden in the darkness of the river bank. Though it was past ten o'clock at night, the sky still held some lingering skirts of light from the departed day; and the sullen heat of the afternoon rolled away at the touch of the cool fingers of midsummer night.

Mole lay stretched on the bank, still panting from the stress of the hot, cloudless day, and waited for his friend to return. He had been on the river with some companions, while the Water Rat had gone to visit the Otter; and he had come back to find the house deserted, with no sign of Rat, who was doubtless staying up late with his old comrade. The Mole lay on some cool dock-leaves, and thought over the past day and its doings, and how very good they had all been.

The Rat's light footfall was soon heard approaching.

"O, the blessed coolness!" he said, and he sat down, gazing thoughtfully into the river.

"You stayed to supper, of course?" said the Mole presently.

"Had to," said the Rat. "They wouldn't hear of my going before. You know how kind they always are. And they made things as jolly as ever they could. But I felt a brute all the time, as it was clear that they were very unhappy, though they tried to hide it. Mole, I'm afraid they're in trouble. Little Portly is missing again."

"What, that child?" said the Mole lightly. "Well, why worry about it? He's always straying off and getting lost, and turning up again; he's so adventurous. But no harm ever happens to him. Everybody hereabouts knows him and likes him, just as they do old Otter, and you may be sure some animal or other will come across him and bring him back again all right. Why, we've found Portly ourselves, miles from home, and quite cheerful!"

"Yes; but this time it's more serious," said the Rat gravely. "He's been missing for days now. The Otters have hunted everywhere, high and low; and they've asked every animal for miles around, and no one knows anything about him. Otter's anxious, because young Portly hasn't learnt to swim very well yet, and I can see he's thinking of the weir. There's a lot of water coming down it still, and the place always had a fascination for the child. And then there are – well, traps and things – you know. Otter's not the nervous type. But now he is nervous. When I left, he came out with me, and he told me he was going to spend the night watching by the ford. You know the place where the old ford used to be, before they built the bridge?"

"I know it well," said the Mole. "But why should Otter choose to watch there?"

“It was there he gave Portly his first swimming-lesson,” continued the Rat. “And it was there he used to teach him fishing, and there young Portly caught his first fish. The child loved the spot, and Otter thinks that if he came wandering back from wherever he is – if he is anywhere by this time, poor little chap – he might make for the ford he was so fond of; or if he came across it, he’d remember it, and stop and play, perhaps. So Otter goes there every night and watches – on the chance, you know, just on the chance!”

They were silent for a time, both thinking of the same thing: the lonely, heart-sore animal, crouched by the ford, watching and waiting, the long night through – on the chance.

“Well, well,” said the Rat presently, “I suppose we ought to thinking about going to bed.” But he did not move.

“Rat,” said the Mole, “I simply can’t go to sleep, and do nothing, even though there doesn’t seem to be anything to be done. We’ll get the boat out, and paddle up stream. The moon will be up in an hour, and then we can search. Anyhow, it will be better than going to bed and doing nothing.”

“Just what I was thinking myself,” said the Rat. “Daybreak is not so far off, and then we may pick up some news of him as we go along.”

They got the boat out, and the Rat took the oars, paddling with caution. Out in midstream, the water reflected the sky; but wherever shadows fell from bank or tree, they looked as solid as the river-banks themselves, and the Mole had to steer cautiously.

Dark as it was, the night was full of small noises, chatter and rustling, telling of the busy little population who were up and about, plying their trades through the night till sunshine should send them to their beds. The water’s own gurglings, too, sounded louder than by day, seeming at times almost like an actual voice.

The line of the horizon was clear and hard against the sky; in one quarter was a silver glow that grew and grew. At last, over the rim of the waiting earth, the moon lifted with slow majesty till it swung clear of the horizon and rose up; and once more they began to see meadows and quiet gardens, and the river itself, all washed clean of mystery, as radiant as by day, but with a difference that was tremendous. It was as if their old haunts greeted them again in pure new clothes.

Fastening their boat to a willow, the friends landed in this silent, silver kingdom, and patiently explored the hedges, the hollow trees, the brooks and culverts, the ditches and dry water-ways. Crossing over the stream, they worked their way up it in this manner, while the moon, serene and detached, did what she could to help them in their quest; till her hour came to sink earthwards, and reluctantly she left them, and mystery once more held field and river.

Then a change began to declare itself. Field and tree took on a different look; the mystery began to drop away from them. A bird piped suddenly; and a

light breeze sprang up and set the reeds rustling. Rat, who was in the stern of the boat, sat up suddenly and listened with a passionate intentness. Mole, who with gentle strokes was just keeping the boat moving while he scanned the banks, looked at him with curiosity.

“It’s gone!” sighed the Rat, sinking back again. “So beautiful and strange. I almost wish I had not heard it. For it makes me feel a longing that is painful, and nothing seems worth while but to hear that sound once more and go on listening to it for ever. There it is again!” he cried. Entranced, he was silent, spellbound for a while.

“Now I’ve lost it,” he said presently. “O Mole! the beauty of it! The merry bubble and joy, the happy call of the distant piping! Such music I never dreamed of, and it calls so strongly! Row on, Mole, row! For the music and the call must be for us.”

The Mole, greatly wondering, obeyed. “I hear nothing myself,” he said, “but the wind playing in the reeds.”

The Rat did not answer. He was rapt, possessed by this new divine thing that caught up his helpless soul and swung and dandled it, like a powerless but happy infant in a strong supporting grasp.

Mole rowed steadily, and soon they came to a point where the river divided, a long backwater branching off to one side. Rat nodded towards the backwater, so Mole rowed that way. The creeping tide of light increased, and now they could see the colour of the flowers that gemmed the water’s edge.

“Clearer and nearer still,” cried the Rat joyously. “Now you must surely hear it! Ah – I see you do!”

Breathless and transfixed the Mole stopped rowing. The liquid run of that glad piping broke on him like a wave, and caught him up. He saw the tears on his comrade’s cheeks, and bowed his head and understood. They halted there, by the purple loose-strife that fringed the bank; then the clear imperious summons in the intoxicating melody imposed its will on Mole, and he plied his oars again. The light grew steadily stronger, yet no birds sang in their usual dawn chorus; apart from the heavenly music, all was marvellously still.

On either side of them, as they glided onwards, the rich meadow-grasses seemed more fresh and green than they had ever been. Never had they noticed the roses so vivid, the willow-herb so riotous, the meadow-sweet so fragrant. Then they heard the murmur of the approaching weir, and knew that they were nearing the end of their expedition, whatever it might be.

In a wide half-circle of foam and shining shoulders of green water, the great weir stretched from bank to bank, troubling all the quiet surface with twirling eddies, and deadening all other sounds with its solemn rumble. In the middle of the stream, embraced in the weir’s shimmering arm-spread, lay a small island, fringed with willow and silver birch and alder: hiding whatever it might hold behind a veil, keeping it for those who were called and chosen.

Slowly, and in a solemn expectancy, the two animals passed through the broken tumultuous water and moored their boat at the flowery margin of the island. In silence they landed, and pushed through the blossom and scented herbage and undergrowth, till they stood on a little lawn, set round with Nature's own orchard-trees – crab-apple, wild cherry, and sloe.

“This is the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me,” whispered the Rat, as if in a trance. “Here, if anywhere, surely we shall find Him!”

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was not terror – indeed, he felt wonderfully at peace – but he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near.

With difficulty he turned to look for his friend and saw him at his side, cowed, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew.

Perhaps the Mole would never have dared to raise his eyes, but though the piping was now hushed, the call and the summons seemed still imperious. He could not refuse. So, trembling, he obeyed, and raised his head; and then, in that utter clearness of the arriving dawn, while Nature seemed to hold her breath, he looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper.

He saw the backward sweep of the curved horns, gleaming in the growing daylight; saw the stern, hooked nose between the kindly eyes that were looking down on them humorously, while the bearded mouth broke into a half-smile at the corners; he saw the rippling muscles on the arm that lay across the broad chest, the long supple hand still holding the pan-pipes; saw the splendid curves of the shaggy limbs reclining in majestic ease on the sward.

And he saw, last of all, nestling between his very hooves, sleeping soundly in contentment, the little, round, podgy, childish form of the baby otter. All this the Mole saw, breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he wondered.

“Rat!” he found breath to whisper, shaking. “Are you afraid?”

“Afraid?” murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love.

“Afraid! Of Him? O, never, never! And yet – and yet – O, Mole, I am afraid!”

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.

Sudden and magnificent, the sun's broad golden disc showed itself over the horizon; and the first rays, shooting across the water-meadows, shone full in their eyes and dazzled them. When they were able to look once more, the Vision had vanished, and the air was full of the carol of birds that hailed the dawn.

As they stared blankly in dumb misery, deepening as they realised all they had seen and all they had lost, a little breeze, dancing up from the surface of the water, tossed the trees, shook the dewy roses and blew caressingly in their

faces; and with its soft touch came instant oblivion. For this is the last best gift that the kindly demi-god Pan is careful to bestow on those to whom he has revealed himself while helping them: the gift of forgetfulness. Lest the haunting memory should remain and overshadow mirth and pleasure, and spoil the after-lives of little animals helped out of difficulties, they forget; and can be happy and lighthearted as before.

Mole rubbed his eyes and stared at Rat, who was looking around in a puzzled sort of way. "I beg your pardon; what did you say, Rat?" he asked.

"I think I was remarking," said Rat slowly, "that this was the right sort of place to find him. And look! Why, there he is!" And with a cry of delight he ran towards the slumbering Portly.

But Mole stood still a moment, held in thought. As one wakened suddenly from a beautiful dream, who struggles to recall it, and can re-capture nothing but a dim sense of the beauty of it, the beauty! Till that, too, fades away in its turn – so Mole, after struggling with his memory for a brief space, shook his head sadly and followed the Rat.

Portly woke up with a joyous squeak, and wriggled with pleasure at the sight of his father's friends. In a moment, however, his face grew blank, and he began hunting round in a circle with pleading whine. As a child that has fallen happily asleep in its nurse's arms, and wakes to find itself alone and laid in a strange place, begins to run from room to room, despair growing in its heart, even so Portly searched the island and searched again, till at he gave up, and sat down, crying bitterly.

The Mole ran quickly to comfort the little animal; but Rat, lingering, looked long and doubtfully at hoof-marks deep in the lawn.

"Some great animal has been here," he murmured thoughtfully; and stood musing, his mind strangely stirred.

"Come along, Rat!" called the Mole. "Think of poor Otter, waiting up there by the ford!"

Portly was soon comforted by the promise of a treat – a jaunt on the river in Mr. Rat's boat; and the two animals took him to the water's edge, placed him between them in the bottom of the boat, and paddled off down the backwater. The sun was fully up by now, birds sang lustily, and flowers smiled and nodded from either bank, but somehow with less richness of colour than the animals seemed to remember seeing quite recently. They wondered where.

At the main river, they turned the boat upstream, to where they knew their friend was keeping his lonely vigil. As they drew near the familiar ford, the Mole took the boat in to the bank, and they lifted Portly out and set him on his legs on the tow-path, gave him a friendly farewell pat on the back, and shoved out into mid-stream. They watched the little animal as he waddled along the path contentedly; watched him till they saw his muzzle suddenly lift and his waddle break into a clumsy run, with a shrill whine of recognition.

Looking up the river, they could see Otter start up, tense and rigid, from the shallows where he crouched patiently. They could hear his amazed and joyous bark as he bounded up to the path to meet his son. Then the Mole, with a strong pull on one oar, swung the boat round and let the stream bear them whither it would, their quest happily ended.

“I feel strangely tired, Rat,” said the Mole, leaning over his oars. “You’ll say it’s through being up all night, but we stay up half the nights of the week, at this time of the year. I feel as if I had been through something very exciting and rather terrible; and yet nothing particular has happened.”

“Or something very surprising and splendid,” murmured the Rat, leaning back and closing his eyes. “I feel just as you do, Mole; simply dead tired. It’s lucky we’ve got the stream to take us home. Isn’t it jolly to feel the sun again, soaking into one’s bones! And hark to the wind playing in the reeds!”

“It’s like far away music,” said the Mole, nodding drowsily.

“So I was thinking,” murmured the Rat. “Dance-music – but with words in it, too – I catch them at intervals – then it’s dance-music once more, and then nothing but the reeds’ soft whispering.”

“You hear better than I,” said the Mole sadly. “I cannot catch the words.”

“Let me try and give you them,” said the Rat softly, his eyes still closed. “They’re faint but clear.

“Lest the awe should dwell – and turn your frolic to fret – You shall look on my power at the helping hour – but then you shall forget! Now the reeds are sighing, forget, forget, and it dies away in a whisper.

“Then the voice returns – Lest limbs be bloodied and torn – I spring the trap that is set – As I loose the snare you may glimpse me there – For surely you shall forget! Row nearer to the reeds, Mole! It grows fainter every minute.

“Helper and healer, I cheer – small waifs in the woodland wet – Strays I find in it, wounds I bind in it – bidding them all forget! Nearer, Mole, nearer! No, it’s no good; the song has died away.”

“But what do the words mean?” asked the wondering Mole.

“I don’t know,” said the Rat. “Ah! Here they are again, full and clear! This time, it is the real thing – simple – perfect—”

“Well, let’s have it, then,” said the Mole, after he had waited patiently for a few minutes.

But no answer came. He looked, and understood. With a smile on his face, and a listening look still lingering there, the weary Rat was fast asleep.

Chapter Eight Toad's Adventures

When Toad found himself imprisoned in a dungeon, and knew that all the grim darkness of a medieval fortress lay between him and the outer world of sunshine and the happiness of high roads, he flung himself at full length on the floor, and shed bitter tears in his despair.

“This is the end of everything” (he said), “at least it is the end of the career of Toad; the popular and handsome Toad, the rich Toad, so free and debonair! I have been imprisoned justly for stealing so handsome a motor-car, and for such lurid and imaginative cheek, bestowed upon such a number of red-faced policemen!” (Here his sobs choked him.) “Stupid animal that I was, now I must languish in this dungeon, till people who were proud to say they knew me, have forgotten the very name of Toad! O unhappy and forsaken Toad!”

With lamentations such as these he passed his days and nights for several weeks, refusing his meals; though the grim and ancient gaoler, knowing that Toad's pockets were well lined, frequently pointed out that many comforts, and indeed luxuries, could be sent in, at a price, from outside.

Now the gaoler had a daughter, a good-hearted girl, who assisted her father in his lighter duties. She was particularly fond of animals, and, besides a canary in a cage, she kept several mice and a restless squirrel. This kind-hearted girl, pitying the miserable of Toad, said to her father one day,

“Father! I can't bear to see that poor beast so unhappy, and getting so thin! You know how fond of animals I am. I'll make him eat from my hand, and sit up.”

Her father replied that she could do what she liked with him. He was tired of Toad and his sulks. So that day she knocked at the door of Toad's cell.

“Now, cheer up, Toad,” she said, coaxingly, “sit up and dry your eyes and be a sensible animal. And do try and eat a bit of dinner. See, I've brought you some of mine, hot from the oven!”

It was bubble-and-squeak, between two plates. The smell of cabbage reached the nose of Toad as he lay prostrate in his misery on the floor, and he thought for a moment that perhaps life was not so desperate as he had imagined. But still he wailed, and kicked, and refused to be comforted.

So the wise girl left, but, of course, the smell of hot cabbage remained behind, as it will do, and Toad, between his sobs, gradually began to think new and inspiring thoughts: of chivalry, and poetry, and deeds still to be done; of broad meadows, and cattle browsing in them; of kitchen-gardens, and of the comforting clink of dishes set down on the table at Toad Hall, and the scrape of chair-legs on the floor as every one pulled up their chairs to eat. He began to think of his friends, and how they would surely be able to do something; of

what an ass he had been not to get in a few lawyers; and lastly, he thought of his own great cleverness, and all that he was capable of if he only gave his mind to it; and the cure was almost complete.

When the girl returned, some hours later, she carried a tray, with a cup of steaming tea, and a plate piled with very hot buttered toast, cut thick, with the butter running through it in great golden drops. The smell of that buttered toast talked to Toad of warm kitchens, of breakfasts on bright frosty mornings, of cosy parlour firesides.

Toad sat up once more, dried his eyes, sipped his tea and munched his toast, and soon began talking freely about himself, and the house he lived in, and his doings there, and how important he was, and what a lot his friends thought of him.

The gaoler's daughter saw that the talking was doing him as much good as the tea, and encouraged him to go on.

"Tell me about Toad Hall," said she. "It sounds beautiful."

"Toad Hall," said the Toad proudly, "is an eligible gentleman's residence, very unique; dating in part from the fourteenth century, but replete with every modern convenience. Up-to-date sanitation. Five minutes from church, post-office, and golf-links, and—"

"Bless you," said the girl, laughing, "I don't want to buy it. Tell me something real about it. But first wait till I fetch you some more tea and toast."

She left, and soon returned with a fresh trayful; and Toad, pitching into the toast, his spirits quite restored, told her about the boat-house, and the fish-pond, and the old walled kitchen-garden; and about the pig-sties, and the stables, and the pigeon-house, and the hen-house; and about the dairy, and the wash-house, and the china-cupboards, and the linen-presses; and about the banqueting-hall, and the fun they had there when the other animals were gathered round the table and Toad was singing songs and telling stories.

Then she wanted to know about his animal-friends, and was very interested in all he had to tell her about them. Of course, she did not say she was fond of animals as pets, because she had the sense to see that Toad would be extremely offended.

When she said good night, having filled his water-jug, Toad was very much the same self-satisfied animal that he had been of old. He sang a little song or two, of the sort he used to sing at his dinner-parties, curled himself up in the straw, and had an excellent night's rest.

After that, they had many interesting talks together; and the gaoler's daughter grew very sorry for Toad, and thought it a great shame that he should be locked up for what seemed to her a very trivial offence. Toad, of course, in his vanity, thought that she had romantic feelings for him; and he could not help half-regretting that the social gulf between them was so very wide, for she evidently admired him very much.

One morning the girl was very thoughtful, and did not seem to be paying attention to Toad's witty comments.

"Toad," she said, "just listen, please. I have an aunt who is a washerwoman."

"There, there," said Toad, graciously, "never mind. I have several aunts who ought to be washerwomen."

"Do be quiet a minute, Toad," said the girl. "You talk too much, and I'm trying to think. As I said, I have an aunt who is a washerwoman; she does the washing for all the prisoners in this castle. She takes out the washing on Monday morning, and brings it in on Friday evening. This is a Thursday. Now, you're very rich – at least you're always telling me so – and she's very poor. A few pounds would mean a lot to her. I think you could come to some arrangement by which she would let you have her dress and bonnet, and you could escape from the castle as the washerwoman. You're very alike in many respects – particularly about the figure."

"We're not," said the Toad in a huff. "I have a very elegant figure."

"Have it your own way, then. You horrid, proud, ungrateful animal, when I'm trying to help you!"

"Yes, yes, thank you very much indeed," said the Toad hurriedly. "But look here! you surely wouldn't have Mr. Toad of Toad Hall, going about the country disguised as a washerwoman!"

"Then you can stay here as a Toad," replied the girl with much spirit.

Honest Toad was ready to admit himself in the wrong. "You are a good, kind, clever girl," he said, "and I am indeed a proud and stupid toad. Introduce me to your worthy aunt, if you will be so kind, and I have no doubt that we can come to an arrangement."

Next evening the girl ushered her aunt into Toad's cell, carrying his week's washing. The old lady had been prepared, and the sight of the gold sovereigns that Toad had placed on the table left little further to discuss. In return for his cash, Toad received a cotton print gown, an apron, a shawl, and a black bonnet. The old lady asked that she should be gagged and bound and dumped in a corner. By this pretence, she explained, she hoped to keep her job.

Toad was delighted with the suggestion. It would enable him to leave the prison with a reputation for being a desperate and dangerous fellow; and he readily helped the gaoler's daughter to make her aunt appear as if she had been overpowered.

"Now it's your turn, Toad," said the girl. "Take off that coat and waistcoat of yours." Laughing, she proceeded to fasten the hooks and eyes of the cotton gown, arranged the shawl properly, and tied the strings of the bonnet under his chin.

"You're the very image of her," she giggled, "and I'm sure you never looked half so respectable in all your life. Now, good-bye, Toad, and good luck. Go straight down the way you came up; and if any one says anything to you, as

they probably will, you can chaff back a bit, but remember you're a widow woman."

With a quaking heart, but as firm a footstep as he could manage, Toad set forth cautiously; but he was soon agreeably surprised to find how easy everything was for him, and a little humbled at the thought that his popularity was really another's. The washerwoman's squat figure seemed a passport for every barred door and grim gateway; even when he hesitated, uncertain as to which turning to take, he found himself helped out by the warder at the next gate, summoning him to come along sharp. The humorous remarks to which he was subjected, and to which, of course, he had to reply, formed his chief danger; for Toad was an animal with a strong sense of his own dignity, and almost lost his temper. However, he kept it, with difficulty, and did his best not to overstep the limits of good taste.

It seemed hours before he crossed the last courtyard, and dodged the outspread arms of the last warder, who was pleading with simulated passion for a farewell embrace. But at last he heard the wicket-gate in the great outer door click behind him, felt the fresh air of the outer world, and knew that he was free!

Dizzy with his success, he walked quickly towards the lights of the town, not knowing what he should do next, but quite certain of one thing: that he must as quickly as possible leave the neighbourhood where the washerwoman was so well-known.

As he walked along, he noticed some red and green lights to one side of the town, and he heard the puffing and snorting of engines.

"Aha!" he thought, "this is a piece of luck! A railway station!"

He made his way to the station, consulted a time-table, and found that a train, going more or less in the direction of his home, was due in half-an-hour.

"More luck!" said Toad, his spirits rising rapidly, and he went off to the booking-office to buy his ticket.

He gave the name of the station nearest to Toad Hall, and put his fingers to where his waistcoat pocket should have been. But the cotton gown was in his way. Other travellers, forming up in a line behind, waited with impatience; while Toad fumbled with the gown, and at last realised that he had no money, no pocket to hold it, and no waistcoat to hold the pocket!

To his horror he recollected that he had left his coat and waistcoat behind him in his cell, and with them his wallet, money, keys, watch, pencil-case – all that makes life worth living.

He made one desperate effort to carry the thing off. With a return to his proud manner, he said, "Look here! I find I've left my purse behind. Just give me that ticket, will you, and I'll send the money on tomorrow. I'm well-known in these parts."

The clerk stared at him and his black bonnet for a moment, and then laughed. "I should think you were pretty well known in these parts," he said, "if you've tried this game on often. Stand away from the window, please, madam; you're obstructing the other passengers!"

Baffled and full of despair, Toad wandered blindly down the platform where the train was standing, and tears trickled down each side of his nose. It was hard, he thought, to be within sight of safety and almost of home, and to be held up by the lack of a few wretched coins. Very soon his escape would be discovered, the hunt would be up, he would be caught, loaded with chains, and dragged back again to prison; his punishment would be doubled!

What was to be done? He was not swift of foot; his figure was unfortunately recognisable. Could he squeeze under the seat of a carriage? He had seen this method adopted by schoolboys, when the train fare provided by their parents had been put to other uses. As he pondered, he found himself opposite the engine, which was being oiled and caressed by its affectionate driver, a burly man with an oil-can in his hand and a cotton rag in the other.

"Hullo, mother!" said the engine-driver, "what's the trouble? You don't look very cheerful."

"O, sir!" said Toad, crying afresh, "I am a poor unhappy washerwoman, and I've lost all my money, and can't pay for a ticket, and I must get home tonight somehow, and I don't know what to do. O dear, O dear!"

"That's a bad business," said the engine-driver reflectively. "Can't get home – and got kids waiting for you, I dare say?"

"Any amount of 'em," sobbed Toad. "And they'll be hungry – and playing with matches – and quarrelling. O dear, O dear!"

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do," said the good engine-driver. "You're a washerwoman; and I'm an engine-driver, and it's terribly dirty work. Uses up no end of shirts, it does, till my missus is tired of washing 'em. If you'll wash a few shirts for me when you get home, I'll give you a ride on my engine. It's against the regulations, but we're in out-of-the-way parts."

The Toad eagerly scrambled up into the cab of the engine. Of course, he had never washed a shirt in his life, and wasn't going to begin; but he thought: "When I get safely home to Toad Hall, and have money again, I will send the engine-driver enough to pay for a quantity of washing."

The guard waved his flag, the engine-driver whistled in response, and the train moved out of the station. As the speed increased, and the Toad could see fields, and trees, and cows, and horses, all flying past him, and as he thought how every minute was bringing him nearer to Toad Hall, and his friends, and money, and a soft bed to sleep in, and praise and admiration at the recital of his adventures – he began to skip up and down and sing snatches of song, to the great astonishment of the engine-driver, who had never met a washerwoman like this one.

They had covered many miles, when Toad noticed that the engine-driver, with a puzzled expression, was leaning over the side of the engine and listening hard. Then he said to Toad:

“It’s very strange; we’re the last train running in this direction tonight, yet I could swear I heard another following us!”

Toad ceased his antics at once. He became grave and depressed, and tried desperately not to think of all the possibilities. By this time the moon was shining brightly, and the engine-driver could see behind them for a long distance.

He called out, “I can see it clearly now! It is an engine, on our rails, coming along at a great pace! It looks as if we were being pursued!”

The miserable Toad, crouching in the coal-dust, tried hard to think of something to do, without success.

“They are gaining on us fast!” cried the engine-driver. “And the engine is crowded with the strangest lot of people! Men like ancient warders; policemen waving truncheons; and plain-clothes detectives brandishing revolvers and walking-sticks; all shouting the same thing – ‘Stop, stop, stop!’”

Then Toad fell on his knees among the coals and, raising his clasped paws in supplication, cried, “Save me, save me, dear kind Mr. Engine-driver, and I will confess everything! I am not a simple washerwoman! I am a toad – the well-known and popular Mr. Toad. I have just escaped, by my great daring and cleverness, from a loathsome dungeon into which my enemies had flung me; and if those fellows on that engine catch me, it will be chains and bread-and-water and misery once more for poor, unhappy Toad!”

The engine-driver looked at him very sternly, and said, “What were you put in prison for?”

“It was nothing very much,” said poor Toad, blushing. “I only borrowed a motor-car. I didn’t mean to steal it, really; but magistrates take such harsh views of high-spirited actions.”

The engine-driver looked very grave and said, “I fear that you have been indeed a wicked toad, and by rights I ought to give you up. But you are in trouble; and I don’t hold with motor-cars. And I don’t hold with being ordered about by policemen when I’m on my own engine. So cheer up, Toad! I’ll do my best, and we may beat them yet!”

They piled on more coals, shovelling furiously; the furnace roared, the sparks flew, but still their pursuers slowly gained on them. The engine-driver, sighing, wiped his brow, and said,

“I’m afraid it’s no good, Toad. They have the better engine. There’s just one thing left that we can do, and it’s your only chance. Now, ahead of us is a long tunnel, and on the other side of that, the railway line passes through a thick wood. I will go as fast as I can through the tunnel, but the other fellows will slow down a bit, naturally. When we are through, I will shut off steam and put on the brakes, and the moment it’s safe to do so you must jump off and hide in

the wood, before they get through the tunnel and see you. Then I will go full speed ahead again, and they can chase me for as long as they like. Now be ready to jump when I tell you!”

They piled on more coals, and the train shot into the tunnel. The engine rushed and roared, till at last they shot out at the other end into the peaceful moonlight, and saw the wood lying dark on either side of the line. The driver put on the brakes, and as the train slowed down to almost a walking pace he called out, “Now, jump!”

Toad jumped. He rolled down an embankment, picked himself up, scrambled into the wood and hid.

Peeping out, he saw his train get up speed again and disappear at a great pace. Then out of the tunnel burst the pursuing engine, roaring and whistling, her crew shouting, “Stop! stop!” When they were past, the Toad had a hearty laugh – for the first time since he was thrown into prison.

But he soon stopped laughing. It was now very late and dark and cold, and he was in an unknown wood, with no money, still far from friends and home; and the dead silence of everything, after the roar and rattle of the train, was something of a shock.

He set off into the wood, with the idea of leaving the railway as far as possible behind him. After so many weeks within walls, he found the wood strange and unfriendly. An owl, swooping noiselessly towards him, brushed his shoulder with its wing, startling him; then flitted off, moth-like, laughing its low *ho! ho! ho!*; which Toad thought in very poor taste.

Once he met a fox, who stopped, looked him up and down in a sarcastic way, and said, “Hullo, washerwoman! Half a pair of socks and a pillow-case short this week! Mind it doesn’t happen again!” and swaggered off, sniggering. Toad looked about for a stone to throw at him, but could not succeed in finding one. At last, cold, hungry, and tired out, he sought the shelter of a hollow tree, where he made himself as comfortable a bed as he could with dead leaves, and slept soundly till the morning.

Chapter Nine

Wayfarers All

The Water Rat was restless, and he did not know why. The summer's pomp was still at full height, although in the fields green had given way to gold, and rowans were reddening, and the woods were dashed here and there with a tawny fierceness.

It was still warm and light. But the constant chorus of birds had shrunk to a casual evensong from a few performers; the robin was asserting himself once more; and there was a feeling in the air of change and departure. The cuckoo had long been silent; but many another feathered friend, for months a part of the familiar landscape, was missing too, and it seemed that the ranks of birds thinned steadily day by day. As he lay in bed at night Rat thought he could make out, passing in the darkness overhead, the beat and quiver of wings, all heading south.

He could not help being somewhat affected by all these flittings and farewells. Such changes make one unsettled, and inclined to be querulous. The Rat was a self-sufficient sort of animal, rooted to the land, and, whoever went, he stayed; still, he could not help noticing what was in the air, and feeling its influence in his bones.

It was difficult for him to settle down to anything seriously. Leaving the water-side, where rushes stood thick in a stream that was becoming sluggish and low, he wandered across a field or two of dusty pasture, and entered the great sea of wheat, yellow, wavy, and murmurous, full of small whisperings. Here he often loved to wander, through the forest of stiff strong stalks that carried their own golden sky over his head— a sky that was always dancing, softly talking; or swaying strongly to the passing wind. Here, too, he had many small friends, a society complete in itself, leading full and busy lives, but always with a spare moment to exchange news with a visitor.

Today, however, though they were civil enough, the field-mice and harvest-mice seemed preoccupied. Many were tunnelling busily; others, gathered in small groups, examined drawings of small flats, situated conveniently near the Stores. Some were hauling out dusty trunks, others were already packing their belongings; while everywhere piles of wheat, oats, barley, beech-mast and nuts lay about ready for transport.

"Here's old Ratty!" they cried when they saw him. "Come and lend a hand, Rat!"

"What are you up to?" said the Water Rat severely. "You know it isn't time to be thinking of winter quarters yet!"

"O yes, we know that," explained a field-mouse rather shamefacedly; "but it's always as well to be in good time, isn't it? We really must get all the baggage

and stores moved out before those horrid machines begin clicking round the fields; and then, you know, the best homes get picked up so quickly nowadays. Of course, we're early, we know that; but we're only making a start."

"O, bother starts," said the Rat. "It's a splendid day. Come for a stroll along the hedges, or a picnic in the woods, or something."

"Well, not today, thank you," replied the field-mouse hurriedly. "Perhaps some other day, when we've more time."

The Rat, with a snort of contempt, swung round to go, tripped over a hat-box, and fell over.

"If people would be more careful," said a field-mouse stiffly, "and look where they're going, they wouldn't hurt themselves. Mind that hold-all, Rat! Sit down somewhere. In an hour or two we may be more free."

"You won't be 'free' this side of Christmas, I can see that," retorted the Rat grumpily, as he left the field.

He returned somewhat despondently to his river – his faithful, steady-going old river, which never packed up, flitted, or went into winter quarters. In the willows which fringed the bank he spied a swallow. Presently it was joined by another, and then a third; and the birds, fidgeting restlessly on their bough, talked together earnestly.

"What, already," said the Rat, strolling up to them. "What's the hurry?"

"O, we're not off yet," replied the first swallow. "We're only making plans. Talking it over, you know – what route we'll take this year, and where we'll stop, and so on. That's half the fun!"

"Fun?" said the Rat. "That's what I don't understand. If you've got to leave this pleasant place, and your friends and your snug homes, I've no doubt you'll go bravely, and face all the trouble and discomfort. But to want to even think about it, till you really need—"

"No, you *don't* understand," said the second swallow. "First, we feel it stirring within us, a sweet unrest; then back come the memories, like homing pigeons, fluttering through our dreams. We compare notes and assure ourselves that it was all really true, as one by one the scents and names of long-forgotten places come gradually back and beckon to us."

"Couldn't you stay for just this year?" suggested the Water Rat, wistfully. "We'll do our best to make you feel at home."

"I tried staying one year," said the third swallow. "I had grown so fond of the place that when the time came I let the others go without me. For a few weeks it was well enough, but after that, O the weary length of the nights! The shivering, sunless days! The air so clammy and chill, and not an insect in an acre of it! No, it was no good; my courage broke down, and one cold, stormy night I took wing. It was snowing hard as I beat through the passes of the great mountains, and I had a stiff fight to win through; but never shall I forget the blissful feeling of the hot sun again, as I sped down to the lakes that lay so blue

and placid below me, and the taste of my first fat insect! I had my warning; never again did I think of disobedience.”

“Ah, yes, the call of the South!” twittered the other two dreamily. “Its songs, its hues, its radiant air! O, do you remember...” and, forgetting the Rat, they slid into passionate reminiscence, while he listened, fascinated, and his heart burned within him. The mere chatter of these southern-bound birds had the power to awaken a wild new sensation and thrill him through and through; what would one moment of the real thing do – one touch of the real southern sun? With closed eyes he dared to dream a moment, and when he looked again the river seemed steely and chill, the green fields grey and lightless. Then his loyal heart seemed to cry out “Treachery.”

“Why do you ever come back, then?” he demanded of the swallows jealously. “What do you find to attract you in this poor drab little country?”

“Do you think,” said the first swallow, “that the other call is not for us too? The call of lush meadow-grass, wet orchards, warm, insect-haunted ponds, of browsing cattle, of haymaking, and nest-building under the eaves?”

“Do you suppose,” asked the second one, “that you are the only one who craves to hear the cuckoo’s song again?”

“In due time,” said the third, “we shall be home-sick once more for quiet water-lilies swaying on an English stream. But just now our blood dances to other music.”

They fell a-twittering among themselves once more; this time of violet seas, and tawny sands, and lizard-haunted walls.

Restlessly the Rat wandered off once more. He climbed the slope that rose from the north bank of the river, and lay looking out towards the Downs that formed his horizon until now, his limit behind which lay nothing he had cared to see. Today, as he gazed South with a new-born need stirring in his heart, the clear sky over the Downs seemed to pulsate with promise; on this side of the hills was a blank, on the other side lay the coloured panorama that his inner eye was seeing so clearly. What seas lay beyond, green and crested! What sun-bathed coasts, along which white villas glittered against olive woods! What quiet harbours, thronged with ships bound for purple islands of spice and wine!

He descended towards the river; then changed his mind and sought the dusty lane. There, lying underneath the thick, cool hedge that bordered it, he could muse on the road and all the wondrous world it led to, out there beyond – beyond!

He heard footsteps, and a walker came wearily into view. It was a Rat, and a very dusty one. The wayfarer, as he reached the Water Rat, saluted with a courteous gesture that had something foreign about it; he hesitated a moment, and then with a pleasant smile sat down by his side in the cool grass. He seemed tired, and the Rat let him rest in silent companionship.

The wayfarer was lean and keen-featured, and somewhat bowed at the shoulders; his paws were thin, his eyes much wrinkled at the corners, and he

wore small gold ear-rings in his well-shaped ears. His knitted jersey was of a faded blue, as were his breeches, which were patched and stained. His belongings were tied up in a blue cotton handkerchief.

When he had rested awhile the stranger sighed, sniffed the air, and looked about him.

“That was clover on the breeze,” he remarked; “and those are cows we hear cropping the grass behind us. There is a sound of distant reapers. The river runs somewhere close by, for I hear the call of a moorhen, and I see by your build that you’re a freshwater mariner. Everything seems asleep, and yet going on all the time. It’s a good life that you lead, friend; no doubt the best in the world, if only you are strong enough to lead it!”

“Yes, it’s the only life,” responded the Water Rat, though without his usual conviction.

“I did not say exactly that,” replied the stranger cautiously; “but no doubt it’s the best. I’ve tried it, and I know. And because I’ve just tried six months of it, here am I, footsore and hungry, tramping away from it southward, following the old call, back to the old life which will not let me go.”

“Where have you just come from?” asked the Rat. He hardly dared to ask where the wayfarer was bound for; he seemed to know the answer all too well.

“Nice little farm to the north,” replied the wayfarer, briefly. “I had everything I could want, and more; and here I am! Glad to be here all the same, though! So many miles further on the road, so many hours nearer to my heart’s desire!”

His shining eyes fixed on the horizon, and he seemed to be listening for some distant sound.

“You are not one of us,” said the Water Rat, “nor even, I should judge, of this country.”

“Right,” replied the stranger. “I’m a seafaring rat, I am, and the port I originally hail from is Constantinople, though I’m a sort of foreigner there too, in a manner of speaking. You have heard of Constantinople, friend? A fair city, and an ancient and glorious one. And you may have heard, too, of Sigurd, King of Norway, and how he sailed there with sixty ships, and how he and his men rode through streets all draped in their honour with purple and gold; and how the Emperor and Empress banqueted with him on board his ship. When Sigurd returned home, many of his Northmen remained behind and entered the Emperor’s body-guard, and my ancestor, a Norwegian, stayed behind too, with the ships that Sigurd gave the Emperor. Seafarers we have ever been; as for me, my home is any pleasant port between there and the London River. I know them all, and they know me. Set me down on any of their quays, and I am home again.”

“I suppose you travel on great voyages,” said the Water Rat with growing interest. “Months out of sight of land, and food and water running short, and all that sort of thing?”

“By no means,” said the Sea Rat frankly. “That life would not suit me at all. I’m in the coasting trade, and rarely out of sight of land. It’s the jolly times on shore that appeal to me, as much as any seafaring. O, those southern seaports! The smell of them, the lights, the glamour!”

“Tell me something of your coasting, then,” the Water Rat suggested; “for, I confess to you, my life today feels somewhat narrow.”

“My last voyage,” began the Sea Rat, “that landed me eventually in this country, began with family troubles, as usual. To get away I shipped myself on board a small trading vessel bound from Constantinople to the Greek Islands and the Levant. Those were golden days and balmy nights! In and out of harbour all the time – old friends everywhere – sleeping in some cool temple during the heat of the day – feasting and song after sundown, under great stars set in a velvet sky!

“Then we coasted up the Adriatic, its shores swimming in an atmosphere of amber, rose, and aquamarine; we lay in wide land-locked harbours, we roamed through ancient and noble cities, until at last one morning, as the sun rose royally behind us, we rode into Venice down a path of gold. O, Venice is a fine city, wherein a rat can wander at his ease! Or, when weary of wandering, can sit at the edge of the Grand Canal at night, feasting with his friends, when the air is full of music and the sky full of stars, and the lights flash and shimmer on the polished prows of the swaying gondolas!”

He was silent for a time; and the Water Rat, silent too and enthralled, floated on dream-canals between wave-lapped walls.

“South we sailed again,” continued the Sea Rat, “coasting down the Italian shore to Palermo, and there I quitted for a long, happy spell on shore. I never stick too long to one ship; and Sicily is one of my happy hunting-grounds. I know everybody there, and their ways suit me. I spent many jolly weeks in the island, staying with friends up country. When I grew restless again I took a ship that was trading to Sardinia and Corsica; and very glad I was to feel the sea-breeze in my face once more.”

“But isn’t it very hot and stuffy, down in the hold?” asked the Water Rat.

The seafarer winked at him. “I’m an old hand,” he remarked. “The captain’s cabin’s good enough for me.”

“It’s a hard life, by all accounts,” murmured the Rat, sunk in deep thought.

“For the crew it is,” replied the seafarer, again with the ghost of a wink.

“From Corsica, I made use of a ship that was taking wine to the mainland. We landed in the evening, hauled up our wine-casks, and heaved them overboard, tied one to the other by a long line. Then the crew rowed shorewards, singing as they went, and drawing after them the long bobbing procession of casks, like a mile of porpoises. On the sands they had horses waiting, which dragged the casks up the steep street with a clatter and scramble. When the last cask was in, we sat late into the night, drinking with our friends, and next morning I took to the great olive-woods for a spell and a rest. I had done with islands for the time;

so I led a lazy life among the peasants, lying and watching them work, or stretched high on the hillside with the blue Mediterranean far below me. And so at length, by easy stages, to Marseilles, and old shipmates, and great ocean-bound vessels, and more feasting.”

“That reminds me,” said the polite Water Rat; “will you take your midday meal with me? My hole is close by, and you are very welcome to whatever there is.”

“Now I call that kind of you,” said the Sea Rat. “I am indeed hungry – but couldn’t you fetch it out here? I am none too fond of going under hatches; and, while we eat, I could tell you more about my voyages and the pleasant life I lead – at least, it’s very pleasant to me; whereas if we go indoors I shall most likely fall asleep.”

“That is an excellent suggestion,” said the Water Rat, and he hurried off home. There he got out the lunch-basket and packed a simple meal, including a long French loaf, a garlic sausage, some very strong cheese, and a long-necked flask wherein lay bottled sunshine from far Southern slopes. Thus laden, he returned, and blushed for pleasure at the old seaman’s compliments as they unpacked the basket and laid out the contents on the grass.

The Sea Rat continued the history of his latest voyage, from port to port, from Spain to Lisbon, Oporto, and Bordeaux, then to the pleasant harbours of Cornwall and Devon, and so up the English Channel to that final quayside, where he had caught the magical hints of another Spring; and, fired by these, had hurried on a long tramp inland, hungry to try life on some quiet farmstead, far from the weary beating of the sea.

Spell-bound with excitement, the Water Rat followed the Adventurer league by league, over stormy bays, across harbour bars on a racing tide, up winding rivers; and left him with a regretful sigh planted at his dull inland farm, about which he desired to hear nothing.

By this time their meal was over. The Seafarer, refreshed and strengthened, his eye lit with a brightness that seemed caught from some far-away sea-beacon, filled his glass with the red wine of the South, and, holding the Water Rat’s gaze, talked on. The Water Rat listened, fascinated, powerless. The quiet world outside receded far away and ceased to be, while the wonderful talk flowed on. Was it speech entirely, or did it turn at times to song – a shanty of the sailors weighing the dripping anchor, a ballad of the fisherman hauling his nets at sundown, the chords of a guitar from a gondola?

All these sounds the spell-bound Water Rat seemed to hear, and with them the hungry complaint of the gulls, the soft thunder of the breaking wave, and the rattle of the shingle.

With beating heart he followed the adventures of a dozen seaports: fights, escapes, friendships, and gallant doings; or he searched islands for treasure, fished in still lagoons and dozed on warm white sand. Of deep-sea fishings he heard tell; of sudden perils on a moonless night, the tall bows of a great liner

taking shape through the fog; of the merry home-coming, the harbour lights; the trudge up little streets towards the comforting glow of red-curtained windows.

Lastly, in his waking dream it seemed to him that the Adventurer had risen to his feet, but was still speaking.

“And now,” he was softly saying, “I take to the road again, south-west for many a long and dusty day; till at last I reach the little grey town I know so well, beside the harbour. There you look down flights of stone steps to a patch of sparkling blue water, and gaily painted boats. Salmon leap on the tide, schools of mackerel flash past, and the great vessels glide up to their moorings or out to the open sea.

“There, the ship of my choice will let go its anchor. I shall take my time, I shall wait till the right one lies waiting for me; then I shall slip on board along a rope; and wake to the song and tramp of the sailors, and the rattle of the anchor-chain coming in. We shall break out the sails, the white houses on the harbour side will glide slowly past us, and the voyage will have begun! And then, once outside the harbour, we hear the slap of great green seas as the ship heels to the wind, pointing South!

“And you will come too, young brother; for the South still waits for you. Take the Adventure, heed the call, now before the moment passes! ’Tis but a banging of the door behind you, a light step forward, and you are out of the old life and into the new! You can easily overtake me on the road, for you are young, and I am ageing. I will linger, and look back; and at last I’ll surely see you coming, eager and light-hearted, with all the South in your face!”

The voice died away and ceased; and the Water Rat, paralysed and staring, saw at last only a distant speck on the white surface of the road.

Mechanically he rose and repacked the lunch-basket carefully. Mechanically he returned home, gathered together a few small necessaries and special treasures he was fond of, and put them in a satchel, moving about the room like a sleep-walker. He swung the satchel over his shoulder, selected a stout stick for his wayfaring, and with no haste, but no hesitation, he stepped across the threshold just as the Mole appeared at the door.

“Why, where are you off to, Ratty?” asked the Mole in great surprise, grasping him by the arm.

“Going South, with the rest of them,” murmured the Rat in a dreamy monotone. “Seawards first and then on shipboard, and so to the shores that are calling me!”

He pressed forward, still without haste, but with a dogged fixity of purpose. The Mole, now thoroughly alarmed, stood in front of him, and looking into his eyes saw that they were glazed and turned a streaked and shifting grey – not his friend’s eyes, but the eyes of some other animal! Grappling with him strongly he dragged the Rat inside, threw him down, and held him.

The Rat struggled desperately for a few moments, and then his strength seemed suddenly to leave him, and he lay exhausted, with closed eyes, trembling. Presently the Mole helped him to rise and placed him in a chair, where he sat collapsed, his body shaken by a violent shivering, which changed to dry sobbing.

Mole locked the door, threw the satchel into a drawer, and sat down quietly by his friend, waiting for the strange seizure to pass. Gradually the Rat sank into a troubled doze, broken by confused murmurings of things strange and wild and foreign to the Mole; and then he passed into a deep slumber.

Feeling very anxious, the Mole left him while he busied himself with household tasks. It was getting dark when he returned to the parlour and found the Rat wide awake, but listless, silent, and dejected. He took one hasty glance at his eyes; saw, to his great gratification, that they were clear and dark brown as before; and then sat down and tried to cheer him up and help him to relate what had happened.

Poor Ratty did his best to explain; but how could he put it into words? How could he describe the haunting sea voices that had sung to him, the magic of the Seafarer's tales? Even to himself, now that the spell was broken, he found it difficult to account for what had seemed, some hours ago, the only thing.

To the Mole this much was plain: the attack had passed, and had left him sane again, though shaken. But the Rat seemed to have lost all interest in the things that made up his daily life, and the changes of the seasons.

Casually, then, the Mole turned his talk to the harvest that was being gathered in, the towering wagons and their straining teams of horses, the growing hayricks, and the large moon rising over bare acres dotted with sheaves of wheat. He talked of reddening apples, of ripening nuts, of jams and preserves and cordials; till by easy stages he reached midwinter, its hearty joys and its snug home life, and then he became simply lyrical.

Gradually the Rat began to sit up and join in, his dull eyes brightening. The tactful Mole slipped away and returned with a pencil and a few sheets of paper, which he placed on the table at his friend's elbow.

"It's quite a long time since you wrote any poetry," he remarked. "You might try this evening, instead of brooding over things so much. I've an idea that you'll feel a lot better when you've got something jotted down."

The Rat pushed the paper away wearily, but the discreet Mole made an excuse to leave the room. When he peeped in again some time later, the Rat was absorbed, alternately scribbling and sucking the top of his pencil. It is true that he sucked a good deal more than he scribbled; but it was joy to the Mole to know that the cure had at least begun.

Chapter Ten

The Further Adventures of Toad

The front door of the hollow tree faced eastwards, so Toad woke up early; partly because of the bright sunlight streaming in on him, partly because of the exceeding coldness of his toes – which made him dream that he was at home in bed on a cold winter's night, and his bedclothes had got up, grumbling and protesting they couldn't stand the cold any longer, and had run downstairs to the kitchen fire to warm themselves; and he had followed, on bare feet, along miles and miles of icy stone-paved passages.

Sitting up, he rubbed his eyes first and his complaining toes next, wondering where he was; then, with a leap of the heart, remembered everything – his escape, his flight, his pursuit; and best of all, that he was free!

Free! The word and the thought alone warmed him up from top to toe as he thought of the jolly world outside, waiting eagerly for him to make his triumphal entrance. He shook himself and combed the dry leaves out of his hair with his fingers; and then marched forth into the morning sun, cold but confident, hungry but hopeful, all yesterday's nervous terrors dispelled by rest and heartening sunshine.

He had the world to himself, that early summer morning. The dewy woodland that he walked through was solitary and still: the green fields that he came to were his own to do as he liked with; the road itself, when he reached it, was entirely empty.

Toad, however, was looking for something that could talk, and tell him which way he ought to go. He could not simply wander wherever the road pointed, not caring where. He could have kicked the road for its helpless silence when every minute was of importance to him.

The rustic road was soon joined by a shy little brother in the shape of a canal, which ambled by its side but still told Toad nothing.

"Bother them!" said Toad to himself. "But they must both be coming from somewhere, and going to somewhere!" So, in his washerwoman's outfit, he marched on patiently by the water's edge.

Round a bend in the canal came plodding a solitary horse, stooping forward as if in anxious thought. From his collar stretched a long line, taut, and dripping. Toad let the horse pass, and stood waiting for what followed.

With a pleasant swirl of quiet water a barge slid up beside him, its gaily painted side level with the towing-path, its sole occupant a big stout woman wearing a sun-bonnet, one brawny arm laid along the tiller.

"A nice morning, ma'am!" she remarked to Toad, as she drew up level with him.

“I dare say, ma’am!” responded Toad politely, as he walked along the tow-path alongside her. “I dare it is a nice morning to them that’s not in sore trouble, like what I am. Here’s my married daughter, she writes to me to come to her at once; so I comes, not knowing what may be happening, but fearing the worst, as you will understand, ma’am, if you’re a mother too. And I’ve left my business to look after itself – I’m in the washing and laundry line, ma’am – and I’ve left my young children to look after themselves; and I’ve lost all my money, and lost my way, and as for what may be happening to my married daughter, why, I don’t like to think of it, ma’am!”

“Where might your daughter live?” asked the barge-woman.

“She lives near the river, ma’am,” replied Toad. “Close to a fine house called Toad Hall, that’s somewhere in these parts. Perhaps you may have heard of it.”

“Toad Hall? Why, I’m going that way myself,” replied the barge-woman. “This canal joins the river a few miles on, above Toad Hall; and then it’s an easy walk. Come in the barge with me, and I’ll give you a lift.”

She steered the barge close to the bank, and Toad, with humble thanks, stepped lightly on board and sat down with great satisfaction.

“Toad’s luck again!” thought he. “I always come out on top!”

“So you’re in the washing business, ma’am?” said the barge-woman politely, as they glided along. “And a very good business too, I dare say.”

“Finest business in the whole country,” said Toad airily. “All the gentry come to me. You see, I understand my work thoroughly, and attend to it all myself. Washing, ironing, starching, gentlemen’s shirts – everything’s done under my own eye!”

“But surely you don’t do all that work yourself, ma’am?” asked the barge-woman.

“O, I have girls,” said Toad lightly: “twenty girls or so, always at work. But you know what girls are, ma’am! Nasty little hussies, that’s what I call ’em!”

“So do I, too,” said the barge-woman heartily. “But I dare say you sort yours out, the idle trollops! And are you very fond of washing?”

“I love it,” said Toad. “Never so happy as when I’ve got both arms in the wash-tub. But, then, it comes so easy to me! A real pleasure, I assure you, ma’am!”

“What a bit of luck, meeting you!” observed the barge-woman thoughtfully. “Lucky for both of us!”

“Why, what do you mean?” asked Toad, nervously.

“Well, now,” replied the barge-woman. “I like washing, too, the same as you do; but my husband, he’s such a fellow for shirking his work and leaving the barge to me, that never a moment do I get for seeing to my own affairs. By rights he ought to be here now, but instead he’s gone off with the dog, to see if they can’t pick up a rabbit for dinner. But meantime, how am I to get on with my washing?”

“O, never mind about the washing,” said Toad, not liking the subject. “Think of that rabbit. A nice fat young rabbit, I’ll be bound. Got any onions?”

“I can’t think anything but my washing,” said the barge-woman, “and I wonder you can be talking of rabbits, with such a joyful prospect before you. There’s a heap of things in a corner of the cabin. If you’ll just take one or two of the undergarments and put them through the wash-tub, it’ll be a pleasure to you, as you rightly say, and a real help to me. You’ll find a tub, and soap, and a kettle on the stove, and a bucket to haul up water from the canal with. Then I shall know you’re enjoying yourself, instead of sitting here idle.”

“Here, let me steer!” said Toad, now thoroughly frightened, “and then you can get on with your washing your own way. I might spoil your things, or not do ’em as you like. I’m more used to gentlemen’s things. It’s my special line.”

“Let you steer?” replied the barge-woman, laughing. “It takes some practice to steer a barge properly. Besides, it’s dull work, and I want you to be happy. No, you shall do the washing you are so fond of, and I’ll stick to the steering. I want to give you a treat!”

Toad was cornered. He looked for escape this way and that, saw that he was too far from the bank for a flying leap, and sullenly resigned himself to his fate.

“I suppose any fool can wash!” he thought. So he fetched the tub and soap, selected a few garments at random, tried to remember what he had seen in casual glances through laundry windows, and set to work.

A half-hour passed, and Toad got crosser and crosser. Nothing that he could do to the clothes seemed to get them clean. He tried coaxing, he tried slapping, he tried punching; they were unchanged. Once or twice he looked nervously over his shoulder at the barge-woman, but she was gazing ahead, seeming absorbed in her steering.

His back ached badly, and he noticed with dismay that his paws were beginning to get all crinkly. Now Toad was very proud of his paws. He muttered under his breath words that should never pass the lips of either washerwomen or Toads; and lost the soap, for the fiftieth time.

A burst of laughter made him straighten up and look around. The barge-woman was leaning back and laughing till the tears ran down her cheeks.

“I’ve been watching you all the time,” she gasped. “I thought you must be a humbug all along, from the conceited way you talked. Pretty washerwoman you are! Never washed so much as a dish-cloth in your life, I’ll bet!”

Toad’s temper, which had been simmering viciously for some time, now fairly boiled over, and he lost control of himself.

“You common, low, fat barge-woman!” he shouted; “don’t you dare to talk to me like that! Washerwoman indeed! I would have you know that I am a very well-known, respected, distinguished Toad! I may be under a bit of a cloud at present, but I will not be laughed at by a bargewoman!”

The woman moved nearer and peered under his bonnet. "Why, so you are!" she cried. "Well, I never! A horrid, nasty, crawly Toad! And in my nice clean barge! Now that is a thing that I will not have."

She let go of the tiller. One big arm shot out and caught Toad by a fore-leg, while the other gripped him by a hind-leg. Then the world turned suddenly upside down, the barge seemed to flit across the sky, the wind whistled in his ears, and Toad found himself flying through the air, revolving as he went.

The cold water, when he eventually reached it with a loud splash, did not cool the heat of his furious temper. He rose to the surface spluttering, and when he had wiped the duck-weed out of his eyes he saw the barge-woman laughing at him from the retreating barge; and he vowed, as he coughed and choked, to be even with her.

He swam for shore, but the cotton gown greatly hindered him, and when at last he landed, he found it hard to climb up the steep bank. He had to take a minute or two's rest to recover his breath; then, gathering his wet skirts over his arms, he started to run after the barge as fast as his legs would carry him, wild with indignation, thirsting for revenge.

The barge-woman was still laughing when he drew up level with her. "Put yourself through your mangle, washerwoman," she called out, "and you'll pass for quite a decent-looking Toad!"

Toad did not reply. Revenge was what he wanted, although he had a thing or two in his mind that he would have liked to say.

Instead, running swiftly on, he overtook the horse, unfastened the tow-rope from it, jumped lightly on the horse's back, and urged it to a gallop by kicking it vigorously. He steered for the open country, abandoning the tow-path, and swinging his steed down a rutty lane.

Once he looked back, and saw that the barge had run aground on the other side of the canal. The barge-woman was shouting, "Stop, stop!"

"I've heard that song before," said Toad, laughing, as he continued to ride onward.

The barge-horse was not capable of galloping for long, and it soon subsided into a trot, and then an easy walk; but Toad was quite contented with this, knowing that he was moving, and the barge was not. He had recovered his temper, now that he had done something he thought really clever; and he was satisfied to jog along quietly in the sunny by-ways and bridle-paths, and trying to forget how hungry he was, till the canal had been left far behind him.

He had travelled some miles, and he was feeling drowsy in the sunshine, when the horse stopped, lowered his head, and began to nibble the grass; and Toad, waking up, just saved himself from falling off. Looking about him, he found he was on a wide common, dotted with patches of gorse and bramble. Near him stood a dingy gipsy caravan, and beside it a man was sitting on a bucket turned upside down, smoking and staring out into the wide world. A fire was burning nearby, and over the fire hung an iron pot, and out of that

pot came forth bubblings and steam and warm, rich smells that twined together into one complete and perfect smell.

Toad now knew that he had not been really hungry before. This was real hunger at last, and no mistake. He looked the gipsy over carefully, wondering vaguely whether it would be easier to fight him or cajole him. So there he sat, and sniffed, and looked at the gipsy; and the gipsy sat and smoked, and looked at him.

Presently the gipsy took his pipe out of his mouth and remarked in a careless way, "Want to sell that there horse of yours?"

Toad was completely taken aback. He did not know that gipsies were very fond of horse-dealing, needing horses to pull their caravans. But the gipsy's suggestion seemed to smooth the way towards the two things he wanted so badly – money, and a good breakfast.

"What?" he said, "me sell this beautiful young horse of mine? O, no; it's out of the question. Who's going to take the washing to my customers every week? Besides, I'm too fond of him, and he simply dotes on me."

"Try and love a donkey," suggested the gipsy.

"You don't seem to see," continued Toad, "that this fine horse of mine is a cut above you altogether. He's been a Prize Hackney, in his time – you can tell that at a glance, if you understand anything about horses. No, selling him's not to be thought of. All the same, how much would you offer for this beautiful young horse of mine?"

The gipsy looked the horse over, and then he looked Toad over with equal care. "Shillin' a leg," he said briefly, and turned away, continuing to smoke.

"A shilling a leg?" cried Toad. "If you please, I must take a little time to work that out, and see just what it comes to."

He climbed down off his horse, and sat down by the gipsy, and did sums on his fingers, and at last he said, "A shilling a leg? Why, that comes to exactly four shillings. I could not think of accepting four shillings for this beautiful young horse of mine."

"Well," said the gipsy, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make it five shillings, and that's three-and-sixpence more than the animal's worth. And that's my last word."

Then Toad pondered long and deeply. For he was hungry and quite penniless, and he did not know how far he was from home, and enemies might still be looking for him. In that situation, five shillings seemed a large sum of money. On the other hand, it did not seem very much to get for a horse. But then again, the horse hadn't cost him anything.

At last he said firmly, "Look here, gipsy! I tell you what we will do. You shall hand me over six shillings and sixpence, in cash; and in addition you shall give me as much breakfast as I can possibly eat out of that pot of yours that keeps sending forth such delicious and exciting smells. In return, I will sell you my spirited young horse, with all the beautiful harness and trappings thrown in. If

that's not good enough for you, say so, and I'll be getting on. I know a man near here who's wanted this horse of mine for years."

The gipsy grumbled, and declared that if he did any more deals of that sort he'd be ruined. But he lugged a dirty canvas bag out of his trouser pocket, and counted out six shillings and sixpence into Toad's paw. Then he disappeared into the caravan, and returned with a large iron plate and a knife, fork, and spoon. He tilted up the pot, and a glorious stream of hot rich stew gurgled into the plate. It was, indeed, the most beautiful stew in the world, being made of partridges, and pheasants, chickens, hares, and rabbits, and pea-hens, guinea-fowls, and one or two other things. Toad took the plate on his lap, almost crying, and stuffed himself, and kept asking for more, and the gipsy gave it him. Toad thought that he had never eaten so good a breakfast in his life.

When he had taken as much stew on board as he could possibly hold, he said good-bye to the gipsy, and took an affectionate farewell of the horse; and the gipsy told him which way to go.

He set forth on his travels again in the best possible spirits. He was, indeed, a very different Toad from the animal of an hour ago. The sun was shining brightly, his wet clothes were dry again, he had money in his pocket, he was nearing home and friends and safety, and, best of all, he had had a hot meal, and felt big, and strong, and self-confident.

As he tramped along gaily, he thought of his adventures and escapes, and how he had always managed to find a way out of trouble; and his pride and conceit began to swell within him.

"Ho, ho!" he said to himself as he marched along with his chin in the air, "what a clever Toad I am! There is surely no animal equal to me for cleverness! My enemies shut me up in prison, watched night and day by warders; I walk out through them all. They pursue me with engines, and policemen, and revolvers; I snap my fingers at them, and vanish, laughing, into space. I am thrown into a canal by an evil-minded woman. What of it? I swim ashore, I seize her horse, I ride off in triumph, and I sell the horse for a whole pocketful of money and an excellent breakfast! Ho, ho! I am The Toad, the handsome, the popular, the successful Toad!"

He got so puffed up with conceit that as he walked he made up a song in praise of himself, and sang it at the top of his voice, though there was no one to hear it but him.

"The world has held great Heroes,
As history-books have showed;
But never a name to go down to fame
Compared with that of Toad!
"The clever men at Oxford
Know all that there is to be knowed.
But they none of them know one half as much

As intelligent Mr. Toad!

“The animals sat in the Ark and cried,
Their tears in torrents flowed.
Who was it said, ‘There’s land ahead?’
Encouraging Mr. Toad!

“The army all saluted
As they marched along the road.
Was it the King? Or Kitchener?
No. It was Mr. Toad.

“The Queen and her Ladies-in-waiting
Sat at the window and sewed.
She cried, ‘Look! who’s that handsome man?’
They answered, ‘Mr. Toad.’”

There was a great deal more of the same sort. Toad sang it as he walked, and got more inflated every minute. But his pride was shortly to have a fall.

After some miles of country lanes he reached the high road, and as he turned into it and glanced along its white length, he saw approaching him a speck that turned into a dot and then into a blob; and a familiar note of warning fell on his delighted ear.

“A motor-car!” said the excited Toad. “This is real life again, this is the great world from which I have been missed for long! I will hail my brothers of the wheel, and tell them a tale, and they will give me a lift, of course, and perhaps, with luck, it may even end in my driving up to Toad Hall in a motor-car! That will be one in the eye for Badger!”

He stepped confidently out into the road to hail the motor-car, which slowed its pace as it neared the lane; when suddenly he became very pale. His heart turned to water, his knees shook, and he doubled up and collapsed with a sickening pain in his stomach. And well he might; for the approaching car was the very one he had stolen out of the yard of the Red Lion Hotel on that fatal day when all his troubles began! And the people in it were the very same people he had sat and watched in the coffee-room!

He sank down in a shabby, miserable heap in the road, murmuring to himself in his despair, “It’s all over now! Chains and policemen again! Prison again! Dry bread and water! O, what a fool I have been! What did I want to go strutting about the country for, singing conceited songs, and hailing people in broad day, instead of hiding till nightfall and slipping home quietly! O hapless Toad!”

The terrible motor-car drew slowly nearer, till at last he heard it stop. Two gentlemen got out and walked round the trembling heap of crumpled misery lying in the road, and one of them said,

“O dear! this is very sad! Here is a poor old washerwoman who has fainted in the road! Perhaps she is overcome by the heat, poor creature. Let us lift her into the car and take her to the nearest village, where doubtless she has friends.”

They tenderly lifted Toad into the motor-car and propped him up with soft cushions, and drove on their way.

When Toad heard them talk so sympathetically and knew that he was not recognised, his courage began to revive. He cautiously opened first one eye and then the other.

“Look!” said one of the gentlemen, “she is better already. The fresh air is doing her good. How do you feel now, ma’am?”

“Thank you kindly, Sir,” said Toad in a feeble voice, “I’m feeling a great deal better!”

“That’s good,” said the gentleman. “Now keep still, and don’t try to talk.”

“I won’t,” said Toad. “I was only thinking, if I might sit on the front seat beside the driver, where I could get the fresh air full in my face, I should soon be all right again.”

“What a very sensible woman!” said the gentleman. “Of course you shall.” So they carefully helped Toad into the front seat beside the driver, and on they went.

Toad was almost himself again by now. He looked around him, and tried to beat down the yearnings and old cravings that rose up and took possession of him entirely.

“It is fate!” he said to himself. “Why fight it?” and he turned to the driver at his side. “Please, Sir,” he said, “I wish you would let me try and drive the car for a little. I’ve been watching you carefully, and it looks so interesting, and I should like to be able to tell my friends that I had driven a motor-car!”

The driver laughed, so that the gentleman inquired what the matter was. When he heard, he said, to Toad’s delight, “Bravo, ma’am! I like your spirit. Let her have a try. She won’t do any harm.”

Toad eagerly scrambled into the driver’s seat, took the steering-wheel in his hands, listened with pretended humility to the instructions given him, and set the car in motion, but very slowly and carefully at first, for he was determined to be prudent.

The gentlemen behind clapped their hands and applauded. Toad heard them saying, “How well she does it! Fancy a washerwoman driving a car as well as that, the first time!”

Toad went a little faster; then faster still, and faster.

He heard the gentlemen call out warningly, “Be careful, washerwoman!” And this annoyed him, and he began to lose his head.

The driver tried to interfere, but Toad pinned him in his seat with one elbow, and put on full speed. The rush of air in his face, the hum of the engines, and the leap of the car beneath him intoxicated his weak brain.

“Washerwoman, indeed!” he shouted recklessly. “Ho! ho! I am the Toad, the motor-car snatcher, the prison-breaker, the Toad who always escapes! Sit still, and you shall know what driving really is, for you are in the hands of the famous, the skilful, the entirely fearless Toad!”

With a cry of horror the whole group rose and flung themselves on him.

“Seize him!” they cried, “seize the Toad, the wicked animal who stole our motor-car! Drag him to the nearest police-station! Down with the desperate and dangerous Toad!”

Alas! they should have been more prudent, they should have remembered to stop the motor-car first. With a half-turn of the wheel the Toad sent the car crashing through the low hedge beside the road. One mighty bound, a violent shock – and the car was in the thick mud of a horse-pond.

Toad found himself flying through the air with the delicate curve of a swallow. He liked the motion, and was just beginning to wonder whether he might develop wings and turn into a Toad-bird, when he landed on his back with a thump, in the soft grass of a meadow. Sitting up, he could see the motor-car in the pond, nearly submerged; the gentlemen and the driver, encumbered by their long coats, were floundering helplessly in the water.

He picked himself up rapidly, and set off running across country as hard as he could, scrambling through hedges, jumping ditches, pounding across fields, till he was breathless and weary, and had to settle down into a walk. When he had recovered his breath, he began to giggle, and then laugh; and he laughed till he had to sit down under a hedge.

“Ho, ho!” he cried, “Toad, as usual, comes out on top! Who was it got them to give him a lift? Who persuaded them into letting him see if he could drive? Who landed them all in a horse-pond? Who escaped, flying through the air, leaving the narrow-minded, timid drivers in the mud? Why, Toad, of course; clever Toad, great Toad!”

Then he burst into song again, and chanted:

“The motor-car went Poop-poop-poop,
As it raced along the road.
Who was it steered it into a pond?
Ingenious Mr. Toad!

“O, how clever I am! How clever, how clever, how very clever—”
A slight noise at a distance behind him made him turn his head and look.
O horror! O despair!

Two fields away, a chauffeur and two large policemen were visible, running towards him as hard as they could go!

Poor Toad sprang to his feet and pelted away again, his heart in his mouth.

“O, my!” he gasped, as he panted along, “what an ass I am! What a conceited heedless ass! Swaggering again! Shouting and singing songs again! O my! O my! O my!”

He glanced back, and saw to his dismay that they were gaining on him. On he ran desperately, but they still gained steadily. Toad did his best, but he was a fat animal, and his legs were short. He could hear them close behind him now.

He struggled on blindly and wildly, looking back over his shoulder at the enemy, when suddenly the earth disappeared under his feet, he grasped at the air, and, splash! he found himself head over ears in deep rapid water, in a strong current; and he knew that in his blind panic he had run straight into the river!

He rose to the surface and tried to grasp the reeds and the rushes that grew along the water’s edge, but the stream was so strong that it tore them out of his hands.

“O my!” gasped poor Toad, “if ever I steal a motor-car again! If ever I—” — then down he went, and came up breathless and spluttering.

Soon he saw that he was approaching a dark hole in the bank, just above his head, and as the stream carried him past he reached up with a paw and caught hold of the edge and held on. Then with difficulty he drew himself up out of the water, till at last he was able to rest his elbows on the edge of the hole. There he remained for some minutes, puffing and panting, for he was quite exhausted.

As he sighed and blew and stared into the dark hole, some bright small thing twinkled in its depths, moving towards him. As it approached, a face grew up gradually around it, and it was a familiar face!

Brown and small, with whiskers.

Grave and round, with neat ears and silky hair.

It was the Water Rat!

Chapter Eleven

“Like Summer Tempests Came his Tears”

The Rat put out a neat little brown paw, gripped Toad firmly by the scruff of the neck, and gave a great pull; and the water-logged Toad came up slowly over the edge of the hole, till at last he stood safe and sound in the hall, streaked with mud and weed, and with the water streaming off him, but happy and high-spirited as of old, now that he found himself once more in the house of a friend.

“O, Ratty!” he cried. “I’ve been through such times since I saw you last, you can’t think! Such trials, such sufferings, and all so nobly borne! Then such escapes, such disguises, all so cleverly planned and carried out! Been in prison – got out of it, of course! Been thrown into a canal – swam ashore! Stole a horse – sold for a load of money! Humbugged everybody – made ’em all do what I wanted! Oh, I am a smart Toad! What do you think my last exploit was? Just wait till I tell you–”

“Toad,” said the Water Rat, firmly, “go upstairs at once, and take off that old rag that looks as if it might have belonged to some washerwoman, and clean yourself thoroughly, and put on some of my clothes, and come down looking like a gentleman if you can; for a more shabby, bedraggled, disreputable-looking object than you I never set eyes on! Now, stop swaggering and be off! I’ll have something to say to you later!”

Toad was at first inclined to do some talking back at him. He had had enough of being ordered about when he was in prison, and here was Rat doing the same thing! However, when he caught sight of himself in the looking-glass, with the black bonnet perched rakishly over one eye, he changed his mind and went very quickly and humbly upstairs to the Rat’s dressing-room. There he had a thorough wash, changed his clothes, and stood for a long time before the mirror, contemplating himself with pride and pleasure, and thinking what idiots all the people must have been to have mistaken him for one moment for a washerwoman.

By the time he came down again lunch was on the table, and very glad Toad was to see it, for he had taken much hard exercise since the excellent breakfast provided by the gipsy. While they ate Toad told the Rat all his adventures, dwelling chiefly on his own cleverness and cunning; and making out that he had been having a light-hearted and colourful experience. But the more he talked and boasted, the more grave and silent the Rat became.

When at last Toad had talked himself to a standstill, there was silence; and then the Rat said,

“Now, Toady, I don’t want to give you pain, after all you’ve been through; but, seriously, don’t you see what an awful ass you’ve been making of yourself?”

You have been handcuffed, imprisoned, starved, chased, terrified, insulted, jeered at, and flung into the water! Where's the amusement in that? Where's the fun? And all because you had to go and steal a motor-car. You know that you've never had anything but trouble from motor-cars from the moment you first set eyes on one. But if you will be mixed up with them, why steal them? When are you going to be sensible? Do you suppose I like to hear animals saying that I'm the chap that keeps company with gaol-birds?"

Now, it was a good point in Toad's character that he never minded being told off by his real friends. And he was always able to see the other side of the question. So although, while the Rat was talking so seriously, he kept saying to himself mutinously, "But it was fun, though! Awful fun!" and making strange suppressed noises, like *poop-p-p*, and stifled snorts, yet when the Rat had finished, he heaved a deep sigh and said, very humbly,

"Quite right, Ratty! Yes, I've been a conceited ass, I can see that; but now I'm going to be a good Toad, and not do it any more. As for motor-cars, I've not been so keen about them since my last ducking in that river. The fact is, while I was hanging on to the edge of your hole, I had a sudden idea brilliant idea about motor-boats – now, don't get in a temper, old chap, and stamp your foot; it was only an idea, and we won't talk any more about it now. We'll have our coffee, and a chat, and then I'll stroll quietly down to Toad Hall, and change into my own clothes, and set things going again. I've had enough of adventures. I shall lead a quiet, steady, respectable life, pottering about my property, and doing a little landscape gardening. There will always be dinner for my friends when they come to see me."

"Stroll quietly down to Toad Hall?" cried the Rat, greatly excited. "What are you talking about? Do you mean to say you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" said Toad, turning rather pale. "Go on, Ratty! Quick! What haven't I heard?"

"Do you mean to tell me," shouted the Rat, thumping with his little fist upon the table, "that you've heard nothing about the Stoats and Weasels?"

"What, the Wild Wooders?" cried Toad, trembling in every limb. "No, not a word! What have they been doing?"

"—And how they've taken over Toad Hall?" continued the Rat.

Toad leaned his elbows on the table, and his chin on his paws; and a large tear welled up in each of his eyes, overflowed and splashed on the table, *plop! plop!*

"Go on, Ratty," he murmured; "tell me all. I can bear it."

"When you got into that – trouble of yours," said the Rat, slowly; "I mean, when you – disappeared from society for a time, you know—"

Toad nodded.

"Well, it was a good deal talked about here, naturally," continued the Rat, "even in the Wild Wood. Animals took sides. The River-bankers stuck up for you, and said you had been unfairly treated. But the Wild Wood animals said it

served you right, and it was time this sort of thing was stopped. And they got very cocky, and went about saying you were done for this time! You would never come back again, never, never!”

Toad nodded once more.

“That’s the sort of little beasts they are,” the Rat went on. “But Mole and Badger, they kept saying that you would come back again, somehow. They didn’t know exactly how, but somehow!”

Toad began to sit up in his chair again, and to smirk a little.

“So they arranged to move their things in to Toad Hall,” said Rat, “and sleep there, and keep it aired, and have it all ready for you when you turned up. They didn’t guess what was going to happen, of course; still, they had their suspicions of the Wild Wood animals. Now I come to the most painful part of my story. One dark windy night, when it was raining hard, a band of weasels, armed to the teeth, crept silently up the carriage-drive to the front entrance. At the same time, a group of desperate ferrets, advancing through the kitchen-garden, invaded the backyard and offices; while a company of skirmishing stoats who stuck at nothing occupied the conservatory and the billiard-room, and guarded the French windows opening on to the lawn.

“The Mole and the Badger were sitting by the fire in the parlour, telling stories and suspecting nothing, for it wasn’t a night for any animals to be out in, when those bloodthirsty villains broke down the doors and rushed in from every side. They fought the best they could, but they were unarmed, and taken by surprise, and what can two animals do against hundreds? They were beaten severely with sticks, those two poor faithful creatures, and turned out into the cold and the wet, with many insulting remarks!”

Here the unfeeling Toad broke into a snigger, and then pulled himself together and tried to look particularly solemn.

“And the Wild Wooders have been living in Toad Hall ever since,” continued the Rat; “and in such a manner! Lying in bed half the day, eating breakfast at all hours, and the place is in such a mess (I’m told) it’s not fit to be seen! Eating your grub, and drinking your drink, and making bad jokes about you, and singing vulgar songs, about – well, about prisons and policemen. And they’re telling everybody that they’ve come to stay for good.”

“O, have they!” said Toad getting up and seizing a stick. “I’ll jolly soon see about that!”

“It’s no good, Toad!” called the Rat after him. “You’d better come back and sit down; you’ll only get into trouble.”

But the Toad was off, and there was no holding him back. He marched rapidly down the road, with his stick, fuming and muttering to himself in anger, till he got near his front gate, when suddenly there popped up from behind the railing a long yellow ferret with a gun.

“Who comes there?” said the ferret sharply.

“Stuff and nonsense!” said Toad, very angrily. “What do you mean by talking like that to me? Stop at once, or I’ll—”

The ferret said nothing, but he brought his gun up to his shoulder. Toad dropped flat in the road, and *Bang!* a bullet whistled over his head.

The startled Toad scrambled to his feet and scampered off down the road as hard as he could; and as he ran he heard the ferret laughing, and other horrid thin little laughs joining in.

He went back, very crestfallen, and told the Water Rat.

“What did I tell you?” said the Rat. “It’s no good. They’ve got sentries posted, and they are all armed. You must wait.”

Still, Toad was not inclined to give in all at once. So he got out the boat, and set off rowing up the river to where the garden of Toad Hall came down to the waterside.

Arriving within sight of his old home, he rested on his oars and surveyed the land cautiously. All seemed very peaceful and deserted. He could see the whole front of Toad Hall, glowing in the evening sunshine, the pigeons settling on the straight line of the roof; the garden, a blaze of flowers; the creek that led up to the boat-house, the little wooden bridge that crossed it; all tranquil, apparently waiting for his return. He would try the boat-house first, he thought. Very warily he paddled up to the mouth of the creek, and was just passing under the bridge, when...

Crash!

A great stone, dropped from above, smashed through the bottom of the boat, which filled up and sank. Toad found himself struggling in deep water. Looking up, he saw two stoats leaning over the parapet of the bridge and watching him with great glee.

“It will be your head next time, Toady!” they called out. The indignant Toad swam to shore, while the stoats laughed and laughed again.

The Toad retraced his weary way on foot, back to the Water Rat once more.

“Well, what did I tell you?” said the Rat very crossly. “And, now, see what you’ve been and done! Lost me my boat that I was so fond of, that’s what you’ve done! And ruined that nice suit of clothes that I lent you! Really, Toad, of all the trying animals – I wonder you manage to keep any friends at all!”

The Toad saw at once how foolishly he had acted. He admitted his wrong-headedness and made a full apology to Rat for losing his boat and spoiling his clothes. And he ended by saying, with disarming confession, “Ratty! I see that I have been a headstrong and a wilful Toad! Henceforth, believe me, I will be humble and submissive, and will take no action without your kind advice and full approval!”

“If that is really so,” said the good-natured Rat, “then my advice to you is, to sit down and have your supper, which will be on the table in a minute, and be very patient. For we can do nothing until we have seen the Mole and the

Badger, and heard their latest news, and taken their advice in this difficult matter.”

“Oh, ah, yes, of course, the Mole and the Badger,” said Toad, lightly. “What’s become of them, the dear fellows? I had forgotten all about them.”

“Well may you ask!” said the Rat reproachfully. “While you were riding about the country in expensive motor-cars, and galloping proudly on horses, those two poor devoted animals have been camping out in the open, in every sort of weather, living very rough by day and very hard by night; watching over your house, patrolling your boundaries, keeping a constant eye on the stoats and the weasels, planning and contriving how to get your property back for you. You don’t deserve to have such true and loyal friends, Toad, you don’t, really!”

“I’m an ungrateful beast, I know,” sobbed Toad, shedding bitter tears. “Let me go out and find them, out into the cold, dark night, and share their hardships, and try and – Hold on! Surely I heard the chink of dishes! Supper’s here at last, hooray! Come on, Ratty!”

The Rat remembered that poor Toad had been on prison food for a considerable time, and that allowances had to be made. So he followed him to the table, and hospitably encouraged him to eat. They had just finished their meal and returned to their arm-chairs, when there came a heavy knock at the door. Toad was nervous, but the Rat went straight up to the door and opened it. In walked Mr. Badger.

He looked like someone who had been kept away from home comforts for many nights. His shoes were covered with mud, and he appeared very rough and tousled; but then Badger had never been very smart-looking at the best of times.

He came solemnly up to Toad, shook him by the paw, and said, “Welcome home, Toad! Alas! what am I saying? Home, indeed! This is a poor home-coming. Unhappy Toad!” Then he turned his back on him, sat down to the table, and helped himself to a large slice of cold pie.

Toad was quite alarmed at this very serious style of greeting; but the Rat whispered to him, “Don’t take any notice; and don’t say anything to him just yet. He’s always rather low and despondent when he’s hungry. In half an hour’s time he’ll be quite a different animal.”

So they waited in silence, and presently there came another, lighter knock. The Rat went to the door and ushered in the Mole, very shabby and unwashed, with bits of straw sticking in his fur.

“Hooray! Here’s old Toad!” cried the Mole, beaming. “Fancy having you back again!” And he began to dance around him. “We never dreamt you would turn up so soon! Why, you must have managed to escape, you clever, ingenious, intelligent Toad!”

The Rat, alarmed, pulled him by the elbow; but it was too late. Toad was puffing and swelling already.

“Clever? O, no!” he said. “I’m not really clever, according to my friends. I’ve only broken out of the strongest prison in England, that’s all! And captured a railway train and escaped on it, that’s all! And disguised myself and gone about the country humbugging everybody, that’s all! O, no! I’m a stupid ass, I am! I’ll tell you one or two of my little adventures, Mole, and you shall judge!”

“Well, well,” said the Mole, moving towards the supper-table; “supposing you talk while I eat. Not a bite since breakfast! O my! O my!” And he sat down and helped himself to cold beef and pickles.

Toad stood on the hearth-rug, thrust his paw into his trouser-pocket and pulled out a handful of silver. “Look at that!” he cried, displaying it. “That’s not bad, is it, for a few minutes’ work? And how do you think I done it, Mole? Horse-dealing! That’s how!”

“Go on, Toad,” said the Mole, immensely interested.

“Toad, do be quiet, please!” said the Rat. “Don’t egg him on, Mole. Please tell us what the position is, and what’s best to be done, now that Toad is back at last.”

“The position’s about as bad as it can be,” replied the Mole grumpily; “and as for what’s to be done, why, blest if I know! The Badger and I have been round and round the place, by night and by day; always the same thing. Sentries posted everywhere, guns poked out at us, stones thrown at us; always an animal on the look-out, and when they see us, how they laugh! That’s what annoys me most!”

“It’s a very difficult situation,” said the Rat. “But I think I see now what Toad really ought to do. I will tell you. He ought to—”

“No, he oughtn’t!” shouted the Mole, with his mouth full. “Nothing of the sort! What he ought to do is, he ought to—”

“Well, I shan’t do it, anyway!” cried Toad, getting excited. “I’m not going to be ordered about by you fellows! It’s my house we’re talking about, and I know exactly what to do. I’m going to—”

By this time they were all talking at once, at the top of their voices, and the noise was deafening, when a thin, dry voice made itself heard, saying, “Be quiet at once, all of you!” Instantly everyone was silent.

It was the Badger, who, having finished his pie, was looking at them severely. When he saw that he had their attention, and that they were waiting for him to speak, he turned back to the table again and reached out for the cheese. So great was their respect for him, that not another word was uttered until he had quite finished eating and brushed the crumbs from his knees. The Toad fidgeted a good deal, but the Rat held him down.

The Badger got up from his seat and stood before the fireplace, reflecting deeply. At last he spoke.

“Toad!” he said severely. “You bad, troublesome little animal! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? What do you think your father, my old friend, would have said if he had been here tonight, and knew of all your goings on?”

Toad, who was on the sofa, rolled over on his face, shaken by sobs of contrition.

“There, there!” went on the Badger, more kindly. “Never mind. Stop crying. We’re going to let bygones be bygones, and try and turn over a new leaf. But what the Mole says is quite true. The stoats are on guard everywhere, and they make the best sentinels in the world. It’s quite useless to think of attacking the place. They’re too strong for us.”

“Then it’s all over,” sobbed the Toad, crying into the sofa cushions. “I shall go and enlist for a soldier, and never see my dear Toad Hall any more!”

“Cheer up, Toady!” said the Badger. “There are more ways of getting back a place than taking it by storm. I haven’t said my last word yet. Now I’m going to tell you a great secret.”

Toad sat up and dried his eyes. Secrets had an immense attraction for him, because he never could keep one, and he enjoyed the thrill he experienced when he told another animal a secret, after having faithfully promised not to.

“There is an underground passage,” said the Badger, impressively, “that leads from the river-bank, quite near here, right up into the middle of Toad Hall.”

“O, nonsense, Badger!” said Toad, rather airily. “You’ve been listening to some of the stories they tell in the beer-houses about here. I know every inch of Toad Hall, inside and out. Nothing of the sort, I do assure you!”

“My young friend,” said the Badger, with great severity, “your father, who was a worthy animal and a particular friend of mine, told me a great deal he wouldn’t have dreamt of telling you. He discovered that passage. He didn’t make it; that was done hundreds of years before he ever came to live there – but he repaired it and cleaned it out, because he thought it might come in useful some day, in case of trouble or danger; and he showed it to me. ‘Don’t let my son know about it,’ he said. ‘He’s a good boy, but simply cannot hold his tongue. If he’s ever in a real fix, and it would be of use to him, you may tell him about the secret passage; but not before.’”

The other animals looked at Toad to see how he would take this. Toad was inclined to be sulky at first; but he brightened up.

“Well, well,” he said; “perhaps I am a bit of a talker. A popular fellow like me – with my friends round me – we sparkle, we tell witty stories – and somehow my tongue gets wagging. I have the gift of conversation. Go on, Badger. How’s this passage going to help us?”

“I’ve found out a thing or two lately,” continued the Badger. “I got Otter to disguise himself as a sweep and call at the back-door with brushes over his shoulder, asking for a job. There’s going to be a big banquet tomorrow night. It’s somebody’s birthday – the Chief Weasel’s, I believe – and all the weasels will be gathered together in the dining-hall, eating and drinking and carrying on, suspecting nothing. No guns, no swords, no sticks, no weapons of any sort!”

“But the sentinels will be posted as usual,” remarked the Rat.

“Exactly,” said the Badger; “that is my point. The weasels will trust entirely to their excellent sentinels. And that is where the passage comes in. That very useful tunnel leads right up under the butler’s pantry, next to the dining-hall!”

“Aha! that squeaky board in the butler’s pantry!” said Toad. “Now I understand it!”

“We shall creep out quietly into the butler’s pantry—” cried the Mole.

“—with our pistols and swords and sticks—” shouted the Rat.

“—and rush in upon them,” said the Badger.

“—and whack ’em, and whack ’em, and whack ’em!” cried the Toad in ecstasy, running round the room, and jumping over the chairs.

“Very well, then,” said the Badger, “our plan is settled. So, as it’s getting very late, all of you go off to bed at once. We will make all the necessary arrangements tomorrow morning.”

Toad went off to bed dutifully with the rest – he knew better than to refuse – though he was feeling much too excited to sleep. But he had had a long, eventful day; and sheets and blankets were very comforting things, after plain straw spread on the stone floor of a draughty cell; and his head had not been many seconds on his pillow before he was snoring happily.

Naturally, he dreamt a good deal; about roads that ran away from him, and canals that chased him, and a barge that sailed into the banqueting-hall with his week’s washing, just as he was giving a dinner-party; and then he dreamed he was alone in the secret passage, but it twisted and turned round and sat up on its end; yet somehow, at last, he found himself back in Toad Hall, safe and triumphant, with all his friends gathered round about him, earnestly assuring him that he really was a clever Toad.

He slept till late next morning, and by the time he went downstairs he found that the other animals had finished their breakfast some time before. The Mole had slipped off somewhere by himself, without telling anyone where he was going. The Badger sat in the armchair, reading the paper, and not concerning himself in the slightest about what was going to happen that evening. The Rat, on the other hand, was running round the room busily, with his arms full of weapons of every kind, distributing them in four little heaps on the floor, and saying excitedly under his breath, as he ran,

“Here’s-a-sword-for-the-Rat, here’s-a-sword-for-the Mole, here’s-a-sword-for-the-Toad, here’s-a-sword-for-the-Badger! Here’s-a-pistol-for-the-Rat, here’s-a-pistol-for-the-Mole, here’s-a-pistol-for-the-Toad, here’s-a-pistol-for-the-Badger!” And so on, while the four little heaps gradually grew and grew.

“That’s all very well, Rat,” said the Badger presently, looking at the busy little animal over the edge of his newspaper; “But just let us get past the stoats, with those detestable guns of theirs, and I assure you we shan’t want any swords or pistols. Once we’re inside the dining-hall, we four, with our sticks, shall clear the floor of all the lot of them in five minutes!”

“It’s as well to be on the safe side,” said the Rat, polishing a pistol-barrel on his sleeve.

The Toad picked up a stout stick and swung it vigorously. “I’ll learn ’em to steal my house!” he cried. “I’ll learn ’em, I’ll learn ’em!”

“Don’t say ‘learn ’em,’ Toad,” said the Rat, shocked. “It’s not good English.”

“Why are you always nagging at Toad?” inquired the Badger, rather peevishly. “What’s the matter with his English? It’s the same as what I use myself, and if it’s good enough for me, it ought to be good enough for you!”

“I’m very sorry,” said the Rat humbly. “Only I think it ought to be ‘teach ’em,’ not ‘learn ’em.’”

“But we don’t want to teach ’em,” replied the Badger. “We want to learn ’em, learn ’em! And what’s more, we’re going to do it, too!”

“Oh, very well, have it your own way,” said the Rat. He was getting rather muddled about it himself, and he retired into a corner, where he could be heard muttering, “Learn ’em, teach ’em, teach ’em, learn ’em!” till the Badger told him rather sharply to stop it.

Soon the Mole came tumbling into the room, evidently very pleased with himself. “I’ve been having such fun!” he began; “I’ve been winding up the stoats!”

“I hope you’ve been very careful, Mole?” said the Rat anxiously.

“I should hope so, too,” said the Mole confidently. “I got the idea when I went into the kitchen, and I saw that old washerwoman-dress that Toad came home in yesterday, hanging on a clothes-horse before the fire. So I put it on, and the bonnet and the shawl, and off I went to Toad Hall, as bold as you please. The sentries were on the look-out, of course, with their guns and their ‘Who comes there?’ and all the rest of their nonsense. ‘Good morning, gentlemen!’ says I, very respectful. ‘Want any washing done to-day?’

“They looked at me very proud and stiff and haughty, and said, ‘Go away, washerwoman! We don’t do any washing on duty.’ ‘Or any other time?’ says I. Wasn’t I funny, Toad?”

“Poor, frivolous animal!” said Toad, very loftily. The fact is, he felt exceedingly jealous of Mole for what he had just done. It was exactly what he would have liked to have done himself, if only he had thought of it first.

“Some of the stoats turned quite pink,” continued the Mole, “and the Sergeant in charge said to me, ‘Now run away, my good woman! Don’t keep my men idling and talking on their posts.’ ‘Run away?’ says I; ‘it won’t be me that’ll be running away, in a very short time from now!’”

“O Moly, how could you?” said the Rat, dismayed.

The Badger laid down his paper.

“I could see them pricking up their ears and looking at each other,” went on the Mole; “and the Sergeant said to them, ‘Never mind her; she doesn’t know what she’s talking about.’”

“O! don’t I?” said I. “Well, let me tell you this. My daughter, she washes for Mr. Badger, and that’ll show you whether I know what I’m talking about; and you’ll know pretty soon, too! A hundred bloodthirsty badgers, armed with rifles, are going to attack Toad Hall this very night, by way of the paddock. Six boatloads of Rats, with pistols and cutlasses, will come up the river and land in the garden; while a picked body of Toads, known as the Die-hards, or the Death-or-Glory Toads, will storm the orchard, yelling for vengeance. There won’t be much left of you to wash, by the time they’ve done with you, unless you clear out while you have the chance!”

“Then I ran away, and hid; and presently I took a peep at them through the hedge. They were all as nervous and flustered as could be, running all ways at once, and falling over each other, and every one giving orders to everybody else and not listening; and the Sergeant kept sending off parties of stoats to distant parts of the grounds, and then sending other fellows to fetch ’em back again. I heard them saying to each other, ‘That’s just like the weasels; they’re to stay comfortably in the banqueting-hall, and have feasting and songs and all sorts of fun, while we must stay on guard in the cold and the dark, and be cut to pieces by bloodthirsty Badgers!’”

“Oh, you silly ass, Mole!” cried Toad, “You’ve been and spoilt everything!”

“Mole,” said the Badger, in his dry, quiet way, “I perceive you have more sense in your little finger than some other animals have in the whole of their fat bodies. You have managed excellently. Good Mole! Clever Mole!”

The Toad was simply wild with jealousy, especially as he couldn’t work out for the life of him what the Mole had done that was so particularly clever; but, fortunately for him, before he could show his temper, the bell rang for lunch.

It was a simple meal – bacon and broad beans, and a macaroni pudding; and when they had finished, the Badger settled into an armchair, and said, “Well, we’ve got our work cut out for us to-night; so I’m just going to take forty winks, while I can.” And he drew a handkerchief over his face and was soon snoring.

The anxious Rat at once resumed his preparations, running between his four little heaps, muttering, “Here’s-a-belt-for-the-Rat, here’s-a-belt-for-the-Mole, here’s-a-belt-for-the-Toad, here’s-a-belt-for-the-Badger!” and so on.

So the Mole took Toad’s arm, led him out into the open air, sat him a wicker chair, and made him tell him all his adventures from beginning to end, which Toad was only too willing to do. The Mole was a good listener, and Toad rather let himself go. Indeed, much that he related belonged more to the category of what-might-have-happened-had-I-only-thought-of-it-in-time-instead-of-ten-minutes-afterwards. Those are always the best and the raciest adventures, after all.

Chapter Twelve

The Return of Ulysses

When it began to grow dark, the Rat, with an air of excitement and mystery, called them back into the parlour, stood each of them up alongside his little heap, and began to dress them up. He was very earnest about it, and the affair took quite a long time. First, there was a belt to go round each animal, and then a sword to be stuck into each belt, and then a cutlass on the other side to balance it; then a pair of pistols, a policeman's truncheon, several sets of handcuffs, some bandages and sticking-plaster, and a flask and a sandwich-case.

The Badger laughed good-humouredly and said, "All right, Ratty! It amuses you and it doesn't hurt me. But all I need is this here stick."

But the Rat said, "Please, Badger. I shouldn't like you to blame me afterwards and say I had forgotten anything!"

When all was quite ready, the Badger took a dark lantern in one paw, grasped his great stick with the other, and said, "Now then, follow me! Mole first, 'cos I'm very pleased with him; Rat next; Toad last. And look here, Toady! Don't you chatter, or you'll be sent back!"

The Toad was so anxious not to be left out that he went to the back without a murmur, and the animals set off.

The Badger led them along by the river for a little way, and then suddenly swung himself over the edge into a hole in the river-bank, a little above the water. The Mole and the Rat followed silently, swinging themselves successfully into the hole as they had seen the Badger do; but when it came to Toad's turn, of course he managed to slip and fall into the water with a loud splash and a squeal of alarm. He was hauled out by his friends and wrung out hastily, and set on his legs; but the Badger was seriously angry, and told him that the very next time he made a fool of himself he would most certainly be left behind.

So at last they were in the secret passage, and the expedition had really begun!

It was cold, and dark, and damp, and low, and narrow, and poor Toad began to shiver, partly from dread of what might be before him, partly because he was wet through. The lantern was far ahead, and he could not help lagging behind a little in the darkness.

Then he heard the Rat call out warningly, "Come on, Toad!" and a terror seized him of being left behind, alone in the darkness. He "came on" with such a rush that he pushed the Rat into the Mole and the Mole into the Badger, and for a moment all was confusion. The Badger thought they were being attacked from behind, and, as there was no room to use a stick, drew a pistol, and was

on the point of putting a bullet into Toad. When he found out what had really happened he was very angry indeed, and said, "Now this time that tiresome Toad shall be left behind!"

But Toad whimpered, and the other two promised that he would behave, and at last the Badger was pacified. The procession moved on; only this time the Rat brought up the rear, with a firm grip on Toad's shoulder.

So they groped and shuffled along, with their ears pricked and their paws on their pistols, till at last the Badger said, "We ought by now to be nearly under the Hall."

Then suddenly they heard, muffled, and yet apparently over their heads, a confused murmur of sound, as if people were shouting and cheering and stamping on the floor and hammering on tables. The Toad's nervous terrors all returned, but the Badger only remarked placidly, "They are going it, the Weasels!"

The passage now began to slope upwards; they groped onward a little further, and then the noise started again, quite distinct this time, and very close above them.

"Ooo-ray-ooray-ooray-ooray!" they heard, and the stamping of little feet on the floor, and the clinking of glasses as fists pounded on the table.

"What a time they're having!" said the Badger. "Come on!"

They hurried along the passage till it came to a full stop, and they found themselves standing under the trap-door that led up into the butler's pantry.

Such a tremendous noise was going on in the banqueting-hall that there was little danger of their being overheard. The Badger said, "Now, boys, all together!" and the four of them put their shoulders to the trap-door and heaved it back. Hoisting each other up, they found themselves standing in the pantry, with only a door between them and the banqueting-hall, where their enemies were carousing.

As they emerged from the passage, the noise was simply deafening. At last, when the cheering and hammering slowly subsided, a voice could be made out saying, "Well, I do not propose to detain you much longer" – (great applause) – "but before I resume my seat, I should like to say one word about our kind host, Mr. Toad. We all know Toad!" – (great laughter) – "Good Toad, modest Toad, honest Toad!" (shrieks of merriment).

"Just let me get at him!" muttered Toad, grinding his teeth.

"Hold on a minute!" said the Badger, restraining him with difficulty. "Get ready, all of you!"

"—Let me sing you a little song," went on the voice, "which I have composed on the subject of Toad" – (prolonged applause).

Then the Chief Weasel – for it was he – began in a high, squeaky voice:

"Toad he went a-pleasuring
Gaily down the street—"

The Badger drew himself up, took a firm grip of his stick with both paws, glanced round at his comrades, and cried,

“The hour is come! Follow me!”

And flung the door wide open.

My! What a squealing and a squeaking and a screeching filled the air!

Well might the terrified weasels dive under the tables and spring madly up at the windows! Well might the ferrets rush wildly for the fireplace and get hopelessly jammed in the chimney! Well might tables and chairs be upset, and glass and china be sent crashing on the floor, in the panic of that terrible moment when the four Heroes strode wrathfully into the room!

The mighty Badger, his whiskers bristling, his great cudgel whistling through the air; Mole, black and grim, brandishing his stick and shouting his awful war-cry, “A Mole! A Mole!” Rat; desperate and determined, his belt bulging with weapons of every type; Toad, frenzied with excitement and injured pride, swollen to twice his ordinary size, leaping into the air and emitting Toad-whoops that chilled them to the marrow!

“Toad he went a-pleasuring!” he yelled. “I’ll pleasure ’em!” and he went straight for the Chief Weasel. There were only four of them, but to the panic-stricken weasels the hall seemed full of monstrous animals, grey, black, brown and yellow, whooping and flourishing enormous cudgels; and they broke away and fled with squeals of terror and dismay, this way and that, through the windows, up the chimney, anywhere to get out of reach of those terrible sticks.

It was soon over. Up and down the whole length of the hall strode the four Friends, whacking with their sticks at every head that showed itself; and in five minutes the room was cleared. Through the broken windows the shrieks of terrified weasels escaping across the lawn came faintly to their ears; on the floor lay a dozen or so of the enemy, on whom the Mole was busily engaged in fitting handcuffs. The Badger, resting from his labours, leant on his stick and wiped his honest brow.

“Mole,” he said, “you’re the best of fellows! Just pop outside and look after those stoat-sentries of yours, and see what they’re doing. I’ve an idea that, thanks to you, we shan’t have much trouble from them tonight!”

The Mole vanished promptly through a window; and the Badger told the other two to set a table on its legs, pick up knives and forks and plates and glasses from the debris on the floor, and see if they could find food for a supper.

“I want some grub, I do,” he said, in his plain manner. “Stir your stumps, Toad, and look lively! We’ve got your house back for you, and you don’t offer us so much as a sandwich.”

Toad felt rather hurt that the Badger didn’t say pleasant things to him, as he had to the Mole, and tell him what a fine fellow he was, and how splendidly he had fought; for he was particularly pleased with the way he had gone for the Chief Weasel and sent him flying across the table with one blow of his stick. But he bustled about, and so did the Rat, and soon they found some jelly in a

glass dish, and a cold chicken, cold beef, some trifle, and quite a lot of lobster salad; and in the pantry they came upon a basketful of French rolls and any quantity of cheese, butter, and celery. They were just about to sit down when the Mole clambered in through the window, chuckling, with an armful of rifles.

“It’s all over,” he reported. “From what I can make out, the stoats were very nervous and jumpy already. As soon as they heard the shrieks and yells inside the hall, some of them threw down their rifles and fled. The others stood fast for a bit, but when the weasels came rushing out upon them they thought they were betrayed; and the stoats grappled with the weasels, and the weasels fought to get away, and they wrestled and punched each other, and rolled over and over, till most of ’em rolled into the river! They’ve all disappeared now, one way or another; and I’ve got their rifles. So that’s all right!”

“Excellent and deserving animal!” said the Badger, his mouth full of chicken and trifle. “Now, there’s just one more thing I want you to do, Mole, before you sit down to your supper; and I wouldn’t ask you except that I know I can trust you to see a thing done, and I wish I could say the same of everyone I know. I’d send Rat, if he wasn’t a poet. I want you to take those fellows on the floor there upstairs with you, and command them to clean out some bedrooms and make them comfortable. See that they sweep under the beds, and put clean sheets and pillow-cases on; and have a bowl of hot water, and clean towels, and fresh soap, put in each room. And then you can give them a whacking if you like, and put them out by the back-door, and we shan’t see any more of them, I fancy. Then come and have some of this dinner. I’m very pleased with you, Mole!”

The good-natured Mole picked up a stick, formed his prisoners up in a line, gave them the order “Quick march!” and led his squad off to the upper floor. After a time, he appeared again, smiling, and said that every room was ready, and as clean as a new pin.

“And I didn’t have to whack them, either,” he added. “I thought they had had enough for one night, and the weasels quite agreed. They said they were extremely sorry for what they had done, but it was all the fault of the Chief Weasel and the stoats, and if ever they could do anything for us at any time to make up, we had only got to mention it. So I gave them a roll a-piece, and let them out at the back, and off they ran, as fast as they could!”

Then the Mole pulled his chair up to the table, and pitched into the cold beef; and Toad, like the gentleman he was, put all his jealousy from him, and said heartily, “Thank you kindly, dear Mole, for all your trouble tonight, and especially for your cleverness this morning!”

The Badger was pleased at that, and said, “There spoke my brave Toad!” So they finished their supper in great joy and contentment, and presently retired to rest between clean sheets, safe in Toad’s ancestral home, won back by matchless valour, first-class strategy, and a proper handling of sticks.

The following morning, Toad, who had overslept as usual, came down to breakfast disgracefully late, and found on the table a number of egg-shells, some fragments of cold and leathery toast, a coffee-pot three-fourths empty, and very little else; which did not improve his temper. Through the French windows of the breakfast-room he could see the Mole and the Water Rat sitting in wicker-chairs out on the lawn, evidently telling each other stories; roaring with laughter and kicking their short legs up in the air.

The Badger, who was in an arm-chair and deep in the morning paper, merely looked up and nodded when Toad entered the room. Toad thought it best to sit down, and made the best breakfast he could, merely observing to himself that he would get square with the others sooner or later.

When he had nearly finished, the Badger looked up and remarked rather shortly: "I'm sorry, Toad, but I'm afraid there's a heavy morning's work in front of you. You see, we really ought to have a Banquet at once, to celebrate this affair. It's expected of you – in fact, it's the rule."

"O, all right!" said the Toad, readily. "Anything to oblige. Though why on earth you should want to have a Banquet in the morning I cannot understand. But I live to please my friends, and I'll try and arrange it for 'em, dear old Badger!"

"Don't pretend to be stupider than you really are," replied the Badger, crossly; "and don't chuckle and splutter in your coffee while you're talking; it's bad manners. The Banquet will be at night, of course, but the invitations will have to be written and sent off at once, and you've got to write 'em. Now, sit down at that table – there's stacks of writing-paper on it, with 'Toad Hall' at the top in blue and gold – and write invitations to all our friends, and if you stick to it we shall get them sent out before lunch. And I'll help too. I'll order the Banquet."

"What!" cried Toad, dismayed. "Me stop indoors and write a lot of rotten letters on a jolly morning like this, when I want to go around my property, and set everything to rights, and swagger about and enjoy myself! Certainly not! I'll be – I'll see you – Stop a minute, though! Why, of course, dear Badger! What is my pleasure compared with that of others? You wish it done, and it shall be done. Order the Banquet, order what you like; then join our young friends outside in their innocent mirth, oblivious of me and my toils. I sacrifice this fair morning to duty and friendship!"

The Badger looked at him very suspiciously, but Toad's frank, open face made it difficult to suggest any unworthy motive in this change of attitude. So he left the room, and as soon as the door had closed behind him, Toad hurried to the writing-table.

A fine idea had occurred to him while he was talking. He would write the invitations; and he would take care to mention the leading part he had taken in the fight, and how he had laid the Chief Weasel flat; and he would hint at his adventures, and his career of triumph; and he would set out a programme of

entertainment for the evening – something like this, as he sketched it out in his head:

SPEECH. . . BY TOAD.

(There will be other speeches by TOAD during the evening.)

ADDRESS. . . BY TOAD

Summary: – Our Prison System – the Waterways of Old England – Horse-dealing, and how to deal – Property, its rights and duties – Back to the Land – A Typical English Squire.

SONG. . . . BY TOAD.

(Composed by himself.)

OTHER COMPOSITIONS BY TOAD

will be sung in the course of the evening by the COMPOSER.

The idea pleased him mightily, and he worked very hard and got all the letters finished by noon, when it was reported to him that there was a small and rather bedraggled weasel at the door, inquiring timidly whether he could be of any service to the gentlemen. Toad swaggered out and found it was one of the prisoners of the previous evening, very respectful and anxious to please. He patted him on the head, shoved the bundle of invitations into his paw, and told him to run along quick and deliver them as fast as he could, and if he came back again in the evening, perhaps there might be a shilling for him; and the poor weasel seemed really quite grateful, and hurried off eagerly on his mission.

When the other animals came back to lunch, very boisterous after a morning on the river, the Mole, whose conscience had been pricking him, looked doubtfully at Toad, expecting to find him sulky or depressed. Instead, he was so uppish and inflated that the Mole began to suspect something; while the Rat and the Badger exchanged significant glances.

As soon as the meal was over, Toad thrust his paws deep into his trouser-pockets, and remarked casually, “Well, look after yourselves, you fellows! Ask for anything you want!” He was swaggering off in the direction of the garden, where he wanted to think about his coming speeches, when the Rat caught him by the arm.

Toad did his best to get away; but when the Badger took him firmly by the other arm he knew that the game was up. The two animals conducted him between them into the parlour, shut the door, and put him into a chair. Then they both stood in front of him, while Toad sat silent and looked at them with suspicion and ill-humour.

“Now, look here, Toad,” said the Rat. “It’s about this Banquet, and I’m sorry to have to speak to you like this. But we want you to understand clearly that there are going to be no speeches and no songs. We’re not arguing with you; we’re just telling you.”

Toad saw that he was trapped. They understood him, they saw through him, they had got ahead of him. His pleasant dream was shattered.

“Mayn’t I sing them just one little song?” he pleaded piteously.

“No, not one little song,” replied the Rat firmly, though his heart bled as he noticed the trembling lip of the poor disappointed Toad. “It’s no good, Toady; you know that your songs are all conceit and boasting and vanity; and your speeches are all self-praise and – and – well, and gross exaggeration and – and – and–”

“And hot air,” put in the Badger.

“It’s for your own good, Toady,” went on the Rat. “You know you must turn over a new leaf sooner or later, and now seems a splendid time to begin.”

Toad remained a long while plunged in thought. At last he raised his head, and the traces of strong emotion were visible on his face.

“You have conquered, my friends,” he said brokenly. “It was, to be sure, only a small thing that I asked – merely to blossom and expand for just one more evening, to let myself go and hear the tumultuous applause that always seems to me to bring out my best qualities. However, you are right, I know, and I am wrong. Henceforth I will be a very different Toad. My friends, you shall never have to blush for me again. But, O dear, O dear, this is a hard world!”

And, pressing his handkerchief to his face, he left the room, with faltering footsteps.

“Badger,” said the Rat, “I feel like a brute.”

“O, I know, I know,” said the Badger gloomily. “But it had to be done. This good fellow has got to live here, and be respected. Would you have him a common laughing-stock, mocked and jeered at by stoats and weasels?”

“Of course not,” said the Rat. “And, talking of weasels, it’s lucky we came upon that little weasel, just as he was setting out with Toad’s invitations. I suspected something from what you told me, and had a look at one or two; they were simply disgraceful. I confiscated the lot, and the good Mole is now filling up plain, simple invitation cards.”

At last the hour for the banquet began to draw near, and Toad, who had retired to his bedroom, was still sitting there, melancholy and thoughtful. His brow resting on his paw, he pondered long and deeply. Gradually his countenance cleared, and he began to smile. Then he took to giggling in a shy, self-conscious manner.

At last he got up, locked the door, drew the curtains across the windows, collected all the chairs in the room and arranged them in a semicircle, and took up his position in front of them, swelling visibly. Then he bowed, coughed

twice, and with uplifted voice he sang, to the enraptured audience in his imagination:

TOAD'S LAST LITTLE SONG!

The Toad – came – home!
There was panic in the parlours and howling in the halls,
There was crying in the cow-sheds and shrieking in the stalls,
When the Toad – came – home!

When the Toad – came – home!
There was smashing in of window and crashing in of door,
There was chivvying of weasels that fainted on the floor,
When the Toad – came – home!

Bang go the drums!
The trumpeters are tooting and the soldiers are saluting,
And the cannon they are shooting and the motor-cars are hooting,
As the Hero comes!

Shout *Hoo-ray!*
Let each of the crowd try and shout it very loud,
In honour of an animal of whom you're justly proud,
For it's Toad's – great – day!

He sang this very loud, with great expression; and when he had finished, he sang it all over again. Then he heaved a deep sigh; a long, long sigh.

Then, unlocking the door, he went quietly down the stairs to greet his guests, who he knew must be assembling in the drawing-room.

All the animals cheered when he entered, and crowded round to congratulate him and say nice things about his courage, and his cleverness, and his fighting qualities; but Toad only smiled faintly, and murmured, "Not at all!" Or, sometimes, for a change, "On the contrary!"

Otter, who was standing on the hearthrug, describing to an admiring circle of friends exactly how he would have managed things had he been there, came forward with a shout, threw his arm round Toad's neck, and tried to take him round the room in triumphal progress; but Toad, in a mild way, simply remarked gently, as he freed himself, "Badger's was the mastermind; the Mole and the Water Rat bore the brunt of the fighting; I merely served in the ranks and did little or nothing."

The animals were puzzled and taken aback by this unexpected attitude of his; and Toad felt, as he moved from one guest to the other, making his modest responses, that he was an object of absorbing interest to every one.

The Badger had ordered the best food and drink, and the banquet was a great success. There was much talking and laughter and banter among the animals, but through it all Toad looked down his nose and murmured pleasant nothings to the animals on either side of him. Now and then he glanced at the Badger and the Rat, and whenever he looked they were always staring at each other with their mouths open; and this gave him the greatest satisfaction.

Some of the younger and livelier animals, as the evening wore on, began whispering to each other that things were not so amusing as they used to be in the good old days; and there were some cries of "Toad! Speech! Speech from Toad! Mr. Toad's song!" But Toad only shook his head gently, raised one paw in mild protest, and kept to polite small-talk.

He was indeed an altered Toad!

After this happy conclusion, the four animals continued to lead their lives in great contentment, undisturbed by further risings or invasions. Toad, after consulting with his friends, selected a handsome gold chain and locket set with pearls, which he sent to the gaoler's daughter with a letter that even the Badger admitted to be modest and grateful; and the engine-driver, in his turn, was properly thanked and compensated for his trouble.

Under orders from the Badger, even the barge-woman was sought out and the value of her horse discreetly sent to her; though Toad kicked off terribly at this, saying she couldn't tell a real gentleman when she saw one.

Sometimes, in the course of long summer evenings, the friends would take a stroll together in the Wild Wood, now successfully tamed; and it was pleasing to see how respectfully they were greeted by the inhabitants, and how the mother-weasels would bring their young ones to the mouths of their holes, and say, pointing,

"Look, baby! There goes the great Mr. Toad! And that's the gallant Water Rat, a terrible fighter, walking along o' him! And yonder comes the famous Mr. Mole, of whom you so often have heard your father tell!"

But when their infants were fractious and quite beyond control, they would quiet them by telling how, if they didn't hush and stop fretting, the terrible grey Badger would up and get them. This was a base libel on Badger, who, though he cared little about Society, was rather fond of children; but it never failed to have its full effect.

The End

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