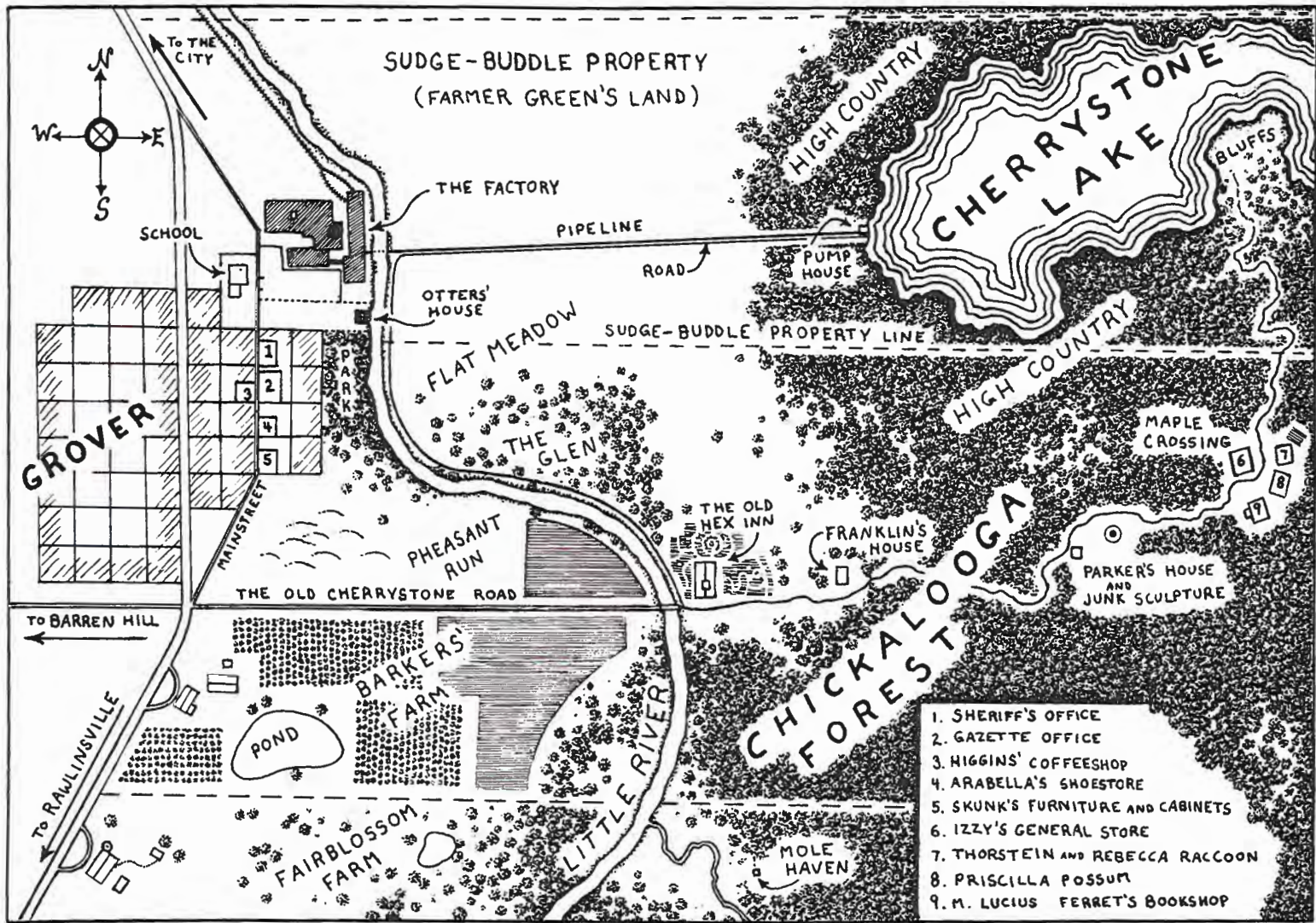


STICKLEWORT AND FEVERFEW



Written and Illustrated by
ROBERT D. SUTHERLAND

**STICKLEWORT
AND
FEVERFEW**



Map drawn by Allan Sutherland

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The PIKESTAFF PRESS



Text and Illustrations

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**The author wishes to thank his son, David Scott Sutherland,
for his skill in using current technology to enhance the
visual impact of the 74 graphite illustrations from their original
grayscale appearance in the half-toning technology of forty years ago.**

**(A hand-held magnifying glass provides a delightful way of studying
subtle details in the illustrations.)**

FOR
DAVID and ALLAN

With thanks to:

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Ted, Tobe, Tom, Will

O blighted Marigold,
on bended knee
I lift your withered leaves
and hanging head.
You still bear traces of your
 promised glory—
gold and copper-bronze and red.
What message would you whisper me
Before I hang my harp upon the tree?

I hear you say 'Keep courage, don't despair;
for you are not alone.'—a riddle fading
 in the sulfur gloom.

Well then, farewell.
I have my hands, my heart, my brain,
My harp, and poetry, and friends—
And as the harp is all its strings
sounding together,
We all of us are one.

Each harpstring has its own true voice,
unlike the others, separate and distinct,
Yet all are needed in the golden frame
to make a stirring melody.

Sleep well, Queen Marigold, my voice
(such as it is) will serve the tune—
hands, heart, and brain—
My friends have voices, too!
We shall keep courage, gentle Queen,
and not despair.
We'll make the golden harp to sing
a sweeter air!

—from *MARIGOLD HARP*
by Roscoe Lynx

Chapter 1

TWENTY MINUTES east of the village of Grover—just beyond the Little River bridge, and halfway to Maple Crossing—stood the Old Hex Inn and Boarding House. It was a good location; for as a place of fellowship and fun, good talk and games and honey brew, the Old Hex, like a magnet, drew people in from all the surrounding countryside to meet at a common center.

It was to the Inn, on a cool spring night filled with the fresh exciting smell of green things growing, that Sheriff Badger, Miss Proudie Fairblossom, and Simon Skunk were hurrying. As they briskly stepped along, laughing and chatting, the Old Cherrystone Road took them past Ben Barker's peach orchard and the broad pasture of Pheasant Run. Far ahead they could see the Chickalooga Forest, stretched like a bank of black clouds on the horizon. Behind them, the full moon, hanging low above their shoulders, kept them company and lighted their way.

Sheriff Badger had been more talkative than usual. As a rule, he was a person who thought much but said little. Tonight, however, the scent of spring had loosed his tongue, and he was talking eagerly of what he would be planting in his garden. "Carrots, of course, and celery. Rhubarb and beets." His love of rhubarb pie was surpassed only by his passion for pickled beets—crisp, ruby-red, with a vinegar tang, spiced with cloves and cinnamon.

"I think I'll plant okra again this year," Miss Proudie said. "It's been awhile. I don't really like it, but I heard of a new way of cooking it that might be worth a try."

Simon Skunk chuckled. "Listening to you folks makes me wish *I* had time to grow a garden. But I'm just too busy to give it the care it needs." Simon was a cabinet maker, and a good one, and therefore much in demand throughout the region. He also made fine furniture of walnut and cherrywood, taking such pride in his work that he refused to be hurried, though orders backed up and he was always running behind. Knowing the quality of furniture they would be getting, his customers were quite content to wait.

"I've always said you work too hard," said Sheriff Badger. "You ought to do less, stop pushing yourself, take time to grow a garden."

Simon smiled and shook his head. "There's a need for good cabinets and furniture."

"I think you're both right," said Miss Proudie, pulling her shawl more closely about her. "But I guess we all do what we have to do." She was a small, red-cheeked woman who, in her sixty-three years, had done a great deal herself. She was the last of an old family in Grover, and owner of Fairblossom Farm, which had once been the showplace of the district. As a young woman, she had taught school for several years; then, coming into her inheritance on the death of her

father, she had decided to travel. She had been around the world three times, and had lived for long periods in France, New Zealand, Turkey, and Brazil. But, as she'd said when she returned to Grover after the last trip, "I'm ready to come home. I've seen what I wanted to see, and been where I wanted to go. Now it's time to sit back and take stock and cultivate my garden."

And that's what she'd done, living alone in the big white house her grandfather had built when she was a little girl. She no longer farmed the land, but was letting it return to the natural state. "When I'm gone," she liked to say, "the farm can become a park for city people to enjoy when they want to get away from the crowding and the traffic." Meanwhile she lived quietly with her potted plants, her vegetable and flower gardens, and the treasures she'd brought back from her travels. She wrote a monthly column for the *Grover Gazette*, had friends to dinner, and made attractive clay pots and ornamental dishes which she gave away to those who would appreciate them. She was a member of the Grover School Board, the District Gardening Club, and the National Globetrotters' Association.

Sheriff Badger, pondering her words, found he couldn't disagree. "You're right," he nodded. "We all do what we must. *I* can't make cabinets. Why, I can't even pick up a hammer without ruining my thumb. So, Simon, I'll see to it that you get some pickled beets."

"You always have," said Simon, "and I've always found them good." As he watched their tall shadows marching and weaving before them down the road, he suddenly saw another shadow moving ahead in the left-hand ditch. It belonged to Randy Possum, who was climbing through the rail fence that bordered Ben Barker's cornfield.

"Evening, Randy," Sheriff Badger called.

"Hello there," Randy answered, climbing out of the ditch. "I've been watching you come along the road. You seem to be in a hurry. Going to the Old Hex?"

"Yep," said Simon Skunk. "I've got a chess game with Franklin Groundsquirrel."

"And we're going to play cards with Elizabeth H. and Farmer Ben," said Miss Proudie. "Do you want to come along?"

"Can't," said Randy. "I've got some things to do. Say hello to Franklin for me, and Roscoe, and all the rest. And if my Aunt Priscilla's there, tell her I'll come by tomorrow afternoon, and that I'm ready for buttonholes."

"Buttonholes?" Simon echoed.

"Yep. It's now or never." Randy started on across the road, heading for the low stone wall that bordered Farmer Ben's peach orchard.

"Have you heard the news about the sale of Farmer Green's land?" Miss Proudie called after him.

Randy paused and looked back over his shoulder. "Yes, and I hear that the people who bought it paid a lot of money for it."

"They call themselves the Sudge-Buddle Company," Simon said, "and the story is they want to build a factory on it. But nobody knows what they're going to make in the factory."

"I expect we'll find out soon enough," Randy said. "They plan to move in and

start tearing down Farmer Green's house next week."

"That soon?" Sheriff Badger gasped. "Why the hurry?"

"I don't know," said Randy. "For that matter, why do they want their factory in Grover? Look, I've got to be going. See you later." He pattered across the road, scrambled over the stone wall, and disappeared among the peach trees.

The others continued on their way, no longer laughing and chatting, but thoughtful and somewhat subdued. The sale of the land made them realize once again how keenly they all missed Farmer Green. He had died just over a year ago; and since then the farm had stood idle and vacant, for his children long before had moved away and scattered to pursue their lives elsewhere. It was not surprising that they'd now choose to sell the land. The shock came in realizing it was no longer Farmer Green's.

For Farmer Green had been a part of Grover for as long as anyone could remember. A pleasant, easy-going, generous man, he'd taken an active part in the town's affairs, always friendly and quick to help if anyone had need. Each autumn he had organized a Harvest Festival and invited folks from all over the region to his gray stone house on the edge of town for music, dancing, and luscious things to eat: buttered pancakes and thick maple syrup, taffy apples and popcorn balls, cheddar cheese, new apple cider, and pumpkin pie.

Moreover, Farmer Green had wanted others to enjoy his land. It was a large farm extending eastward from his house on Little River, across the valley, into the Chickalooga Forest, and up into the High Country where it included all of Cherrystone Lake with its towering limestone bluffs. Farmer Green had grown his crops in the rich valley that lay between the village and the upland pastures (the bottom land of Little River, which wandered through it in a southeasterly direction). The rest of his land was open for people to enjoy. In the sunny meadows and shady groves were wonderful spots for picnics, naps, and hiking. There was good mushroom hunting in the woods, and stands of wild blackberries for jams and jellies. Many folks went boating on Cherrystone Lake or fossil hunting in the limestone bluffs. During the past year, folks had continued to use his land as he had wished—but without him it wasn't the same. His death had left an emptiness that nothing could fill.

"Why do those people want to build a factory *here*?" Sheriff Badger asked suddenly, breaking a long silence.

"It does seem like a strange place," said Miss Proudie. "You'd think they'd build it downriver in Rawlinsville, where they could find more workers."

Simon Skunk, watching their shadows on the road, gave a little sigh. "I guess I'm sorry they didn't," he said. That plunged them back into silence; and they quickened their pace, strangely troubled in the moonlight.

Their spirits perked up as they crossed the bridge and saw the bright windows of the Old Hex Inn. Built as a barn many years ago, then abandoned after long use, it had stood empty till Roscoe Lynx had moved to town, bought the property, and remodeled it into a boarding house. From the outside it still looked like a barn—tall, its roof sagging slightly with age, its rough board walls gone silver-gray with weathering. But inside Roscoe had made great changes.

Simon vividly recalled the day that Roscoe had met with him and Thorstein Raccoon to explain his plans. His eyes gleaming with excitement, Roscoe had talked rapidly: "If we divide the hay loft into two stories, that will make three altogether. The kitchen and public rooms will be on the ground floor—a big space for eating and drinking and playing games and talking with friends. We'll put in a fireplace against the north wall, and lots of cabinets for storage. That's where *you* come in, Simon. And a grand staircase will lead up to the second floor." Roscoe paused and looked at Thorstein anxiously. "Do you think you can make it a *grand* staircase? Because that's what it's got to be."

"In all my years as a carpenter," said Thorstein Raccoon with a smile, "I was just waiting for the chance to build a grand staircase!"

Roscoe gave a happy sigh and returned to his charts and diagrams. "We'll divide the second floor into three apartments—two big ones, with a bedroom and a sitting room each. The third one I'll live in myself. It doesn't need to be very large—just room enough for a desk and a bed. I'll keep my harp downstairs."

"And the third floor?" asked Thorstein, taking notes with a stubby pencil.

"Two apartments," said Roscoe, "and at the rear, a big room for storage. Then, above them, right under the eaves, there's room for an attic. As you know, there were two families of Swallows living up there when I bought the barn. I don't see why they should have to leave."

"They've been there a long time," Thorstein nodded. "Though I'm not sure how they'll like paying rent, since they never have."

"Oh, they don't take up much room," Roscoe said quickly. "I'm not too worried about them paying rent. As I see it, they've got squatters' rights, since they were there first."

All that summer they had worked on remodeling the barn. Thorstein and Roscoe had done most of the heavy carpentry and built the fireplace. At a later stage, Simon had built cabinets and bookshelves, and the long counter in the main public room where Roscoe would serve tall mugs of his marvelous honey brew. In September, while Simon was varnishing the ornamental oak bannister on the grand staircase, Roscoe turned his full attention to plotting out the huge and complicated flower gardens which were to surround the Inn.

He had laid them out with imagination and cunning—a bewildering maze of winding paths which looped and intersected in delightful ways among shrubs and hedges, flowerbeds and trees. While strolling on the paths, folks would continually come upon his planned surprises: a trellised arbor, a bench of stone or wood nestled among the leaves, a little waterfall, a statue, sundial, birdbath, fountain, or pool. Also, Roscoe's careful planning saw to it that from early spring till late fall there was a continuous blossoming, one type of flower following another, each in its season, to form an ever-changing display of scents and colors.

The earliest were already in bloom as Miss Proudie, Simon, and the Sheriff went up the path to the Inn's front door. "The daffodils are doing well," said Sheriff Badger, pointing to the bright yellow heads that caught the light from a latticed window. "And look! the tulips are just about to bloom."

"And see the pale purple phlox!" said Miss Proudie. "They're my favorite!"

As they reached the porch, the door flew open. Out came Lafayette Lizard, followed by Grover's mayor, Estella Higgins, and at her heels, her husband Thaddeus.

Lafayette was editor of the *Grover Gazette*, a weekly newspaper widely read throughout the region. Always short of time, he didn't believe in wasting words. "Evening," he greeted the newcomers. "You got here just in time. Me, I'm going back to town."

"Just in time for what?" Simon asked.

"Franklin's going to play the flute," the Mayor said, looking nervously over her shoulder.

"Soon," said Thaddeus Higgins. "Any minute."

Sheriff Badger and Miss Proudie Fairblossom exchanged an anxious look. Simon shuddered as a sudden chill ran down his spine. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said weakly. Franklin Groundsquirrel was a fine fellow, and did many things well. But playing the flute wasn't one of them.

"It was Arabella Raccoon's idea," said Mayor Higgins, buttoning her jacket. "She wants to try out the sonata she wrote for him. Franklin says he's been practicing it for three weeks."

"That won't make any difference!" said Lafayette.

"Arabella says she needs to hear how it actually sounds," Thaddeus Higgins added.

"She ought to know how it'll sound," Lafayette muttered darkly, moving down the path.

"Do you think there's any way we could get Franklin to postpone it?" Simon asked. He was willing to try almost anything.

"No way," said Mayor Higgins. "He feels it's the least he can do for Arabella."

"Are you coming, or aren't you?" Lafayette called from the road.

"We're coming," they answered. They quickly said their goodbyes and went crunching away along the gravel.

Miss Proudie and the Sheriff had been whispering together. "If you'll excuse us, Simon," Miss Proudie said, "we think we'll walk down to the reflecting pool to see how it looks in the moonlight." And she and the Sheriff moved off quickly into the shadows.

Simon stood at the doorway making up his mind. Should he go in and face the flute sonata? Or should he stay outside and walk among the flowers? It was such a beautiful night. And Roscoe had said that the roses looked promising this year. But he was quite thirsty after the walk from town. A mug of honey brew would be very nice. With a sigh, he decided to risk it: perhaps he could get the honey brew and skip out to the garden again before the music started. Before he could change his mind, he took a deep breath and rushed in, hoping that Franklin wouldn't see him. He went straight to the serving counter where Roscoe Lynx was polishing mugs with an orange towel.

"You're looking well tonight," Simon volunteered, as Roscoe poured him a mug of brew.

"I got no complaints," said Roscoe. "The company's good, the weather's fine, and the tulips are ready to bloom. How's the furniture business?"

"Oh, good, good," Simon answered vaguely, as he looked nervously about the room to find Franklin and the flute. "I've got more orders than I can fill—from the city mostly. Tables and chairs."

There were many people present, gathered in groups, and the room was abuzz with conversation. Franklin Groundsquirrel was at a table against the far wall, looking over sheets of music with Arabella Raccoon. But his flute wasn't with him. Simon's eyes wandered about the room looking for it. At a nearby table Ambrose Fieldmouse (whose family lived on the ground floor at the back of the Inn) was talking with Elizabeth H. and her husband, Farmer Ben Barker. With them were Priscilla Possum, Randy's aunt from Maple Crossing deep in the Chickaloooga Forest, and Oscar and Lucy Otter from upriver near Farmer Green's house. At another table, Thorstein and Rebecca Raccoon, Arabella's parents, were chatting with M. Lucius Ferret the bookseller and Peabody the Postman (both of whom never got enough of Roscoe's honey brew). At Simon's elbow, Parker Packrat was perched on a stool at the counter, munching pretzels.

But there was still no sign of the flute. It was a cozy room, designed for comfort and to encourage conversation. A variety of interesting objects covered the walls: framed photographs of Roscoe's relatives, several oil paintings by Elizabeth H. and Farmer Ben, a fine collection of old railroad lanterns, crossed hockey sticks and snowshoes from Roscoe's past, and yellowed newspaper clippings behind glass. While scanning the room, Simon's eyes suddenly fixed on the piano. Lying on it was Franklin's flute case.

"I see you've noticed the flute," said Roscoe Lynx, polishing the counter top. "I'm afraid it means just what you think it does. And it will happen as soon as they've finished getting their signals straight."

Simon nodded, then made a quick decision. He left the counter and began edging his way toward the piano by a roundabout route. Since Franklin hadn't seen him yet, there might just be time for Simon to get to the piano, slip the flute case under his sweater, and sneak it outside before Franklin missed it. He would hide it in the large yew bush beside the front porch until Franklin was ready to go home. No harm would be done, and much would be prevented. It was actually the friendliest thing to do—in the nature of a public service, really—to spare so many people so much pain. Besides, Franklin and Arabella could play the sonata some other time, when they had the room all to themselves. Such were his thoughts as he approached the piano from behind chair backs and large potted plants.

At last, concealed by the fronds of a gigantic fern, he stood within reach of the flute case. He was just stretching out his arm to snatch it when Priscilla Possum tapped him sharply on the shoulder from behind.

"Well, Simon!" she said crisply. "Why are you hiding in Roscoe's ferns?"

He spun around blushing and stammered: "Why hello, Priscilla. How are you? I—uh—I've got a message for you from Randy."

"That scamp!" Priscilla said grimly. "He's supposed to help me with the



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spring planting, and we should have started last week. Where's he been keeping himself? I've been looking high and low, but haven't seen a sign of him, neither toe nor whisker. What's he been up to?"

"I don't know," Simon answered. "He did say he'd come see you tomorrow. And—oh, yes—he said to tell you he's ready for buttonholes."

"Well, it's about time," she said. "On *both* counts."

"About the buttonholes, he said it's now or never."

"Well, if he feels that way," Priscilla said, "and expects to step into my shoes someday, then I guess it had *better* be 'now'. I don't know why he's been so afraid of them. He's been putting it off for weeks, trying to get his courage up. They're really quite easy once you've been shown how. Why, I was three times younger than he is when my mother taught *me* how to make them. Would you believe it? He was telling me that shirts ought to be made with zippers instead of buttons. I said, 'Randy, zippers are fine, and if you want to design shirts that zip instead of button, that's your business. But if you want to be the Third Generation—as you say you do—then you'll simply *have* to learn how to make buttonholes!'"

Like her mother before her, Priscilla was a designer and maker of fine clothing. Although the old weather-beaten sign outside her house in Maple Crossing read POSSUM—DRESS AND BONNET-MAKER (her mother's wording), Priscilla's talents ranged far beyond dresses and bonnets. She was famous throughout the region as a designer of first-rate originals. Though she always kept up with the latest fashions and could do that sort of thing if her customers wished, Priscilla had her own style which many people preferred. It threw fashion to the winds, and was a style so different, so striking and unusual that it had come to be known as "the Possum Look"—and was recognizable anywhere.

Feeling that someone should carry on the family tradition, Randy some time ago had decided to become the third generation of designer-Possums. Priscilla had been delighted to take her nephew on as an apprentice; and she had done all that she could to teach him her skills. His progress had been fairly good, considering the amount of time he had to spend on it. For Randy also had a job running the printing press at the *Gazette* office, as well as a great many other interests. But then had come buttonholes. He knew there was no way around them—not with Aunt Priscilla calling the shots—but he'd already decided that when *he* was chief designer, the "Randy Possum Look" would be known for its brilliant and frequent use of zippers!

"I'm glad he's decided to take the plunge," Priscilla Possum said to Simon Skunk, "but right now, to me beans are more important than buttonholes. The spring planting will have to come first."

Franklin Groundsquirrel joined them beside the potted fern. "Simon," he grinned, "I'm glad you're here! It was getting late, and I thought you might not make it."

"Better late than never," Simon replied with a crooked smile.

"But as it is, you got here just in time!" said Franklin.

"You mean you're ready to play that game of chess?" Simon said hopefully.

"Well, sure I want to play chess," said Franklin, "but we'll have to wait till after the flute sonata. Arabella's finished two movements and wants to hear how it sounds. It shouldn't take too long. Then the chess game!" He took the battered flute case from the piano and lovingly opened it. Arabella Raccoon, wearing her reading glasses, sat down on the piano bench and began arranging the music sheets. Simon, his hand shaking slightly, moved slowly away, sipping his honey brew and preparing himself for the worst.

Writing music was only one of Arabella's pursuits. She owned and operated the only shoestore in Grover. On two afternoons a week she gave piano lessons to several of the neighborhood children. She also served on the Grover Town Council and was president of the local Rockhounds' Club. She had composed quite a lot of music—most of it short pieces for solo piano; but she had written several longer works too, including three piano sonatas, a set of variations on Winkelberger's "Too too lightly falls the dew," a Rondo for Piano and Sleighbells (commissioned by Grandfather Fieldmouse), and a rather strange piece called "The Honey Brew Rag." Roscoe Lynx wanted her to hurry up and finish the flute sonata so that she could get to work on a piece for him—a Fantasy for Piano and Harp.

Arabella lived on the second floor of the Old Hex Inn—in the front apartment, next to Roscoe's single room. Visiting her was like visiting a museum, for her sitting room was filled with a huge collection of rocks and fossils displayed in glass-fronted cases that Simon Skunk had made for her. On Sunday afternoons she often could be found scrambling about on the limestone bluffs above Cherry-stone Lake with her blue baseball cap, specimen bag, and rock hammer.

Roscoe's room, by contrast, was not interesting at all. It contained only an old brass bed, one chair, and a beat-up roll-top desk. Here it was that Roscoe did the Inn's book-keeping and wrote his poetry. For although he didn't talk about it much, Roscoe was something of a poet. Before he had come to Grover, he had been a professional hockey player; now, as an innkeeper, he wanted folks to think of him as tough and gruff, a driver of hard bargains and shrewd business deals. But this was all bluff, a game he played with himself as much as with other people. And only he was fooled by it. Actually, he was a gentle, kindly fellow who worried a lot about other people, tended his flowers, played his harp when the mood was upon him, and wrote a great deal of poetry—in secret, with a quill pen, by candlelight—all of which he locked away in his desk. He rarely showed people any of his poems. Yet folks knew he wrote them, and knew they were good. When they did happen to see one now and then, they talked about it. For several years, Lafayette Lizard had been trying to convince Roscoe to let him publish the poems at the *Gazette* press—in book form, to be widely distributed. But Roscoe had always refused. "You realize, of course, that I won't give up," Lafayette had declared, after being turned down for the ninth time. "I'm sure you won't," Roscoe had replied. "Though it would be much easier for both of us if you did."

The rear apartment on the second floor was occupied by Matthew Muddie, a tall, stoop-shouldered man with a bushy red beard. He taught school in the village and spent most of his spare time reading or walking in the woods. In the spring, he helped Roscoe with the flower gardens, and in the summer he usually spent several weeks at his sister's home in the city.

The third floor of the Old Hex belonged entirely to Fergus Fisher, who was a scientist and pleasant enough—but a little odd. He didn't talk much, except to himself, and went about mostly at night seeing to his many projects. Over the years he had invented such things as a self-winding clock, a carrot-shredder that could shred five hundred carrots in twenty-five minutes, and a chemical process for removing mulberry stains from white cotton fabrics. At the moment, he was growing mushrooms in the basement beneath the Inn, constructing a machine which could fly by moving its wings, and—in an experimental garden patch down the road—trying to cross radishes with watermelons (without much success). He had turned most of his apartment into a laboratory, where he tinkered with all sorts of things that squealed and went boom and made foul stinks late at night. On the roof of the Inn was a box-like cupola which Fergus had turned into an observatory. Here he would sit on clear nights scanning the heavens with his telescope. So far he had discovered two new comets which had been named after him: Fisher and Fisher Two.

In the attic, under the eaves, lived the Singebottoms and the Scissortails, the two families of Swallows which had been there when Roscoe had bought the barn. Also, an Owl named Oliphant. The Swallows were gone during much of the day, and went to bed early. Oliphant sat up late doing jigsaw puzzles or going about with Fergus as he did his experiments. He liked to sit with Fergus in the observatory counting stars; but he did not go with Fergus to the basement—because (he said) he didn't like the dampness down where the mushrooms were.

While he was waiting for the flute sonata to begin, Simon Skunk asked Roscoe to re-fill his mug with honey brew. Roscoe didn't respond, so Simon made his request a second time. "Sorry," said Roscoe with a sheepish grin, "I'm wearing my ear-plugs."

"You don't have an extra set, do you?" Simon asked.

Smiling, Roscoe said "Thank you!" with a pleasant nod. Simon decided to let the matter drop, and turned to face the piano.

Arabella Raccoon was adjusting her spectacles and peering anxiously at the carefully inked pages on the music rack. Franklin Groundsquirrel, standing tall beside the piano, was nervously fingering his flute.

"Are you ready?" Arabella asked. "Let's go!" She struck a chord on the piano, and they were off.

Arabella played the piano very well. No question about that. Her touch on the keys was strong and elegant. And no one could deny that the musical ideas in the sonata were very interesting. But Franklin's flute playing left much to be desired.

In Franklin's hands, the silver flute bleated forth shrill squawks and painful gaspings, hair-raising twitters of birds in fright, the squeals of pinched porcupines, the moans and shrieks of lonely banshees on wind-swept heights. Oh, it was horrible. It grated on the nerves. It shocked the sensibilities. It left one breathless with amazement and despair. Among other things, it brought to mind the squeak of chalk on blackboards, fire truck sirens, train wrecks, and rusty hinges. Even Arabella was appalled. Six bars into the first movement her mouth fell open in disbelief.

There was a flurry and a scrambling throughout the room. Oscar and Lucy Otter excused themselves and hurried outside. Farmer Ben turned his chair to the wall and pulled his hat down over his ears. Rebecca Raccoon clutched Thorstein's hand and laid her head on the table. Even Roscoe Lynx decided it was time to go to the basement for more honey brew. Simon, leaning against the counter for support, saw Ambrose Fieldmouse sneak out through the kitchen. It seemed like a good idea. He started to follow Ambrose out.

Then: *buh-whoom!* A deafening thunderclap! The room rocked; windows rattled; dishes danced and clattered. The ceiling lights swung like pendulums, and the framed photograph of Roscoe's Uncle Jason dropped off the wall into a pot of prize geraniums.

Dazed and blank, the explosion still ringing in his ears, Simon found himself sitting on the floor in a puddle of cold honey brew, tightly clenching the handle of his empty mug. Arabella Raccoon sat stiffly on the piano bench looking upward, her mouth still open, her hands poised motionless above the keys. For a long moment Elizabeth H. sat staring at her husband's toppled chair, then moved quickly to help him out from under the table. "That was a *loud* one," said Farmer Ben.

Oscar Otter poked his head through the doorway and asked, "Is the sonata finished?"

Franklin, on his knees, was scrambling to retrieve the music sheets which had scattered in all directions. Roscoe bolted up the basement stairs and looked nervously about, taking stock of the damage. With a little grunt of concern he dashed to the pot of geraniums, hung the photograph back on the wall, and bent anxiously to see what harm Uncle Jason had done to the flowers.

Down the staircase from the second floor came Fergus Fisher. His white laboratory coat was speckled all over with purple splotches and globs of black soot. He appeared to be impatient and irritated, and was mumbling to himself. But when he saw them watching him expectantly, he smiled and waved his hand to reassure them: "Just a little accident. Nothing to worry about. Everything's all right." He went quickly to the kitchen, and Oliphant Owl, winging down the stairs, flew after him.

"Well, that's a relief!" said Priscilla Possum. "It's a wonder to me that he doesn't hurt himself!"

"Oh, Fergus knows what he's doing," Peabody the Postman said with admiration.

"Would you mind if we didn't finish the sonata tonight?" Arabella asked



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Franklin. "Somehow I don't feel like going on just now."

Franklin's face showed his keen disappointment, but he nodded and put his flute back into its case. "Keep practicing," she said, "and next time we'll do the second movement."

As Franklin joined Simon Skunk at the serving counter, Fergus Fisher came from the kitchen carrying a mop and a bucket of water. Oliphant rode on his shoulder all the way up the stairs.

"I'm sorry she doesn't want to finish it," Franklin said sadly. "We were just getting warmed up."

"Oh, well," said Simon, wiping the seat of his pants with Roscoe's towel. "There'll be another time—maybe when no one's here. And you can go through it without being interrupted."

"At least you got to hear *some* of it," Franklin said. "What did you think of it?"

"Oh, it's quite powerful," Simon replied. "It makes a lot of demands on the listener. I can truthfully say I've never heard anything like it."

"Yes, it *is* unusual," Franklin agreed. "But it's kind of haunting, don't you think?"

Simon nodded emphatically. "Oh, yes, it's the kind of thing you don't easily forget. Come on now, let's go play that game of chess."

Chapter 2

FRANKLIN Groundsquirrel's house was a small stone cottage nestled among old oak trees at the edge of the Chickalooga Forest. Perched on a post at the end of the flagstone walk that led from Franklin's front door to the Old Cherrystone Road was a large wooden mailbox with Franklin's name printed on it in neat black letters. Below his name, the words 'AND US TOO' had been added in bright red paint, not nearly so neatly. This had been the work of Peggy and Peter, Franklin's niece and nephew, on their last visit. When they had gone back home to the city, Franklin had left their message on the mailbox. "Why take it off?" he'd said to Peabody the Postman. "They'll be here again. I'll save any mail that comes for them."

Simon Skunk trotted up the walk, wiped the dust off his feet on the welcome mat, and knocked loudly on Franklin's door. Franklin answered at once: "You're just in time. Lunch is ready."

Simon hung his cap on a hook beside the door. "I thought it would be," he said. "It always is by the time I get here." With pleasure he surveyed the table set for two, the bright blue dishes on the red-and-white checked cloth, the tall frosty glasses of lemonade. While Franklin, in a bright red apron, worked at the stove, Simon seated himself at the table and spread a napkin in his lap.

"I've been out walking this morning," he announced after a sip of lemonade. "Went upriver to visit the Otters, did some measuring for some cabinet work they want done." The lemonade was delicious. He took another sip. "They're not very happy about the factory."

"What's the problem?" Franklin asked.

"They can't get any sleep. Since the Sudge-Buddle Company moved in, the workmen have been going in and out, day and night, with heavy earth-moving equipment—bulldozers, graders, trucks. Spotlights are on all night. Dust and noise."

Franklin shook his head. "I don't understand why they're trying to build the factory so fast."

"Maybe they're trying to get as far along as possible before autumn comes," Simon suggested, nibbling at a cracker. "But there's even more. After I left the Otters' I went on upriver to Farmer Green's property line. Do you know what I found?"

"What?" said Franklin, turning from the stove to face him.

"A barbed wire fence, and big signs everywhere that said 'KEEP OUT. NO TRESPASSING. SUDGE-BUDDLE PROPERTY.'"

Franklin's eyes grew wide. "Does that mean we can't use Farmer Green's land anymore for hikes and picnics?" he cried in dismay.

"It's *not* Farmer Green's land anymore," Simon said. "And I think that's *just* what it means."

"What about Cherrystone Lake? Can we still go boating?"

"I don't know whether the Lake's been put off limits or not," Simon replied. "I haven't been up to the High Country recently."

"Oh, that's very sad," Franklin sighed, turning back to the stove. He took the lid off a large kettle and stirred the contents with a wooden spoon. Simon caught a whiff of the odor rising from the kettle. He didn't like what he smelled.

"Is that our lunch?" he asked, hoping that it wasn't but knowing that it was.

"Yes, it's called Jamaica Delight. A new recipe that Izzy the Witch gave me." Franklin filled Simon's plate from the kettle, and then his own, then hung up his apron and sat down at the table. Simon, his mouth slightly open and his nose wrinkled up, sat frowning at his plate. "What's wrong?" Franklin asked anxiously.

"Is it supposed to look like this?" Simon inquired. The food in the plate was gray and lumpy and tired-looking. It bubbled sluggishly and smelled like burning chicken feathers.

"I don't know how it's supposed to look," Franklin answered. "I told you I've never made it before. Izzy said it was a good recipe, a favorite of old Jamaica planters. I worked hard all morning to make it."

Simon studied it doubtfully. It wasn't promising. But he didn't want to hurt Franklin's feelings. "Do you use a spoon, or a fork?" he asked.

"I don't think it matters. But you'd better hurry. It's supposed to be eaten hot."

Simon decided to use his spoon. He reluctantly fished around in the gray puddle, then brought some slowly to his lips and—holding his breath—cautiously tasted it.

"Gur-r-r-k!" he sputtered, and dropped his spoon into the plate.

"Do you like it?" inquired Franklin.

It was a moment before Simon could speak. He had gone beet-red about the whiskers, and was wheezing into his napkin. Then he rapidly gulped his lemonade while Franklin watched him closely.

Finally Simon gasped out: "What's it called?"

"Jamaica Delight."

Simon shook his head. "Jamaica Mistake would be better."

"Don't you like it?" Franklin asked with deep concern. "Try another taste. Maybe it'll grow on you."

"That's what I *don't* need!" Simon said, squinting at him with one bloodshot eye. Franklin looked crestfallen; and Simon, still not wanting to hurt his friend's feelings, reached for his spoon, which was standing upright in the gray glob with its handle pointing at the ceiling. He tried to lift the spoon. It wouldn't move. He tugged, he pulled.

"It won't give my spoon back!" he cried. He took his hand away, and the spoon remained trapped, its handle pointing upward.

During this surprising turn of events, Franklin had paused, watching, with his

first forkful halfway to his mouth. He frowned at the handle of Simon's spoon. "That's very odd," he said. "Is it supposed to do that?"

"I don't know what it's supposed to do!" Simon said. "I just know what it's doing." He watched in dazed horror as Franklin moved the fork to his mouth.

"Gr-a-a-k!" Franklin snorted, jerking back in his chair. He grabbed the edge of the table with his free hand, and his ears flushed crimson.

Simon nodded. "My feelings exactly. Now, I have a question. Can you get the fork out of your mouth?"

Franklin got the fork out with only slight difficulty and began gulping his lemonade.

"I'd like to see that recipe," Simon commented, wiping his lips very thoroughly with his napkin. Franklin got up and silently took the kettle outside. A minute later he brought it back empty and set it on the stove. Then he handed Simon a piece of paper jotted all over with his careful squirrely script. "Izzy gave me the recipe last week. I said I wanted something new and strange. She said this would fit the description."

"You got what you asked for," Simon said. He read the recipe aloud while Franklin listened and ticked off the steps on his fingers.

"Jamaica Delight. You will need:

12 ripe bananas
 1½ cups ginger
 3 limes
 2 cups ground coffee beans (fresh)
 ½ cup allspice
 1 large whole red pepper
 3 medium sized yams
 1 handful powdered fennis root
 6 cups fresh coconut milk

—It doesn't sound bad so far," Simon commented. Then: "What's fennis root?" he asked suspiciously.

"I don't know," said Franklin. "Izzy gave it to me in a jar."

Simon continued reading: "Directions:

Peel bananas, add water, and mash to thin paste with a wooden spoon. (Save the banana peels for later.) Add ginger slowly, with the juice of three limes and eight cups of water. Let the mixture sit in a cool dark place for one hour.

—That doesn't sound bad at all," Simon said.

"That part was easy," said Franklin. "Go on."

"While the mixture is sitting, chop up the banana peels into small pieces and mix well with the allspice and three cups of coconut milk. Let this mixture stand in the sunlight until it has gone brown and bubbly.

—Brown and bubbly?" said Simon.

"That's right. It looks a little like mud. That part was harder. Banana peels don't like being chopped up in little pieces. Go on."



"Mix the ground coffee beans with the first mixture (bananas, ginger, lime juice). Place in a large kettle and bring to a slow boil. Throw in the handful of fennis root. (Don't worry about the smell—it will go away in a few minutes.)"

"The smell was pretty bad," said Franklin. "But it did go away."

Simon frowned slightly and went on reading:

"When the kettle is boiling, throw in the whole red pepper and three yams, and continue to boil for ten minutes. Take the kettle outside and add the mixture of banana peel, allspice, and coconut milk. Stir in the sunlight with a wooden spoon. The mixture should be gray at this point. If it isn't, take it back to the fire and boil for ten minutes more."

"It did turn gray," said Franklin. "So I went on to the next step."

"Add the remaining coconut milk and bring to a boil again, stirring constantly. Cover and let stand in a cool place for two hours. Heat again and serve. It should be eaten hot.

—I can see why it took you all morning to make it," Simon observed.

Franklin was shaking his head sadly. "I know what I did wrong," he said gloomily. "I forgot to stir it while it was boiling the last time."

"Well," Simon smiled sympathetically, putting aside the recipe, "maybe the next time you make it, it will turn out better."

"Would you like a peanut butter sandwich?" Franklin asked.

"That sounds good."

They ate peanut butter sandwiches and drank more lemonade.

After lunch, they started out for Maple Crossing, where Izzy the Witch had her General Store. Franklin wanted to double-check the recipe with her, for Izzy had been known to make mistakes.

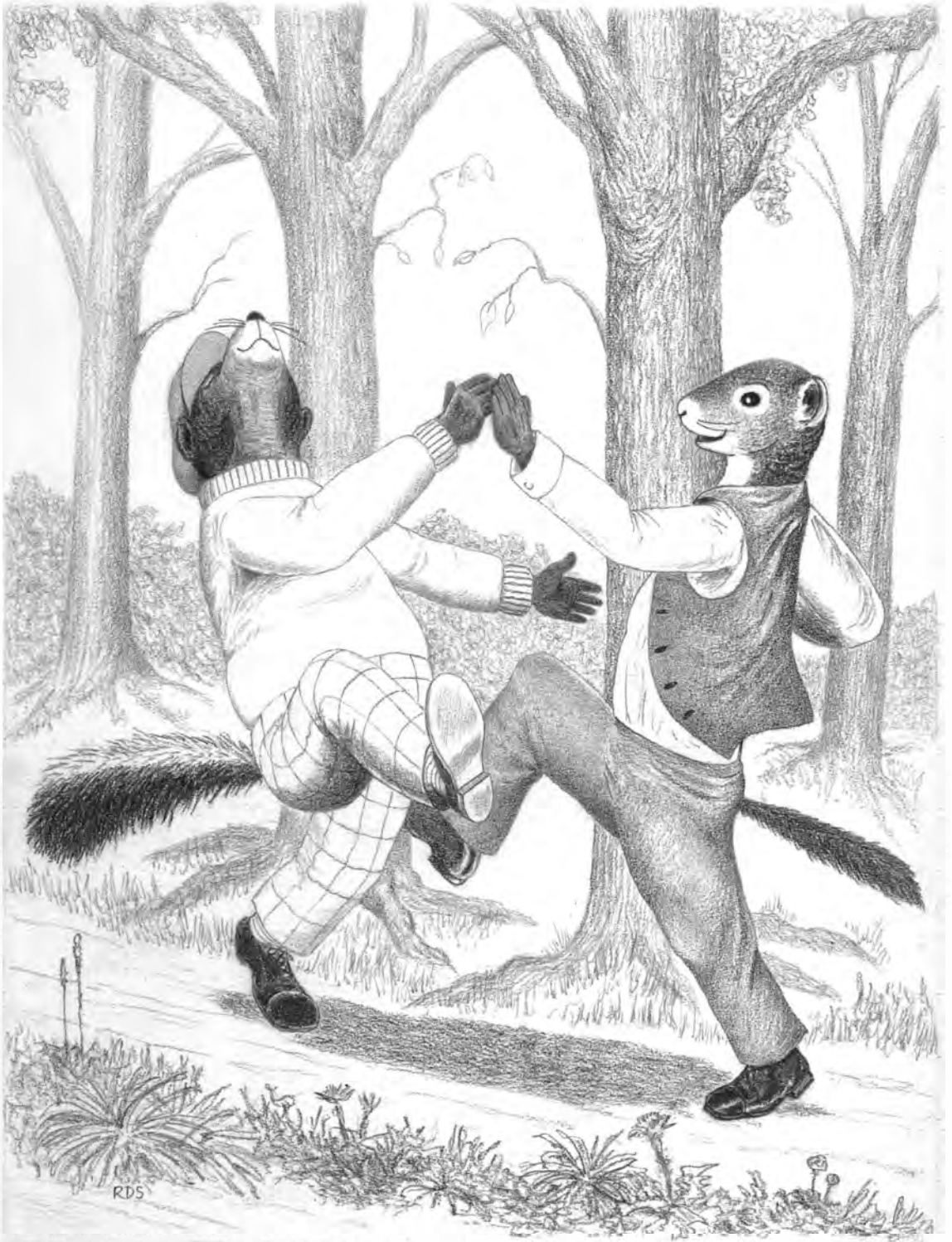
For awhile the Cherrystone Road took them through the woods; then, with a gentle curve, it brought them into a large clearing. The afternoon was warm and lazy, the air so still that no leaves were stirring on the trees. Honeybees were hovering among the red clover blossoms, and the tufted grass was thickly peppered with white and yellow wildflowers.

"Summertime is best," Simon said quietly, closing his eyes and breathing deeply of the sweetly scented air.

"It's fine," Franklin agreed, "but I like winter too. Lots of sleep, snug in the cottage, while the snow falls. Crackling woodfires at the Old Hex, the tingle of ice crystals in your face, snowball fights, the Carnival, ice-skating on Barker's Pond. And still more cozy sleep!"

"Oh, but autumn is better than winter," Simon continued thoughtfully. "With the leaves changing color, and everybody laying in food for the winter. Cool nights and warm sunny days. Hazy twilights, evening mist. The dusty smell of fallen leaves—red, brown, and gold. The first frost! Apples, pumpkins, pawpaws!"

"And then there's spring!" cried Franklin, giving a little skip of delight. They both thought about that, then did a dance in the middle of the road and sang this song:



"Spring springs happily
 Upon the land—
 Merry, merry birdsongs
 On every hand—
 Crocus! Iris! Larkspur!
 Violets and phlox!
 Radishes! Asparagus!
 Moss upon the rocks!
 Exciting sweet aromas
 Fill the air—
 Strawberries! Chokecherries!
 Everywhere!"

Then, swinging along in step, they continued down the road till it curved out of the woods altogether and brought them into a broad sunny meadow surrounded by the high dark walls of the Chickalooga Forest. Just off the road stood a small square house roofed with a sheet of corrugated iron. Before it was a mailbox fashioned from an old nail keg which bore the inscription PARKER PACKRAT ornately carved into the wood. Some distance away, in the middle of the field, Parker's junk sculpture towered above them. It reached up into the sky like a great pointing finger—far taller than the very tallest pine trees at the edge of the pasture. He had been building it for the last two years.

As they stood looking at it, Simon and Franklin could see Parker high up the side of the sculpture, fairly near the top, standing on a wooden platform scaffold, dark against the sky.

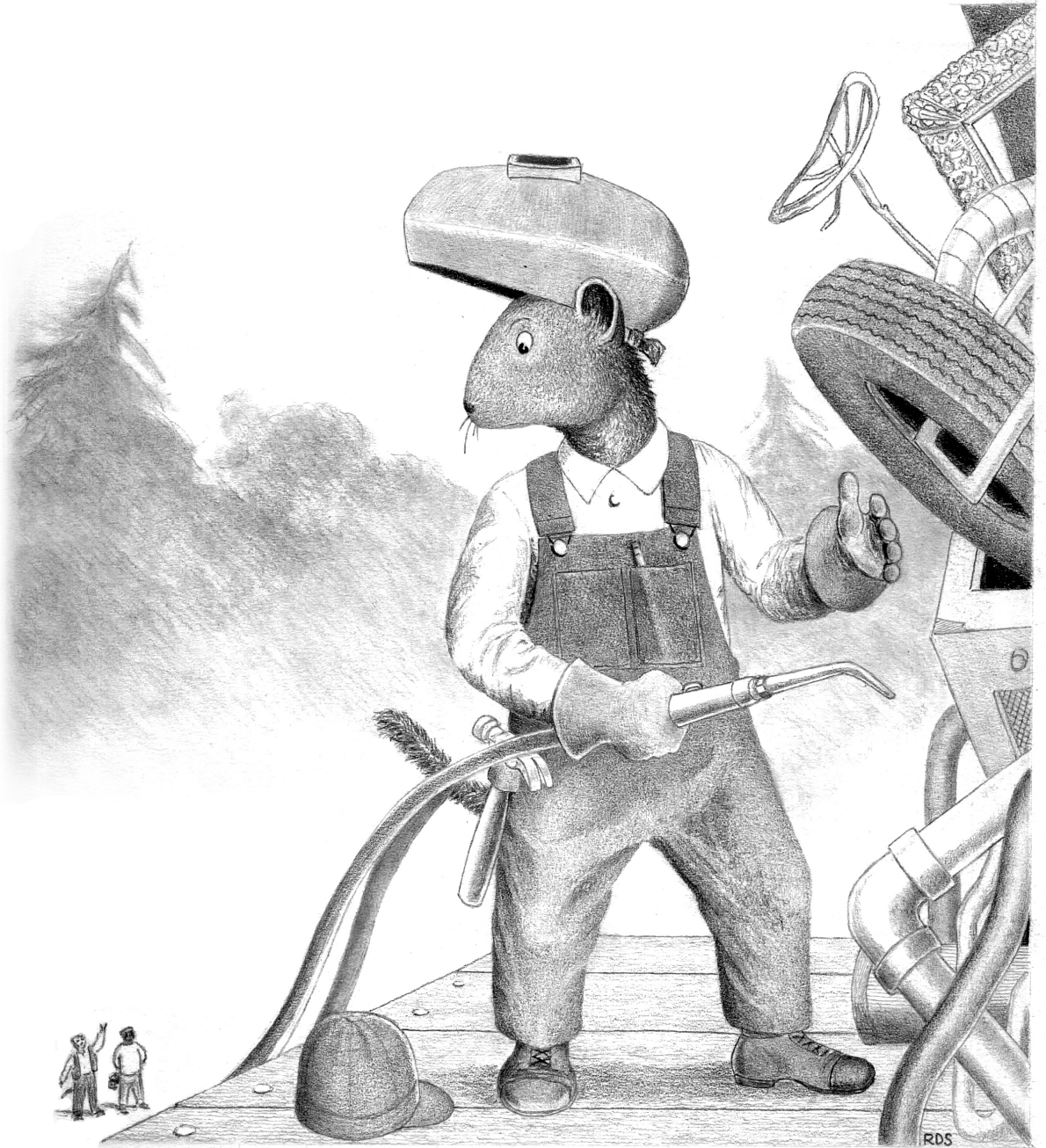
"As a junk sculpture, it's quite impressive," Simon observed. "It gets bigger every time I see it."

"As *anything*, it would be impressive," said Franklin.

To reach the sculpture, they had to pick their way through odds and ends of junk lying heaped and tumbled in the grass: old wagon wheels, a battered washing machine, stacks of rusty pipes, coiled steel springs, part of an old pump organ, and a bathtub filled with assorted table legs. When they arrived at the base of the sculpture, it dwarfed and overshadowed them—a jumble of step ladders and stove pipes, old furniture, bedsprings, plumbing, garbage pails, cables, and garden hoses. Up, up it rose, an eye-baffling maze of bird cages, fan blades, rubber tires, tin cans, wornout bicycles, window frames, cash registers, coffee pots. Lawn mowers and coat hangers. Oxygen tanks. Radiators. Ornamental porch railings. Bottles, copper tubing, garage doors, lampshades, picture frames, and pitchforks. There was even an airplane wing poking out about halfway up.

Franklin tilted back his head, cupped his hands around his mouth, and shouted: "He-e-e-y, Parker!"

The figure on the scaffold high above stopped whatever it was doing and turned to look down at them.



"Just a minute," Parker cried, "I'll be right down." He disappeared into a crevice in the sculpture, and a moment later they heard him far up inside scrambling ever closer down the passageway and stairs.

Suddenly they saw a large tea-kettle clatter-bouncing down the side of the sculpture straight toward them. It was coming fast, from a long way up. Franklin leaped high and far, and landed in the bathtub among the table legs. Simon took a running nose-dive into the grass and lost his chewing gum. With a horrendous ka-thumpetty-cloing the tea-kettle landed right where they'd been standing. It bounced, spun, rolled a little distance, and came to rest against Parker's cement mixer.

"That was close!" Franklin said from the bathtub, scanning the sculpture nervously to see if anything else was coming down. Nothing seemed to be.

Simon picked up the tea-kettle. In its side it sported a large dent, new and shiny. "Lucky for us it was this that fell," he said wryly, "and not the piano, or the ice-box, or the airplane wing."

Franklin climbed awkwardly out of the bathtub, cautiously favoring his right leg, for he had banged his knee badly going in. "I'll bet the whole thing falls down some day," he said, seating himself on the edge of the bathtub. "And when that happens, I don't want to be here. I'd rather read about it in the *Gazette*." Rubbing his knee, he began examining the table legs he had landed on. Some of them were rather interesting.

At that moment, Parker Packrat popped from an opening in the base of the sculpture. "How are you fellows?" he cried, with a broad smile of greeting. "I haven't seen you for a long time!"

"We're alive and well," replied Simon, "—though I must confess that surprises me some." He handed the tea-kettle to Parker. "While you were coming down, so was this. It got here first, and we barely escaped with our lives."

Parker examined the tea-kettle carefully. "This is from the Fifth Level," he said. "I didn't know it was loose. The freezing and thawing last winter must have loosened the cement. I guess I'd better weld it on when I put it back. Oh, say! Did you fellows see this new dent? It's very interesting!" He held it out for them to see.

"We saw it," said Franklin.

"Well now!" Parker said happily, putting one finger into the dent to feel its shape and smoothness. "Oh, this is fine!" He turned, still fingering the dent, and—eyes sparkling with excitement—started slowly back toward the sculpture, holding the tea-kettle gently, as though it were a rare treasure.

"Parker!" Franklin said loudly.

Parker turned and blinked at him. "We stopped by on our way to see Izzy the Witch," Franklin continued, in a softer voice. "We were wondering if you'd like to come along."

"Sure, that's a good idea," Parker said. "It's been several days since I checked to see what Izzy has by way of new junk. Let me get my wagon."

He set the tea-kettle down beside the entrance to the sculpture, trotted over to a work area where several saw horses stood beside the cement mixer, and quickly



returned pulling a small wagon which still bore traces of its red paint.

"I'm going to have to get a new wagon soon," he remarked, as they reached the road and started down it. "This one's about worn out. Something's wrong with the rear axle."

"You've had it ever since you started work, haven't you?" Simon asked.

"Yes, and I've used it constantly. It's better than the wheelbarrow for certain things. When it finally breaks down, I'm going to get another one just like it—though maybe a little bigger."

"And what will become of this one then?" Simon asked—though he already had a good idea what would become of it.

"I've got a place picked out for it on the Seventh Level," Parker replied. "There were three spots to choose from, but the one I picked is where it will go best."

"Are you pleased with the way the sculpture's going?" Franklin inquired.

"Pretty much." Parker's tone was brisk and businesslike, as it always was when he talked about his work. "There are good days and bad days, of course. Sometimes things just click together beautifully; then there are the other times when nothing seems to go right. The sculpture's gotten so high that I'm having trouble getting some of the materials up to where they're needed. Just yesterday I had a very bad time getting a rocking chair up to the Ninth Level where I'm working now. It was one of those big overstuffed chairs, the kind that grandfathers like. The wooden parts were solid oak—very nice grain: you'd like it, Simon. But so heavy! I guess I've got to install a larger pulley, or use two in combination."

Franklin found himself thinking about the tea-kettle that had nearly crowned them. (Perhaps it was because his knee still hurt.) "Aren't you afraid the sculpture might fall over if it gets too tall?" he asked.

"No, I don't think there's much chance of it," Parker answered. "Sometimes a high wind causes me some trouble. Up near the top especially. But I'm strengthening the system of braces and supports on the inside, so I don't think it will fall over."

"I'm glad you're taking precautions," said Franklin.

"Oh yes," said Parker, pausing a moment to look at a brown bottle which was lying in the ditch beside the road. He picked it up and tossed it into the wagon. "But it's true that the taller it gets, the more problems there are. Especially with the wind. So I've got to think ahead and build in the supports before I add new materials."

"Speaking of building things," Simon volunteered, "the Sudge-Buddle Company is moving right along with the construction of their factory."

Parker's interest was immediately sparked. "I was wondering about that. I haven't been over there for a week or so. What stage are they at?"

"Clearing the ground, digging holes. Getting ready to pour the foundations."

"Have they brought in many building materials?" Parker asked.

"I saw some today, but there's not much yet. More will be coming pretty quick, I imagine."

Parker's eyes had a dreamy look about them. "I hope it's soon," he said.

Chapter 3

MAPLE CROSSING, deep in the Chickalooga Forest, was not large enough to be called a village. It consisted of three houses, a bookshop, and Izzy's General Store. The largest house belonged to Thorstein and Rebecca Raccoon, Arabella's parents. Thorstein had built the house himself some years ago; now, having retired from carpentry, he spent most of his time tending his huge vegetable garden or visiting with friends at the Old Hex Inn. Rebecca Raccoon worked three days a week as a reporter for the *Grover Gazette*, scouring the district for news. She also made excellent cottage cheese which she sold to Izzy's General Store and to Higgins' Coffee Shop in Grover.

Next door to the Raccoons lived Priscilla Possum, in a neat yellow cottage surrounded by low privet hedges. Across the back was a glassed-in sunporch where she did her sewing; at the front, she had turned the parlor into a display room for buttons, clothing patterns, and bolts of fabric. Across the road, in the smallest house, lived M. Lucius Ferret, owner of the bookshop. The shop itself was in a separate building joined to the house by a covered walkway. M. Lucius had named his shop "The Boundary"—because, he said, "Folks who like books are bound to come here sooner or later; and when they do, they're bound to find something to interest them." And no wonder: the shop contained over eight thousand books, dealing with every subject imaginable. Since M. Lucius had read them all, and remembered what he read, folks were fond of saying: "If you've got a question, Ferret's got the answer." He usually did, too; and if he didn't, he always knew where it could be found.

Izzy's General Store, directly across the Old Cherrystone Road from The Boundary, was a low wooden building with a steep shingled roof and a broad porch that ran the length of the front. In the wall facing the road were broad windows which lighted the salesroom where Izzy displayed her merchandise. She did a brisk business, for no other store in the region could match the variety of things she had to sell. Not even Stoopnagel's Department Store in Rawlinsville, which was much larger. People came to Izzy's first, because whatever they needed, they could be almost certain of finding it—whether broomstick, butter churn, or bottle cork, soap or silverware, galoshes or glue. Now, a person might have to hunt awhile before the item turned up; but with patience, it would usually come to light.

In the center of the salesroom, a pot-bellied stove for use in winter perched like a gnome on stubby iron legs. Above it, a blue-black stovepipe climbed through the ceiling. A counter ran the length of the rear wall, and behind this was a door that led into the living quarters which Izzy shared with Prosper the Cat. Very few people had ever been in this back room, for Izzy did most of her visiting on

the front porch (in good weather) or beside the stove (in bad). Those who had been invited into the living quarters gave reports of a cozy kitchen with great iron kettles, shelves of yellowed books, mysterious cupboards filled with strangely-labeled bottles of all shapes and sizes, and—hanging from the rafters—great bundles of roots and bunches of dried herbs. Most people were quite content to stay in the salesroom.

As Simon Skunk, Franklin Groundsquirrel, and Parker Packrat turned into Izzy's yard from the road, Parker noticed a length of heavy metal chain lying in the ditch. He stopped his wagon, walked excitedly all around the chain, viewing it from every angle; he touched it with his toe, then stooped down and weighed several links in his hands.

"You know, I could really use this chain," he said urgently. "It's not fastened to anything. I'll bet somebody threw it away."

"Maybe it's Izzy's," Franklin suggested.

Parker frowned and shook his head. "Out here by the road? No, I don't think so." He put the chain into the wagon with the brown bottle. "But I'll ask her, just in case. I've been looking for a chain just like this one for a long, long time."

As they entered the salesroom, a brass bell jangled above the door.

"Customers, Izzy," said Prosper the Cat from his velvet cushion at the end of the counter.

"Coming!" called a voice from the back room. "Just let me turn down the fire."

"Hello, Prosper," Franklin said.

Slowly turning his head to face them, Prosper regarded them for a long moment with half-closed yellow eyes. "Good afternoon," he replied. His voice was elegant and cool, neither friendly nor unfriendly, but dignified and superior, as though he had—with good reason—a very high opinion of himself and expected others to also. Indeed, sleek and trim and immaculately well-groomed, Prosper had an air about him that commanded respect. Frankly, people stood a little in awe of Prosper. For although he was always at the store, and folks were accustomed to his presence, no one knew him well. There was, without question, something mysterious and remote about Prosper. He never waited on customers, or rang up orders, or stocked the shelves. Most of the time he sat cross-legged on his velvet cushion with his eyes closed. Occasionally he could be seen sitting in stately dignity in one of the rocking chairs on the front porch, or—at evening—strolling self-importantly about the yard with his gold-headed walking stick. When Izzy went out collecting herbs and mushrooms, Prosper always accompanied her; and folks were always encountering them walking about in unexpected places in the fields and woods.

Prosper never said much, and he frequently sat motionless for long periods of time with his eyes shut—as though he were in deep thought, or in some sort of trance, or perhaps asleep. But every now and then on these occasions, for no apparent reason—and without opening his eyes—he would curve his mouth into a slow, secret smile. A few of Izzy's customers were always un-nerved by this, but most of them had grown used to it.

"Certainly a very odd fellow," people would say of Prosper, once they were well



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out of his hearing. Even when far from the store, they would say it softly, in subdued whispers, as though they suspected that Prosper's ears were very good indeed. As far as anyone could tell, Prosper had no close friends except Izzy.

With Izzy, though, he was quite familiar. People observed that they frequently exchanged glances, whispers, and knowing smiles. It was apparent that Izzy talked to Prosper a great deal, asking his advice on problems that arose in running the store and perhaps (though folks could only guess at this—in whispers, when they were out of hearing) discussing her other activities as well.

For Izzy, after all, *was* a witch. She said so herself, and no one had reason to doubt her. She offered a wide range of services, and many people paid her a fee to have witchcraft done for them. Most folks claimed to be entirely satisfied with the results. For example, many people came to her for help in finding things they had lost. Her success in performing this service was well-known. She had helped Farmer Ben Barker locate a barrel of apple cider he had misplaced. She had told old Elisha Rabbit where to look to find his eye-glasses, and Miss Proudie Fairblossom her binoculars. She had helped Oscar Otter find his favorite canoe paddle, and Fosco Fieldmouse his ticket to the circus (so that he got to go, after all), and Sarah Skunk, Simon's mother, her scrapbook with all of Simon's baby pictures (much to Simon's regret, since she always got it out to show visitors).

Besides being able to find lost articles, Izzy claimed to work charms to make crops grow better and to keep houses from being struck by lightning. She concocted potions to cheer people up when they were sad, and philters to make them fall in love when they would rather not. But most important of all, she prepared and kept in stock strange medicines to cure people who were troubled by sleeplessness, hay fever, poison-ivy itch, toothache, indigestion, boils, warts, hiccups, and bad dreams. Bascom Badger, the village doctor, had long regarded Izzy with suspicion and dislike. For years, whenever anyone would listen, he had grumbled noisily about "that person in Maple Crossing who practices medicine without a license." When people told him earnestly that Izzy's witchcraft worked, he would snort contemptuously and stamp his foot and call it "fuddlesome hanky-panky" and "superstitious balderdash." But two years ago he had stopped saying such things so frequently. And for a very good reason.

For many years Doctor Badger had been afflicted with a stubborn case of athlete's foot which he couldn't cure. Time and again he had treated it with all the latest ointments and powders and salves that were advertised in his medical journals. Though sometimes it would clear up for awhile, it always came back again. Then suddenly, two years ago, it had vanished without treatment and never come back. The cure amazed and delighted him; but he was later shocked and horrified to learn that it had come just after his wife Hilda had secretly gone to Izzy for the working of a charm. Izzy's charm was a great embarrassment to him, for Hilda had told all her friends about it; and they, for a long while after, would smile at him knowingly when Izzy's name came up in conversation. Though he still refused to believe in witchcraft, Doctor Badger had fairly well stopped *saying* that he didn't believe in it. And he had stopped saying nasty things about Izzy as well (publicly, at least). Now, when the subject of witchcraft

came up in conversation, he would just fidget, wipe his spectacles, and start talking about the weather.

Some people said Izzy worked wonders. Some said she didn't. Some said they didn't know one way or the other and didn't care—she sold good cottage cheese. But everyone agreed that Izzy was honest; and whether her customers wanted charms or cheese, she stood ready to refund their payment if they weren't completely satisfied with what they got. "Satisfaction guaranteed, or your money back!" was her motto. No one ever came back for a refund.

"Well, well! Good to see you folks!" Izzy said, emerging from the back room with a clattering stack of saucepans which she set on the counter before her visitors. "Haven't seen *you* for a long time, Simon. Where've you been keeping yourself? What can I do for you? Could I interest each of you in a new saucepan? These came in just this morning."

No, they didn't need any saucepans. Franklin said, "I came to ask you about a recipe you gave me last week—the one for Jamaica Delight."

"Ah, that's a good one!" Izzy said. "Have you tried it yet?"

"Well, I've *tried* it," Franklin said, "but it wasn't very good. In fact, it wasn't good at all."

"In fact," Simon added, "it was terrible."

"Terrible?" Izzy said in surprise, looking quickly from one to the other. "That's strange. The last time I made it, I thought it was delicious."

"I brought the recipe along for you to look at," said Franklin, handing her the piece of paper. "Maybe I did something wrong. I know I forgot to stir it while it was boiling the last time. But other than that, I followed the recipe to the letter. And I thought I had it copied down just like you gave it to me."

She studied the recipe. "Hmm, hmm, yes," she muttered, "bananas, ginger—hmm—coconut milk. Oh, dear!" She frowned thoughtfully, rubbing her chin. "The coconut milk is all wrong," she said finally. "Let me think—lime juice, red pepper, yams. The fennis root is all right. Oh, now I see! I gave you the wrong recipe, Franklin. This one isn't for Jamaica Delight. It's an old voodoo recipe for—uh—for doing certain things."

Franklin's eyes got very large, and Simon sat down heavily on a packing crate. "What kinds of things is it supposed to do?" Franklin asked.

"Well, if I remember right," she pondered, "it's either supposed to cure you of rheumatism, or get rid of kidney stones. One or the other, I'm pretty sure. No, wait! Maybe it's the one that's supposed to purify the water in your well." Her smile faded. "No, that one doesn't use yams. Oh, I know! Silly of me to forget! It's to keep your hair from falling out. That's it!" She laughed gaily. "Nothing to worry about. It's not the recipe that turns you into a zombie! That one uses goat's milk instead of lime juice!"

"That's a comfort," said Simon. "No fun being a zombie."

"At least we didn't eat much of it," Franklin added weakly.

"That's a comfort too," said Simon.

"I don't know how I made the mistake," Izzy continued with a puzzled frown. "I thought sure when I gave you the recipe that it was for Jamaica Delight. I

guess I shouldn't try to give out recipes from memory. Just last month I gave Priscilla Possum what I thought was the recipe for Chocolate Rhubarb Truffle. I was awfully embarrassed: she had to repaint her whole kitchen. I gave her the paint to do it, of course, since it was my mistake."

"You mean well, Izzy," Prosper said from his cushion, without opening his eyes.

"That's true," she said. "But I shouldn't give out recipes from memory. And I don't have to—I've got them all written down in my notebook. Wait a minute, Franklin; I'll get you the right recipe for Jamaica Delight."

"Oh, it's not necessary," Franklin said quickly. "Don't trouble yourself. It's not that important, really it isn't."

"No trouble at all," Izzy smiled, pulling from beneath the counter a thick notebook with a moldy green cover. "If I made a mistake, I want to make it right if I can. Satisfaction guaranteed, that's my motto." As she flipped through the stiff yellowed pages, she said, "Are you sure I can't interest you in a lovely new saucepan? They're very nice."

They all shook their heads. No, they didn't need any, thanks. They all had enough saucepans. But they had to agree, those she had certainly *were* nice, all bright and shiny; never seen finer. Izzy shrugged as though there were no accounting for taste, and continued her search for the recipe. When she had found it, she copied it onto a scrap of paper. "No coconut milk, Franklin," she said, as he tucked the paper into his pocket. "Just use plain water. You'll see it makes all the difference in the world." With a satisfied smile she snapped her notebook shut and put it back under the counter. Turning to Parker, she said, "I've got a new box of junk I've been saving for you. It's around in the back yard in the usual place. Some pretty good stuff, too—a bucket, a broken drum, and an old porch swing."

"A porch swing!" Parker cried in delight. "Thanks, Izzy!" He started for the door, then paused with his hand on the knob: "One more thing, Izzy. There was a length of heavy chain outside in the ditch. Is it yours?"

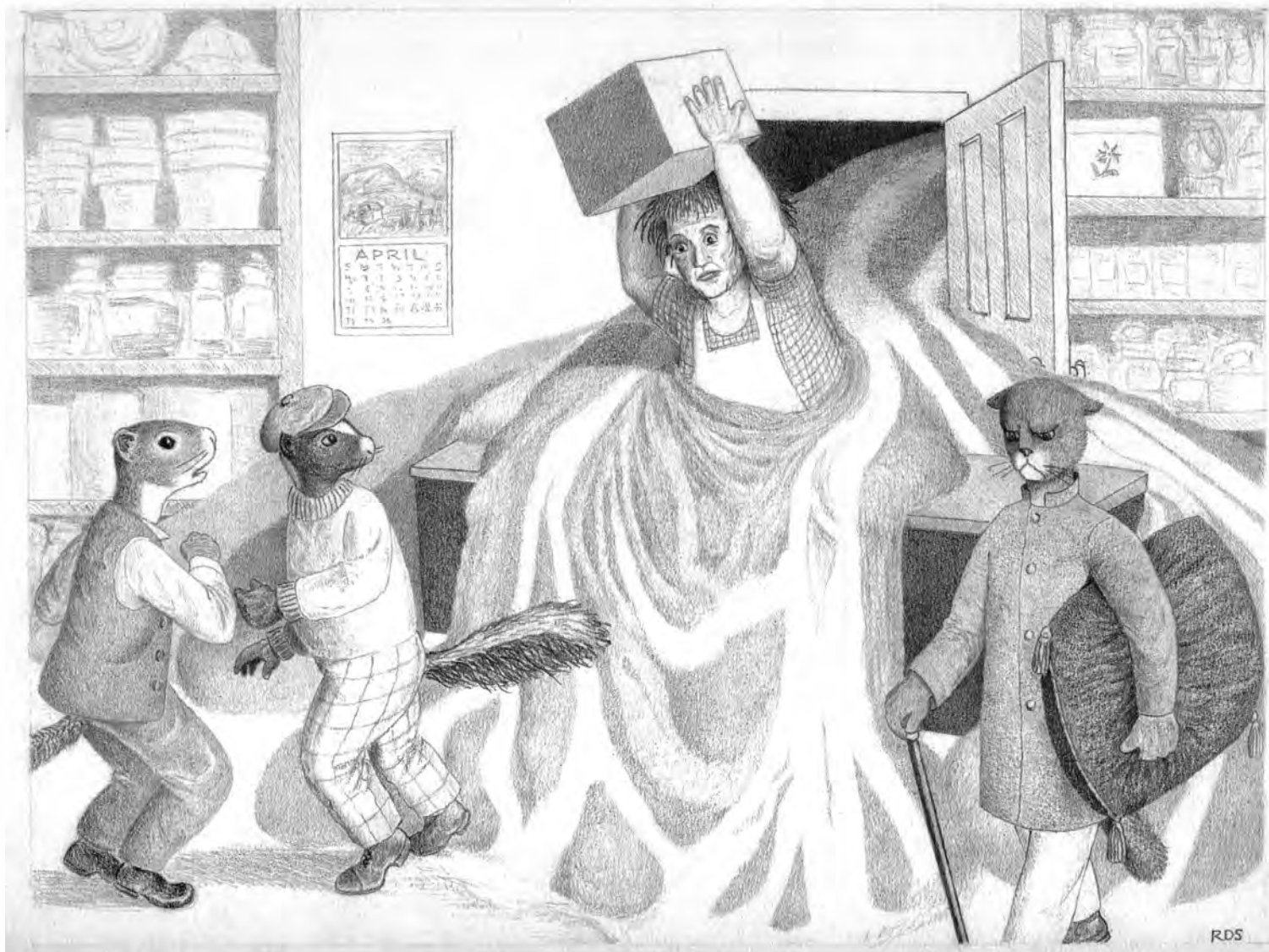
"It's not mine," she answered. "That's one thing I don't carry. Maybe it fell off one of the delivery trucks."

"I'll put it to good use," Parker said, and rushed out.

From the back room, a sharp hissing sound: *Fsssssssst!* Prosper opened his eyes. "It's boiling over!" Izzy cried, and she rushed into the living quarters closing the door behind her. "What's happening?" Simon asked.

"It's overheated," said Prosper. "I warned her—"

The door to the back room swung open slowly, pushed outward by a mountain of pale green foam which came sliding into the salesroom. Like lava, the heap of froth moved through the doorway, flowed around the ends of the counter, over the top, and down the front. Pale green, smooth and creamy like thick soap-suds or whipped gelatin, it looked very much like the filling of a lime chiffon pie. Prosper leaped up, grabbed his walking stick from its place beside the counter, and snatched his velvet cushion from the path of the sliding foam. Clutching the cushion under one arm, he retreated to the center of the room as



Izzy came struggling through the doorway, holding high over her head a cardboard box.

"Quick!" she cried. "Get it in the bottles!" She tossed the box over the counter to Simon, who was standing nearest. "Hurry!" she shouted, turning waist-deep in foam toward the back room. "Don't let any get away!" And she was gone through the doorway and out of sight.

Simon had half caught the box, half dropped it on the floor; from it came spilling a glittering heap of small glass bottles. "Don't just stand there!" he shouted to Franklin. "You heard her. Get it in the bottles!"

Franklin got down on all fours and took up a bottle in each hand. "How are we supposed to do that?" he cried.

"Dipping and scooping!" Simon answered, joining him on the floor. The foam, still coming, flowed around them as they dipped and scooped. Prosper, his face twisted into a sour grimace, placed his velvet cushion and walking stick safely high on a stack of folding chairs and got down carefully on his knees beside them. With obvious disgust, he began filling the bottles with quick, nervous movements—one in each hand—trying all the while to keep his clothing from getting dampened by the foam. That proved to be a hopeless effort; for as the foam spread around them, billowing about the bases of the display racks and oozing in thin fingers along the cracks in the floorboards, they all soon found their trousers soaked, and green froth clinging to their sleeves.

"I've run out of bottles!" Franklin said.

"Use something else then," Simon replied, handing him a carton of new fruit jars from a nearby display. Prosper too had run out of bottles. He began to use drinking glasses and teacups from the chinaware section. Simon began filling shiny new buckets which he found stacked near the front door. As they kept filling their containers, it soon became apparent that the foam had stopped its forward advance. Indeed, the sudsy heap was everywhere subsiding, shrinking into itself as the tiny bubbles burst. Still they continued to scoop and dip, for Izzy had said none of it should be lost.

By the time they had exhausted the supply of containers they could lay their hands on—salad bowls, cream pitchers, crocks, kettles, coffeepots, cookie jars, wastebaskets, washtubs, and two new garbage pails—the foam had nearly vanished, collapsing in upon itself and dwindling away, leaving behind a bright emerald-green liquid which was rapidly soaking into the floor. "Well, we did what we could," Simon said, staring helplessly at the green stain. What they had collected in the various containers had also dwindled away to small quantities of green liquid. Franklin was appalled at such a small return for all their labor.

As they sat exhausted among their crocks and bottles, buckets, pots, and teacups, Izzy came through the doorway from the back room with a large kettle filled with the green liquid. "Oh, good!" she said with relief, when she saw what they had collected. "You managed to save a lot. I was afraid most of it would get away."

Prosper, leaning against a post with his eyes closed, said tiredly, "Really, Izzy, you must be more careful in the future."

"This is only the second time it's happened," she said. "Luckily we saved enough that it'll be at least a year before I have to make another batch."

"Nevertheless," said Prosper, "you must manage it better next time."

The bell over the front door jangled as Parker Packrat came in. He stopped short by the galoshes to stare at them sitting there among the odd assortment of containers. It was clear to him that he had missed something. From what he saw before him, he was glad that he had. "Are you fellows ready to leave?" he asked. "I'd like to get back to get some work done before dark."

Simon and Franklin helped each other up. "I think I'm ready to leave," said Franklin, inspecting his pants. "What about you, Simon?"

"Oh, quite ready," said Simon, "oh, yes."

Izzy was smiling at them both. "I really appreciate what you fellows did," she told them. Quickly she went to the counter and grabbed two of the new saucepans, pouring the green liquid they contained into her kettle. "Please accept these," she said, "as a token of my thanks. They're a little sticky, but they'll wash up fine."

"So are we," muttered Simon, "and I hope we do too." But they took the saucepans, since giving them meant so much to Izzy. "I really do appreciate it," she said again, beginning to empty the various containers into a washtub. "You have no idea how much time you saved me."

"Don't mention it," said Franklin. "Glad to be able to help out."

"Our pleasure," said Simon. "Maybe we'll need *your* help someday."

"And I want to thank *you*, Izzy," said Parker, holding the door open for them. "You really saved some wonderful stuff for me out back. I left the drum; it was just too far gone to be of any use. But the bucket is nice. And the porch swing is magnificent! It will go perfectly on the Tenth Level."

Izzy followed them to the door and watched them down the steps. The long porch swing lay on the ground beside the wagon. Parker and Franklin lifted it cross-wise onto the wagon where it balanced tipsily, its ends projecting far beyond the wagon on either side. "I'll pull," said Parker. "Could you fellows each take one side of the swing? It's going to need some steadying."

With a final wave, Izzy watched them as they started down the road into the setting sun, moving slowly into the woods which stood silent in the dusty yellow haze: Parker and the wagon in the middle of the road; Simon and Franklin walking along on either side, each holding one end of the swing.

"Prosper," Izzy said quietly, "it will look very nice on the Tenth Level."

"Of course it will," said Prosper.

Chapter 4

SINCE BREAKFAST, Franklin Groundsquirrel had been sitting at his front window impatiently watching the road—though he knew that, with a two-hour drive from the city, he couldn't expect his visitors to arrive much before noon. To make the time go faster, he had brought out the postage stamps he sold to collectors and, surrounded by file boxes and bulging stockbooks, he had set about filling orders his customers had sent him. With bright silver tongs he plucked the stamps from the stockbooks, popped them into envelopes for mailing, and totaled up his customers' charges. On each envelope was printed: THE HOUSE OF STAMPS: F. GROUNDSQUIRREL, Dealer—"THE COLLECTOR'S FRIEND."

At eleven-forty, in the middle of filling a very large order, he saw the familiar green car coming up the road. With a cry of delight, he jumped up and hurried out to meet it. As it approached, his sister Victoria waved a greeting, and her husband, Richardson, honked the horn. From the back windows Franklin's niece and nephew leaned and shouted noisily. As soon as the car stopped by his mailbox, Peter and Peggy Groundsquirrel flung open their doors and rushed him.

"Hi, Uncle Franklin!" they shouted, while hugging him and piling his arms full of paintings and clay pots they had made during the last week of school. "It's good to see you again! What's for lunch?"

"Hello yourselves," their uncle replied. "Turnip greens, apple dumplings, and cold tea."

The Twins went whooping into the house to make sure that things were pretty much the way they'd left them on their last visit, and their parents took their turn to greet Franklin more calmly.

"You're looking good," Victoria said, giving him a sisterly hug—a little awkwardly, since his arms were bristling with the Twins' heaped treasures.

"Well, I *feel* good," said Franklin.

"But you do look as though you've been putting on weight," she added.

"Maybe a little," he answered.

"I certainly have," said Richardson Groundsquirrel, hauling the children's suitcases from the trunk of the car.

"Well, you eat too much," said Victoria. "It's all those salted hickory nuts." She was a lawyer with a large, successful practice in the city; her blunt way of speaking was widely known, and other lawyers who had to deal with her approached her with respect and caution.

"I *like* hickory nuts," said Richardson. As owner of a drug store, he was able to buy nuts in large quantity at a sizable discount. "What did those children put in their suitcases?" he grumbled. "It feels like they loaded them with bricks."

"Knowing them, they probably did," said Victoria. "Do you want me to take one?"

"No, I've got 'em," said Richardson. "You take the dufflebag; it's heavy too." As they followed Franklin up the walk to the front door, Richardson said, "Peter and Peggy could hardly wait to get here. Every few minutes, they'd say 'How much longer? Can't you go any faster?' And I was driving right at the speed limit. It seemed like a very long trip."

"Three days ago," said Victoria, "they had their bags packed and ready to go."

"I'm glad they like it here," said Franklin, setting his load of artwork down on the living room table. "It means a lot to me."

"We all like it here," said Victoria. "The city has its good points, but I think a time will come when we'll be tired of it. I don't want to practice law forever; there's other things I want to do."

Richardson stacked the Twins' luggage against the wall. "Someday," he said, "we may want to come back here to live. When that time comes, do you suppose there would be a place for a druggist in Grover?"

"Why, sure," said Franklin. "Doctor Badger says we need one. The nearest is an hour away in Rawlinsville. Except for Izzy the Witch, of course—and she's not exactly a druggist."

"Ah yes, Izzy. Well, I did have something else in mind," said Richardson. "I wouldn't want to cut in on her business."

"Oh, I don't think there's any danger of that," said Franklin.

Peggy Groundsquirrel dashed through the room on her way to the telephone. "We've got to call Jamie Otter!" she cried—"and let him know we're here!"

"We'll be eating lunch in just a few minutes," said Franklin—but she was gone already. From the hall they could hear her dialing Jamie Otter's number.

"By the way," said Victoria, as the three of them moved into the kitchen, "when we came through Grover, we saw the factory that's being built across from the schoolhouse. Have you found out what it will be manufacturing?"

"No," Franklin answered, as he began setting out plates. "As I wrote you, it's being built by the Sudge-Buddle Company—whatever that is. But the word's out that they won't be hiring any workers from around here. In fact, there won't be any workers at all. Just machines."

"That's odd," said Victoria, frowning slightly. "Well, it's certainly an ugly building. It's completely ruined Farmer Green's river frontage."

"Folks aren't very happy about it," Franklin said. "And they're building it so fast! They've got shifts going all around the clock. The construction workers live in Rawlinsville; they come, and do their work, and leave, and won't even talk to Groverpeople."

"Grover seems like a strange place to build a factory," said Richardson.

"That's what we think," Franklin said. "Oh, we *have* learned that they need a big water supply for whatever it is they plan to do."

"But Little River can't provide lots of water," said Victoria.

"They plan to use Cherrystone Lake," said Franklin, setting out the glasses of iced tea.

"That may explain why they chose Grover," Richardson said thoughtfully. "Well, whatever they plan to make, the factory evidently needs a big smokestack. They've already laid the foundation for it—you can see it from the highway. It's going to be huge."

Franklin, just beginning to toss the turnip-green salad, paused and looked at his sister. "Vicki, why don't you see if you can find out what the Sudge-Buddle Company is, and what it manufactures? Lots of folks around here would like to know what they're in for."

"I've heard of the Company," she said. "It's very big and does lots of different things using many different names. I'll find out what I can."

Peggy Groundsquirrel came into the kitchen. "Jamie is coming over this afternoon," she announced. "We're going to work on the treehouse."

"The lumber is still stacked in the woodshed where you left it," said Franklin. "And I've also put fresh sand in the sandpile. Now round up Peter, wherever he is; it's time for lunch."

At four o'clock, the Twins' parents said goodbye and prepared to leave. Peggy and Peter, hard at work on the treehouse, couldn't be bothered with long farewells; from the platform overhead they just waved goodbye and promised to write. Franklin said his goodbyes at the roadside; and when the car had driven off, he ambled into the back yard and to the base of the tree where the children were working. It was a sturdy old oak with thick, heavy limbs. Looking up through the leaves, Franklin could see the underside of the boards of the main platform; from out of sight behind them came excited chattering and the sound of hammers. Jamie Otter, in bluejeans and bright red sweater, was climbing down the boards they had fixed to the tree trunk to form steps. His eyes were sparkling with excitement. "More nails," he said, holding up an empty bucket. "We ran out."

"You must be adding quite a bit on," said Franklin. "I thought the treehouse was pretty big last summer."

"Well, *we've* gotten bigger," Jamie Otter said. "We're putting in a second story."

"And making a lean-to," Peter called down, "for when it rains."

"I see," said Franklin.

"It'll be the biggest treehouse in Grover," said Jamie Otter proudly.

"I didn't know there were any others," said Franklin.

"There aren't," said Jamie. "Just ours. Do you want to go up and look around?"

"Sure," said Franklin; and while Jamie went to get more nails, Franklin climbed up the ladder-like slats to reach the platform. There, Peter, with a pencil behind his ear, was sitting on one end of a board which Peggy was sawing shorter.

"Hello, Uncle Franklin," Peggy said. "You didn't come up to help, did you?"

"No," said Franklin, "just to look around."

"Good," said Peggy.

"We'll be needing more lumber," said Peter. "Do you know where we can get any?"

Franklin thought for a minute. "Fergus Fisher may have some left over from building his workshed at the Old Hex Inn—"

"We'll ask him," said Peggy. "He can even spend the night up here if he wants."

"Maybe in exchange for that, he'd let us into his laboratory," said Peter. For years the Twins had wanted to see Fergus Fisher's laboratory. But Fergus had always said, "Nope. Off limits. Too much happening there."

Jamie Otter clambered over the edge of the platform with a bucket of nails. "There's plenty more," he said, "but these'll see us through this afternoon."

Looking up into the thick limbs above his head, Franklin began moving about the platform. "I hear you're going to put a second story on," he said.

"Right," said Peter. "In that fork up there. With another ladder—oh, look out, Uncle Franklin! Those boards aren't nailed down yet!"

Too late. Franklin's last step had brought him to the edge of the platform where, beneath his weight, the boards suddenly tilted like a seesaw. Up leaped the other ends, flinging high two hammers and a box of chocolate cookies. With a mournful shriek, their uncle plunged from sight, and the angled boards slid after him.

Thumps and grunts and crashes told his downward progress through the limbs, bonks and slithers that of the tumbling boards. Then everything was silent.

The children rushed to the edge of the platform and looked down. Far below, Franklin lay flat on his back beneath two boards, his head and shoulders pillowed in a clump of clover blossoms. "Are you all right?" Peggy called down anxiously.

"As far as I can tell," Franklin slowly replied. "The limbs broke my fall. But I think I'll just lie here for a minute till I'm sure." He moved the boards off his chest onto the grass, then lay watching the leaf-shadows flickering on the dandelions.

"You've really got to be more careful up here," Peter said. "Treehouses are tricky."

"So it would seem," said Franklin. He found a chocolate cookie nestled in the clover, picked it up, and began to nibble it thoughtfully. Jamie Otter came down the ladder to carry the fallen boards back to the treehouse. Franklin moved himself stiffly to a kneeling position and slowly got to his feet.

"You're sure you're all right?" Jamie Otter asked as he picked up the boards.

"Just shaken up," said Franklin. "A few bruises, maybe, but no bones broken. Falling was bad, but landing was worse. Here, you start up; I'll hand the boards to you."

"Aren't you coming up again?" Jamie asked.

"No, I'll wait till you get the whole thing finished."

"It'll be better when we get everything nailed down," said Jamie.

"*Much* better," Franklin nodded in vigorous agreement. "Oh, yes. No doubt about it."

While Franklin tried to prepare the evening meal, the Twins haunted the kitchen like playful elves. They hopped about underfoot, hindering their uncle, climbed on cabinets, and poked their noses into pots and pans. "Oh no!" cried Peter as he lifted a lid, "Are we having stewed turnips, Uncle Franklin? You must like stewed turnips. We always have 'em when we come to visit."

"Why, yes," said Franklin. "I *do* like stewed turnips."

Her nose wrinkled, Peggy asked, "What's for dessert?"

"Squiggleberry pie."

They clapped and cheered. It was their favorite dessert, and even made the prospect of stewed turnips bearable.

After supper, the Twins played outside in the sandpile while Franklin cleaned the kitchen. Then, when it was quite dark and they were getting ready for bed, they asked Franklin to tell them a ghost story.

"All right, if you get to bed right now." He tucked them in and pulled up a rocking chair between their beds as they snuggled deep into the covers in shivery anticipation.

"Which ghost story do you want to hear?" Franklin asked. "There's 'The Green Door,' and 'The House that Screamed,' and 'The Tower Stairs,' and 'Midnight Mist'—you've heard all those before."

"Tell us a new one!" they cried.

Franklin thought for a minute. "Have you heard the one about the Dockside Creeper?"

"Yes," said Peggy. "M. Lucius Ferret told us that one the last time we were here. Let's have a new one. You make one up."

Franklin rocked back and forth, thinking. "All right," he said, "I'll make one up. Let's call it 'The Thing in the Garden'."

They huddled down till only their eyes peeked over the quilts. Franklin stopped rocking and leaned forward, dropping his voice to a whisper. "This happened not so very long ago. On a night much like this one, with the wind sighing in the treetops, and the moon all pale and covered with clouds. It was a dark night, like this one, and the air was heavy with muggy heat.

"Near the bridge by the old ruined mill was a small house, much like this one. And in it lived an old fellow named Mose Muskrat. He had no friends, and didn't talk to other people. And nobody wanted to talk to him."

"Why didn't he have any friends?" Peggy asked.

Franklin pondered a moment, and said: "He thought folks were out to get him."

"Why was that?" asked Peter.

"Because he was greedy, and was always trying to cheat other people."

"Go on," they said.

"Well, Old Mose Muskrat lived alone in the little house; and the only thing he really cared about was his garden."

"What did he grow in his garden?" Peter asked.

"Oh, carrots and pumpkins and cabbages. Except in one section, just outside his bedroom window. And there he grew large pale white roses. He only cared

about his roses. He watered them every day and trimmed back the bushes and took good care of them. And they were the biggest, whitest, sweetest roses you ever saw. But the bushes had great long thorns."

"Lots of thorns?" asked Peggy.

"Lots of thorns," said Franklin. "And the few people that saw this garden wondered how such a sour old fellow could grow such beautiful roses. Well, anyway, on this dark night I was speaking of, old Mose had gone to bed feeling pretty good. He had just cheated the town storekeeper out of a sack of flour."

"What did he want the flour *for*?" asked Peter.

"Uh—he used it to make muffins," said Franklin. "And he ate the muffins, and went to bed feeling pleased with himself. But he couldn't get to sleep."

"Too many muffins?" asked Peggy.

"No. The wind in the trees kept him awake. It sounded like someone moaning outside. Like now." He stopped talking, and they all listened to the wind sighing in the treetops. It did sound like someone moaning. Peter and Peggy covered up their heads.

"Finally," continued Franklin, "he thought he heard a voice mixed with the moaning of the wind. He listened hard and made out what it was saying. It said, 'Mose—Mose—come with me to the mill.'"

"I wouldn't have gone," said Peter in a muffled voice.

"Me either," said Peggy.

"Well, he listened and listened. There was no doubt about it. A low moaning voice was saying, 'Mose—Mose—come with me to the mill.' He got out of bed and went to the window and looked out. What do you think he saw?"

The Twins didn't answer, holding their breaths.

"Well, he couldn't see anything at first, it was so dark. Then he made out the large white shapes of the roses. And in the middle of the rose garden, he saw a tall, dark figure standing, facing the house. Just a still, dark shape. He couldn't make it out very well. But it had arms, and legs, and a large round head. As he watched, it came closer. And the voice moaned, 'Mose—Mose—come with me to the mill.'"

"What color were its eyes?" Peggy asked.

"It didn't *have* any eyes," said Franklin.

"No eyes?" squeaked Peter.

"No eyes," said Franklin.

The Twins shivered under their covers, and Franklin—who was getting a little shivery himself—started rocking again. The friendly creaking of the chair was comfortable and reassuring. He hurried on. "Old Mose said: 'Who are you, and why should I go to the mill?' The figure didn't answer, but came closer. He could see it better now, standing tall among the white roses. It was very tall, and it was carrying—uh—a sack of wheat.

"'Go away!' Mose said, and shut the window. He went back to bed and crawled under the covers. Everything got very quiet. The wind stopped moaning in the trees. Old Mose could hear the sound of his own breathing, fast and heavy. And then—then—"

"What?" said Peggy, in a tiny voice.

"Then there was a tapping on the window, soft at first, then louder and louder. The voice said, 'Mose—Mose—come to the mill. We've got to grind the wheat.'" Franklin stopped rocking and listened: the wind had stopped, and everything was very quiet. He got up, humming a little tune, went to the window, and looked out. Nothing. He closed the window, went back to his chair, and started rocking again.

"What happened then?" Peter whispered.

Franklin tried to pull together his scattered thoughts, scrambling to remember where he had left off. "Old Mose just lay quiet with the covers pulled up over his head. *He* wasn't going to go anywhere. Then he heard the window open: a slow, slithery sound as the sash was raised. Something climbed into the room. He could hear it thumping and scraping as it came over the windowsill. Then it was in the room. And then it was beside his bed. And a loud voice said right beside his ear: 'Aren't you coming to the mill?'"

"'No!' Mose cried. 'Grind your own wheat!'"

"'Then if you aren't coming,' the voice said softly, 'I'll take the muffins!'"

Franklin paused and sat perfectly still, listening. Were those footsteps moving in the kitchen? No, it was just his imagination. He was sure it was just his imagination. He finished the story in a hurry: "Then Mose took his pillow and swung it at the sound of the voice, and he woke up, and it was morning. And he never, never cheated anyone again!" He stopped, listening for footsteps in the kitchen.

"Is that all?" the Twins asked.

"That's all," said Franklin. "Good night." He turned on the night light, patted each of them on the head, and left for the kitchen to make sure no one was walking around in his pantry.

Peter and Peggy lay quietly in the dim light. "That was a good story," Peggy said, "but I didn't like the way he ended it."

"It was awful spooky," Peter agreed, "but he finished it too fast. I'll tell you what *I* think. I think Uncle Franklin got scared by it, too."

"I think it scared him more than it scared us," Peggy said. They were quiet for a minute, then they both sat up and looked at each other grinning. They both spoke at once: "Why don't we—" "Wouldn't it be fun to—" They laughed excitedly, shook hands, and climbed out of bed.

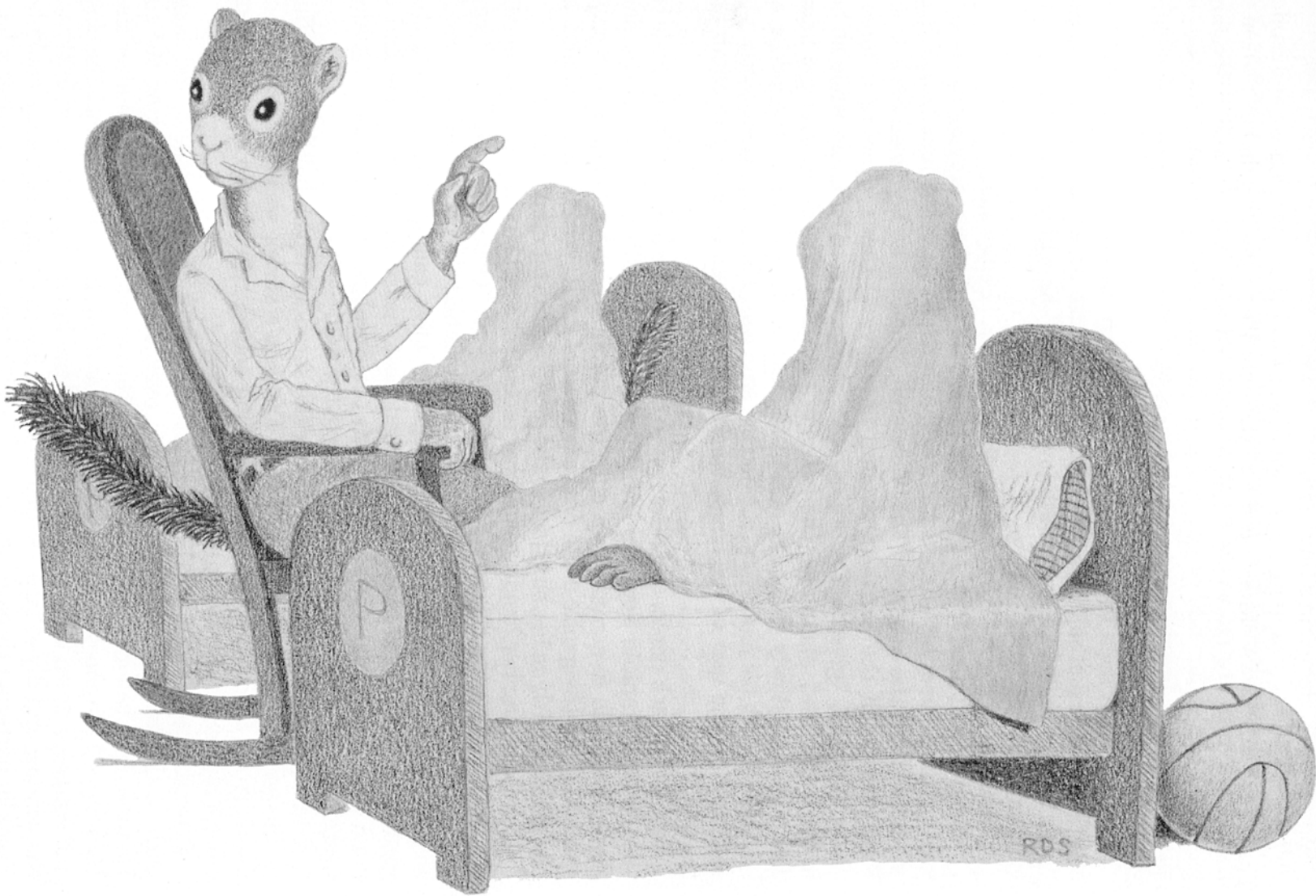
Peggy went to the bedroom door and listened into the hall. "Uncle Franklin is in the kitchen," she whispered. "I hear him opening and closing cupboards."

They huddled for a quick conference, then Peggy went back to the door, and Peter pulled the sheet off his bed. "We'll need our basketball, too," he said, "and a pillowcase."

"Uncle Franklin has gone to the living room," Peggy said. "He's sitting down in the wicker chair by the window. I can tell by the squeaks."

"That'll make it easier," said Peter. "He's right where we want him."

They opened their bedroom window slowly, to make no noise. Then, in their



pajamas, they climbed out into the warm night with the bedsheet, pillowcase, and basketball.

"I'll get the stepladder from the woodshed," said Peter; and while he was doing that, Peggy ran around to the front of the house and peeked in the living room window. On the far side of the room, in his large wicker chair, Franklin was sitting near the fireplace reading the *Grover Gazette*. The window beside him was slightly open.

Peggy hurried back to report. Peter had set up the short stepladder and was stuffing the basketball into the pillowcase. "Just as we thought," she said. "He's sitting next to the side window." "Good," he whispered. "We'll put the ladder right beneath it."

"I'll get up on the roof to call down the chimney," Peggy said.

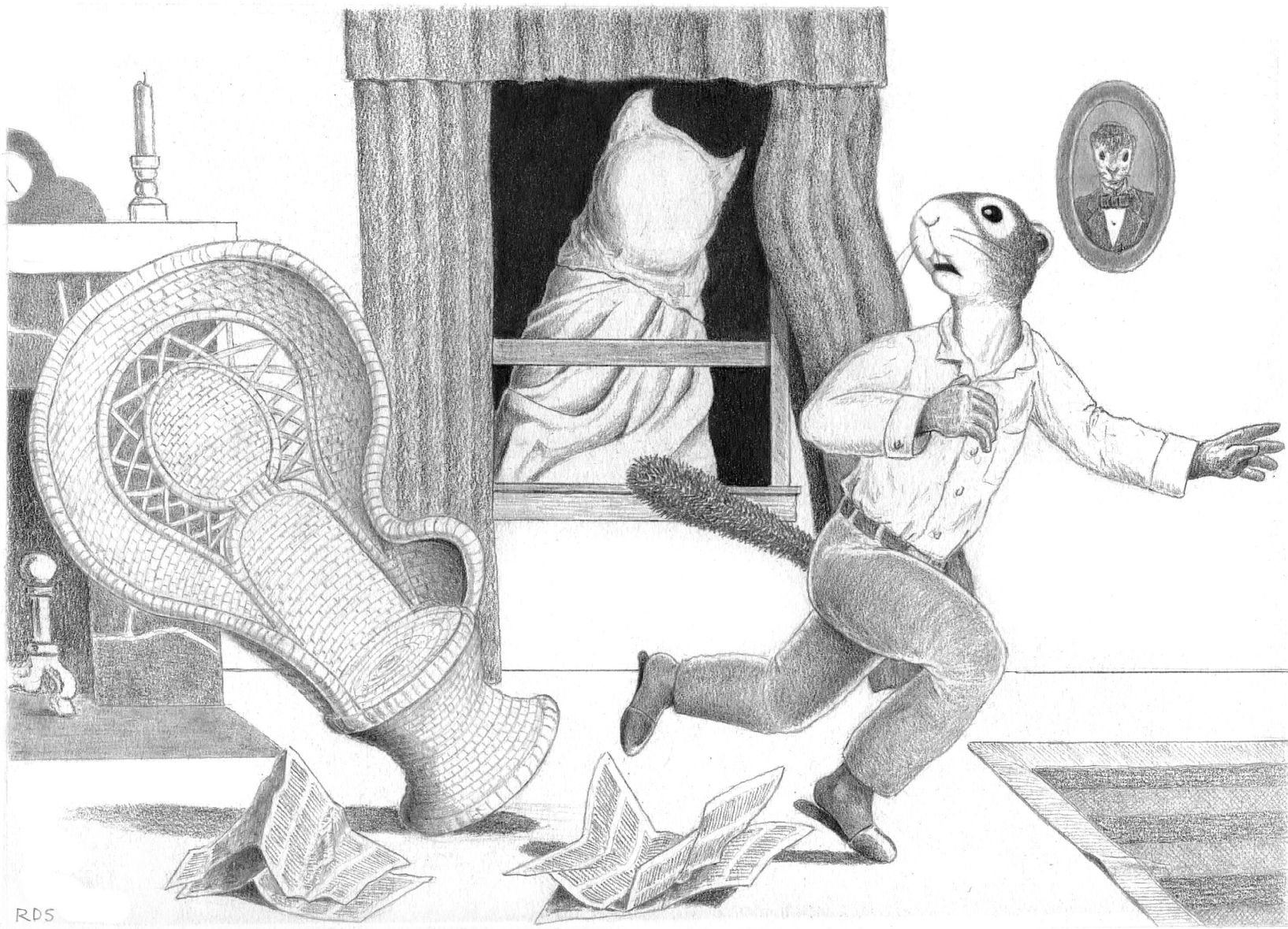
"Get me ready first," said Peter. On his hands and knees, staying close to the wall of the house, he pushed the stepladder into position just beneath the window. "Now the bedsheet," he whispered, when he had crawled back to her. Peggy wrapped the bedsheet around him several times, draping it loosely. "Now," he said, "give me the basketball." She gave it to him, and while he held it above his head, she pulled the edges of the pillowcase down over his hands. Then, moving slowly along the side of the house, she led him to the ladder and let him feel with his foot where the bottom step was. He stood there quietly while she raced to the rear of the house where there was an easy way to climb onto the roof.

Beside the back porch, and attached to the wall of the house, was the little tool shed where Franklin kept his lawn mower. By standing on top of the shed, Peggy was able to scramble up onto the porch roof; from there, it was only a small jump to the gentle slope of the houseroof itself. Within half a minute, she had padded softly in her bare feet to the mouth of the fat stone chimney.

There, cupping her hands around her mouth, she leaned over the dark opening and boomed into the chimney a low moaning wail: "Oooooooooooooh!" As it came from the fireplace at Franklin's elbow, the moan had the hollow, echo-y sound of something old, and cold, and not altogether alive calling from inside a stone vault. Outside, Peter, muffled in his bedsheet, heard Franklin's gasp and the crackle of a clutched newspaper. From the fireplace came another shuddery, moaning cry: "Franklin—come with me to the mill!"

Peter sprang onto the ladder, holding the shrouded basketball high, and flung at the window a blood-chilling shriek. Franklin's shriek was even louder—and immediately followed by frantic scrabbling sounds, the thump and clatter of a chair falling over, and the thuds of running feet.

Peter jumped down from the ladder, struggled out of the bedsheet, and dashed back to the bedroom window as Peggy, overhead, came racing along the roof. He tossed the ball and the bedclothes into the room and scrambled in after them. He whipped the sheet into place on his bed, stuffed the basketball into the closet, and snuggled down under the covers. A second later, Peggy climbed in through the window and dived into her bed. As they lay there giggling, they could hear Franklin pattering through the house opening and closing doors. After a bit, he



came into their room. "Are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

"Sure," said Peter. "Except we're having a little trouble getting to sleep. That was a scary story, Uncle Franklin."

"Uh—well—" said their uncle. "Did you hear anything strange? Any odd noises?"

"No," said Peggy. "Did you?"

Franklin didn't answer at once, but padded nervously about, peering first out their window, then into their closet. "I thought I heard someone calling," he said finally. "I guess my imagination was playing tricks on me."

"Maybe it's the stewed turnips," Peter suggested.

"Well, I think the story I told you kind of scared *me* a little," Franklin said. "Next time I'll tell you one of the *old* ones. We all know how *they* turn out. I think I like those best."

"It sure was good squiggleberry pie we had for dessert," said Peggy.

Chapter 5

AT TEN the next morning, Arabella Raccoon came to Franklin's house to take the children fossil-hunting. Jamie Otter was with her, chatting happily and trailing little puffs of dust as he skipped along the road. Arabella had left a note on the front window of the shoestore: CLOSED. I'VE GONE TO THE BLUFFS. Her customers would know what that meant, and be satisfied. Fossil-hunting was serious business; folks could buy their shoes some other time. She'd even cancelled Jamie Otter's piano lesson for that afternoon, telling him "One is just as important as the other." Jamie was quite happy with the trade.

Peggy and Peter Groundsquirrel ran to meet them when they saw them coming. Arabella was amazed how much they'd grown since their last visit, and she dutifully admired their new tennis shoes. By the time they got back to the house, Franklin was waiting for them beside the mailbox.

"You're going to have a handful!" he called to Arabella. "Peter and Peggy have been dancing a jig all morning long."

"Well," said Arabella with a smile, "Jamie danced one all the way from Grover. I don't mind having a 'handful', as you call it—as long as we find some good fossils." She squinted upward with a practiced eye. "It's going to be hot. No clouds. Should be good hunting." She was wearing her blue baseball cap; a pair of binoculars hung around her neck, and a canvas specimen bag was slung over one shoulder. "Now," she said to the children, "to business. Peter, you carry the binoculars. Peggy, you take the notebooks and pencils. Jamie, you carry the rock hammers and chisels. I'll bring the lunch—" she patted the bag—"It's the heaviest."

"What did you bring to eat?" Peter asked.

"Cheese sandwiches, carrot sticks, and pink lemonade."

"How many sandwiches are there?" Jamie Otter asked. He hoped there would be two apiece.

"Enough," said Arabella. "You'll see."

"Have a good time!" Franklin called after them as they moved off down the road. "Be careful climbing around on those rocks!"

"Always have been," Arabella muttered under her breath. "Never lost a hunter yet."

As they walked toward Maple Crossing, Peggy and Peter told the others about the trick they had played on Franklin the night before. Jamie Otter, who'd played a good number of tricks himself, laughed so hard that he tumbled down and rolled about in the wildflowers that grew beside the road. "Oh, I wish I'd been there!" he gasped. "To see his face! Didn't he ever guess it was you?"

"Nope," Peter said proudly. "We'll tell him about it, though. Not now—but in a few days, when he'll be able to see how funny it was."

"Don't be too sure he hasn't already figured it out," said Peggy. "You forgot to put the stepladder away, and he found it outside his window this morning."

"He didn't say anything about it," Peter said quickly, a little crestfallen.

"No, but I could see what he was thinking," said Peggy.

"Maybe he was thinking that ghosts use stepladders!" Jamie Otter laughed.

"Uncle Franklin knows better than that!" Peggy grinned.

"Then he knows more than *I* know," Arabella said abruptly. "Why shouldn't ghosts use stepladders?"

"You don't believe in ghosts, do you?" Jamie asked her in disbelief.

"Never had any good reason not to," she answered.

"Have you ever seen one?" Jamie persisted.

"No," she answered, "but there are many things I haven't seen which I'm sure *do* exist. Like the Tower of London, or the Red Sea. Miss Proudie Fairblossom has seen both of them, and I'll take her word for it that they're really there. Now, some people say they've seen ghosts. So where's my reason to think they don't exist?"

"Oh foo! there's no such thing as a *real* ghost," Jamie declared, as though saying it loudly proved it once and for all.

"What makes you so sure?" Arabella asked. "How do you *know*?"

That stopped him. "Well, *I* never saw one," he said, after a minute. "And for *me* to believe in 'em, I'd have to see one."

Arabella asked, "Did you ever see an atom?"

"No, but they're too small to see."

"Do you think atoms exist?"

"Why, yes—I guess so. Sure."

"But you've never seen one."

"No—"

"Then how do you *know* they exist?" Arabella asked. "Maybe they don't."

This puzzled Jamie into silence; he glanced at the Twins to see if they could give him any help. But Peter and Peggy were being very careful not to get involved. A few steps ahead, they were pitching pebbles at the trunks of trees. Peggy looked back at him and showed her teeth in a broad smile. Jamie was on his own.

"Well, I've—I've seen pictures of atoms," he said finally, as Arabella waited, "—you know, drawings—diagrams!"

"Ever seen drawings of ghosts?"

"Yes, in books of ghost stories," Jamie said.

"Well then," said Arabella, "if the drawings you've seen make you believe that atoms exist, why don't the drawings of ghosts make you think that *they* exist? And if they do exist, why shouldn't they use stepladders?"

While Jamie was pondering this, the road led them out of the trees into the meadow which contained Parker Packrat's junk sculpture. Peter raised the binoculars and focused them on the upper levels of the tower.

"Look, there's Parker, way up near the top."

"Let me see," said Arabella, taking the binoculars. "Hmmm. He's making a network of metal pipes. Always something new. I wonder if he'll ever be done with it?"

Jamie Otter wasn't ready to let their previous discussion drop. "It's not just drawings that make me believe in atoms," he said. "Scientists are able to *do* things to 'em—split 'em up, and start chain reactions—"

"Well," said Arabella, "some people claim that *ghosts* have done things to *them*. And remember, some folks say they've *seen* them."

"M. Lucius Ferret says his cousin once saw a ghost," said Peggy. "And he has lots of books that talk about 'em. But when M. Lucius tells us ghost stories, I never know for sure whether he's telling us about real things, or about things he's read in his books."

"In a way," said Arabella, "with M. Lucius, it amounts to the same thing. He lives in many different worlds at the same time, and *all* of them are real."

They arrived at Maple Crossing, and the children waved to Prosper the Cat, who sat sunning himself in one of the rocking chairs on Izzy's front porch. "Hi, Prosper!" Peggy called. "How are you, and how's Izzy?"

With his eyes half-closed, Prosper replied, "We're both as well as could be expected. Are you going up to the Lake?" They said they were. "Strange doings up there," he said. "Watch yourselves."

Arabella stopped and leaned on Izzy's gatepost. "What do you mean, Prosper?"

His hands remained cupped over the gold head of his walking stick, which stood between his knees. "People," he answered. "Noise. Machines."

"Well, what are they doing?" she asked with a frown.

"That's not clear yet," Prosper answered. "It's the Sudge-Buddle Company. Watch yourselves."

He closed his eyes and offered nothing more; so they went on, quite disturbed at what he'd said, and wondering what they'd find waiting for them. Crossing the road, Arabella led the children to her parents' house. Rebecca Raccoon was writing a story for the *Gazette* when they knocked. She opened the door with papers in her hand and a pencil behind her ear. "Why, what a surprise!" she cried. "Thorstein, come see who's here!"

Arabella's father hurried in from the kitchen wiping his hands on a rag. "Been painting the woodwork," he explained, peering at the visitors a little nearsightedly. "Well, if it isn't Jamie Otter and the Twins! Franklin said you'd be coming this week. How're you doing, Peggy? Peter? And how's your mom and dad?"

"Just fine," said Peter. "Arabella's taking us fossil-hunting."

"She's been planning to for a long time," said Thorstein.

"I didn't intend to stop here today," said Arabella. "But Prosper just told us something odd, and I wanted to ask you about it. He said that people are up at the Lake with machines. Do you know what they're doing?"

"No," said Rebecca, "we hadn't heard a thing about it. Maybe there's a story in it for the *Gazette*."

"We haven't been up there for quite awhile," said Thorstein. "It might be folks from the Sudge-Buddle Company; they own the Lake now."

"Prosper said it was them," said Peggy.

"And he told us to watch ourselves," said Jamie Otter.

"Huh! Watch yourselves?" Thorstein rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "Do you want me to go along with you? The painting can wait."

"No, I don't think that'll be necessary," said Arabella. "We can take care of ourselves. I just thought you might know something more. We'll let you know what we find out."

They said goodbye and continued on their way. Once beyond Maple Crossing, the road wound deep into the Chickaloga Forest, climbing higher, ever higher through tall, thick-standing trees. The dense foliage overhead created a dusky green gloom on the forest floor. But here and there, shafts of sunlight beaming through checkered their path with dancing spots of brightness. As the road wound upward, gray limestone boulders began to appear, shouldering out of the dark leaf-mold to crowd the trees. The rocks were encrusted with patches of gray-green lichen, and cushioned with pads of velvety moss.

"This is my favorite part of the woods," said Arabella, pausing and gently touching a clump of shaggy emerald moss. "It's always so quiet here. Just the birds singing—and sometimes, after a wet spell, the trickling of falling water."

They rounded a bend and were suddenly stopped in their tracks by three strands of barbed wire stretched tightly across the road. "What's this!" Arabella cried. "There's never been a fence here!"

A freshly-painted yellow sign was nailed to one of the newly-driven fenceposts:

KEEP OUT. PRIVATE PROPERTY.

THE SUDGE-BUDDLE COMPANY

Arabella stood looking at the sign for a long time.

"Does this mean we can't go to the Lake?" Jamie Otter asked.

"Or hunt fossils on the bluffs?" asked Peter.

"It means they don't want us to," said Arabella grimly. "But we aren't going to cause any trouble. We'll be minding our own business. Hunh! Keep out, indeed!" She led the children around the fence, which was only as long as the width of the road, and urged them onward. "Farmer Green wouldn't like this at all," she muttered, more to herself than the children. "He felt that the Lake and the woods belong to everybody."

"Why do the Sudge-Buddles feel different about it?" Peggy asked.

"Do they think we're going to *eat* their fossils?" said Peter.

"It's not the fossils they care about," Arabella said darkly. "I'll bet they don't even know they've got 'em. But they care about *something*. And I want to know what it is."

As the road continued to climb, the rocks became larger—some of them, like steps in a giant staircase, great slabs thicker than Arabella was tall. She motioned the children off the road, and they all began scrambling up the hillside, threading through the underbrush and thinning trees, mounting the staircase slab by slab, till suddenly the woods ended, and they were walking in the open, under the blue sky, on a high, flat tabletop of stone which ended abruptly at a knife-edge cliff. Far below, surrounded by the Chickalooga Forest, was the broad blue expanse of Cherrystone Lake, its surface laced with tiny ripples glinting in the sunlight.

Arabella stood peering at the far shore. "What's going on over there?" she inquired. "What are those people doing?"

Peter focused the binoculars on the distant figures. "There's about ten of 'em," he said. "But I can't tell what they're doing."

"Here, let me see." Arabella took the binoculars and studied the group for a full minute. "They're building a shed of some sort—like a tiny house—right at the edge of the water. There's some machinery on the bank. And a big pipe, raised on legs, heading off downhill through the woods towards Grover."

"Are they from the Sudge-Buddle Company?" Peggy asked.

"Must be," Arabella replied. "Looks like they're building a pipeline—probably to take water out of the Lake and send it to the factory." She gave the binoculars to Peggy so the children could take turns looking, then said briskly: "Well, we've got work to do. Let's have our lunch, and then start finding fossils." They sat on the smooth gray rock, and Arabella opened her specimen bag and brought out the food and the jug of pink lemonade.

They were all quite hungry. And sure enough, there were two sandwiches apiece. While they ate, Arabella's excitement grew. "Here we sit," she said, "high above everything—on a rock that once upon a time was a thick layer of mud at the bottom of a sea!"

"How long ago was that?" asked Jamie.

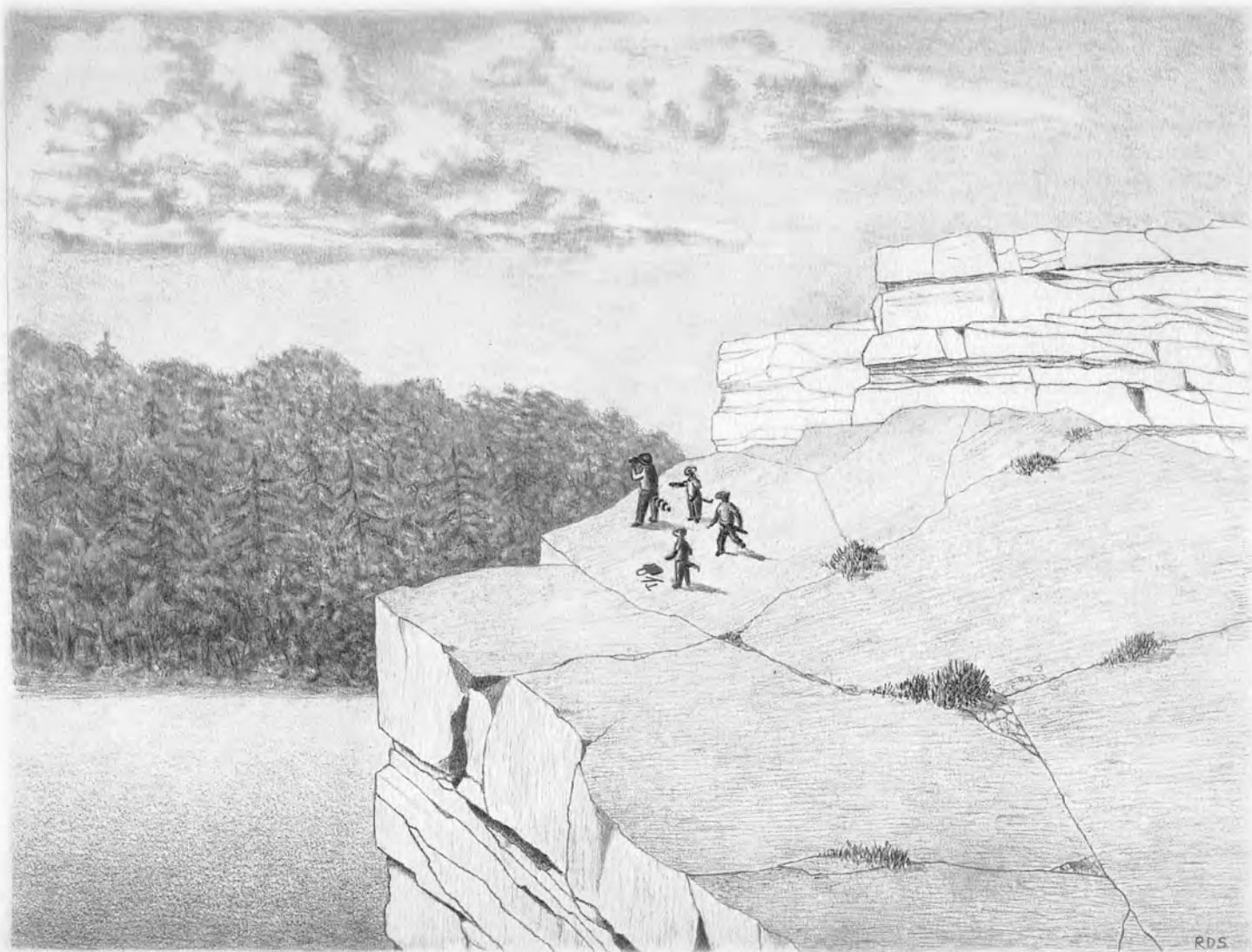
"About two hundred and fifty million years," said Arabella. "But that's just here at the *top* of the cliff. It took about three hundred million years for the *whole* bluff to form. This area was a sea bottom at several different times, as the land rose and sank, and the water came, and went, and came again. Each time, new mud was formed, and dead plants and animals sank to the bottom. So the whole bluff is just old mud, layer on layer, turned to stone, along with the plants and animals embedded in it. The farther down the cliff we go, the older the stone is. Down near the bottom, it's about five hundred million years old."

"That's why the fossils down near the bottom are older than these up here at the top," said Peggy.

"Right. And that's why the farther down we go, the older and more primitive are the forms of life we find."

"Going down the cliff is like a trip backward through time!" Jamie exclaimed.

"That's a good way to think of it," said Arabella. "And in each layer, the fossils tell us what kinds of creatures were living at the time it was formed. Look here—" she pointed to the rock surface they were sitting on— "See, just every-



where are shells and bits of coral, tiny round segments of crinoid stems like little buttons—all embedded in the stone. There—the track of a sea-worm! Further down the bluff are other things: snails, and sponges, ancient clams, and trilobites!”

“Let’s start hunting!” said Peter.

“We’ll go down to the base of the cliff,” Arabella said, putting the lemonade jug into her specimen bag. “There should be lots of loose fossils weathered out of the stone by freezing and thawing, and the spring rains. Every summer there’s a new crop for hunting.” They backtracked a little and began climbing down the cliff, hopping and scrambling among the shelves of layered limestone, lower and lower toward the lake.

At the foot of the cliff, a rocky beach sloped steeply into the water. Standing among the tumbled boulders with the cliff towering high above them, Arabella gave the children some final instructions. “Dig in the soft parts,” she said. “Go slow, and look sharp at every piece of rock you pry loose, no matter how small. Any one of them might contain a fossil. And be sure to look under your feet; there’s bound to be a lot of them on the ground.”

The Twins and Jamie Otter each took a rock chisel and began digging at the wall of the cliff. Bending low—almost on her hands and knees—and humming a melody from the second movement of the flute sonata, Arabella prowled along its base, her sharp eyes missing nothing. Every now and then she’d snatch up a fragment of rock and, after examining it closely, either throw it away, or carefully wrap it in a piece of newspaper and drop it into the specimen bag.

The children laughed and chatted and joked as they explored the cliff face. The hunting was good; in twenty minutes’ time they each had a small pile of specimens.

“Oh look, Arabella!” Peggy cried, holding up a small piece of stone. “Is this a trilobite? It looks like the one you found last summer.”

Arabella hurried over and held it to the sunlight. “Yes it is,” she said, “and a fine specimen! One of the best I’ve seen from Cherrystone Lake. Congratulations, Peggy!”

“How old is it?” Peggy asked, fairly dancing with excitement.

“Oh, I’d guess four hundred million years,” said Arabella.

As he and Jamie looked at Peggy’s trilobite, Peter felt a twinge of envy. “I wish *I* could find one,” he grumbled, staring at the little heap of fossils he had collected on a piece of newspaper. “All I’ve found is old seashells and crinoid stems and pieces of coral.” He went back to work, shuffling along with a dejected slump, kicking small rocks out of his way.

Arabella carefully wrapped Peggy’s trilobite and put it into the bag. “Keep looking,” she called after Peter. “You never know what will turn up.”

The afternoon sun was hot as they worked their way along the cliff. Around two o’clock, Jamie Otter went down to the Lake to cool himself off. The others, hard at work, were not at all surprised when he waded out from shore; they knew he loved the water, and, if anything, were surprised that it had taken so long for him to get there. Jamie was the best swimmer at Grover School and captain of

the swimming team. Matthew Muddie, who besides teaching school was also swimming coach, said Jamie's skill came naturally; the other pupils said it came from all the practice he got. For Jamie was in the water whenever he got the chance. In fact, if any was present, it was hard to keep him out of it.

Arabella was just pouring Peggy and Peter some of the remaining lemonade when they heard a shout from the water. Turning, they saw Jamie Otter splashing through the shallows. He gained the beach and began running toward them over the rocks, his face anxious and frightened. "What's wrong?" Arabella called. Jamie motioned breathlessly over his shoulder; they looked in the direction he pointed and saw what had disturbed him. Some distance away, but coming fast, a dumpy man in a gray uniform was puffing up the slope toward them. Turning to Peter and Peggy as Jamie reached them, Arabella said "Hurry! Get your fossils into the bag." Then they waited as the man climbed sweating up the steep slope.

Fairly close now, he shouted angrily: "You there! What are you doing?"

They didn't answer, but just watched as he approached shaking his finger at them. "You're trespassing on private property!" he shouted, red in the face and shiny with sweat. "What are you doing here?"

The children crowded close to Arabella. She calmly closed the specimen bag and adjusted its strap more comfortably on her shoulder. "We're hunting fossils," she answered him, in her own good time.

"Well, you've got to leave right now!" the man shouted, as he reached them. "This land belongs to the Sudge-Buddle Company, and nobody's allowed on it. Didn't you see the NO TRESPASSING signs?"

"This is the best fossil hunting ground in the whole region," said Arabella. "We're not doing any harm to the Sludge-Bubble Company—"

"Sudge-Buddle!" the man corrected her.

"Well, whatever it calls itself," said Arabella. "I don't see why we should have to leave."

The man stared at her as though he couldn't believe his ears. "You've got to leave because you're on private property!" he shouted. "I got my orders. You get off this land right now, or I'll call the sheriff and have you arrested!"

Arabella stared at him blankly as though she couldn't believe *her* ears, and then she turned to the children. "We'd better go," she said crisply. They got their tools together and dusted their clothes and started walking away from the man, not bothering to look back at him. They were all very quiet as they went down the road.

But when they were well out of his hearing, Arabella said: "Now I *really* want to know what they're doing down by the Lake with their machines and their pipeline. Come on, let's go talk to Izzy and Prosper."



Chapter 6

HER FACE like a thunderstorm, Izzy the Witch marched briskly up the main street of Grover. Seeing her expression, people didn't venture to say "Good afternoon," but simply stayed out of her way. Prosper trailed behind, walking much faster than usual in an effort to keep up. Deeply offended at having to hurry along in so undignified a manner, he nonetheless hadn't asked her to slow down. When they reached Simon Skunk's Furniture Store, Izzy flung the door wide and whirled in with a rush. Straight through the showroom she marched, and into the workshop at the rear, where Simon was polishing the top of a walnut table.

He looked up startled as they entered. "Have you heard the news?" Izzy asked.

Simon paused in his polishing. "What news?"

"Arabella and Jamie and Peter and Peggy were chased away from Cherrystone Lake by the Sudge-Buddle Company!"

"Why, whatever for?" Simon gasped.

"The Lake is off limits to everyone now," Izzy snapped. "Fences are up. And signs that say 'KEEP OUT.' Arabella's not one to get upset easily, but she was furious when she brought the children back to the store. They were only hunting fossils, Simon. And the Sudge-Buddle man said he'd call the sheriff if they didn't leave!"

"But why should they *have* to?" Simon cried in confusion. "They weren't doing any harm. Does it really mean that none of us can go up to the Lake anymore?"

"So it would seem," said Izzy. "According to Arabella, the Company is building something on the western shore. A little shed, and something that looks like a pipeline."

Simon sat down in a fine oak rocking chair and tapped his fingers on the smooth-sanded arm. "A pipeline," he repeated. "So they *are* going to use the Lake for a water supply, just as we'd heard."

"That's what it sounds like to me," said Izzy, perching on the edge of a table. "It would be easy to pipe the lakewater to the factory—it's all downhill. The Lake is fed with springs at the bottom, so would be a good water supply. No, I don't think it's likely they'd try to pipe anything uphill from the factory into the Lake." She paused, scowling thoughtfully, and turned to her companion. "Prosper, maybe we'd better go up to the Lake tonight and see for ourselves what's going on."

Prosper half closed his eyes, and nodded slowly.

"Now," she said, folding her arms, "what should we do about their chasing

Arabella and the children away from the bluffs?"

"What *can* we do?" Simon asked. "It's their property. The law's on their side: if they want to keep people out, they can."

"Well, *something's* got to be done!" Izzy cried, becoming very excited. "Arabella's got to be able to get to the fossils!"

The telephone rang, and Simon answered it distractedly. "What's that?" he shouted into the receiver. "Okay, okay, I'll be right down." He hung up the phone and faced them with a look of complete bewilderment. "That was Parker! He's in jail, and wants me to come down and bail him out!"

Prosper's eyes popped wide open, and Izzy gasped, "In jail! Why is he in jail?"

"I don't know—he didn't say." Simon quickly went to a drawer and pulled out an old sock full of money. "Will you watch the store while I'm gone?"

"No," said Izzy, "we're coming too!"

The three of them hurried up the street to the jail, which was next to the *Gazette* office one block away. Across a vacant lot, they could see the late afternoon sunlight slanting through the elm trees in Grover Park, where children were playing on swings and teeter-totters.

When they arrived at the jail, Sheriff Badger—cousin of the village doctor—was sitting behind his desk looking very unhappy. "Well, you got here quick," he said as they entered. "Parker's back there in the cell."

"What's he done?" Simon asked. "Why is he locked up?"

"He's charged with theft," the sheriff said, looking at a paper before him. "The complaint says he stole eight lengths of pipe and some copper tubing from the construction site of the Sudge-Buddle factory; it was signed by Mr. Snade, the factory manager. I had to arrest Parker, I had no choice."

"I brought some money," Simon said. "Can I bail him out?"

"Sure. But Parker had better get a lawyer fast. The Sudge-Buddle people mean business."

Simon paid the bail, and Sheriff Badger went into the back room with his keys. A minute later he returned with Parker Packrat, who seemed stunned and puzzled.

"Thanks for coming down to get me out," he said, smiling at each of them. "I've never been arrested before. I can't understand it. All I did was—"

Sheriff Badger interrupted him with a frantic wave of his hand. "That's enough! I don't want to hear anything about it. You're scheduled to appear before the judge in Rawlinsville a week from Wednesday. Then you can plead 'guilty' or 'not guilty' to the charge. But don't talk about it in front of me."

He waved them out of his office and went back to his desk, looking even sadder than before. Just last night he had been playing checkers with Parker at the Old Hex Inn.

"I really appreciate your help," Parker continued, as they went down the street. "I'll pay you back, Simon."

"That's all right. Tell us what happened, Parker."

"Well, I was at the factory one night just looking around, and I saw lots of stuff that I needed for my sculpture. It was lying all over the place. So on the



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next two nights I came back and loaded up the wagon with some pipes that were stacked on the ground, and some copper tubing. They were just what I needed for something I'm doing on the Tenth Level. It all relates to the bathtub, which will be in the center—"

"So you did take the pipes?" Simon broke in. "Like they say you did?"

"Sure," said Parker, "they had so many—stacked up in great piles—and a whole lot of tubing. I don't see how they ever could have used all those pipes. I only took eight. But—" he added in a hurt tone "—I didn't *steal* them. I traded something of equal value for everything I took."

"What did you leave in their place?" Izzy asked.

"Well, some very good stuff," said Parker. "An ironing board, and a bucket with a lovely star-shaped hole in the bottom—which I *could* have used on the Seventh Level—and a couple of lawnmower wheels—an old fashioned type that you can't find anymore—and a piano stool, and a gilt picture frame which was chipped only just a little bit on one edge, and the steering wheel from Farmer Ben's old pickup truck—that was really a prize—and the bronze cash register from Elisha Rabbit's pool hall, and part of a rocking chair that had belonged to Priscilla Possum's grandfather."

"I remember that chair," said Simon. "The wood had a very nice grain."

"It was a comfortable chair, too," said Izzy, "until that day Priscilla's grandmother was sitting in it when she fell off the front porch."

"And what did you leave in place of the copper tubing?" inquired Prosper, tucking his walking stick under one arm.

"A stone flowerpot that would have been very useful on the Eighth Level. And it was awful heavy. It took a lot of work to get it to the factory site."

"But in spite of all that," said Izzy angrily, "the Sudge-Buddle Company didn't see that you'd made them a fair trade?"

"I guess not," Parker said sadly. "And now they call me a thief! That really hurts. Why, we Packrats have *always* given fair trade! It's a matter of family honor." He buried his face in his hands. "It's a matter of principle!"

"There, there," said Izzy, patting his shoulder. "They just don't understand."

"You'd better get yourself a lawyer," Simon advised. "You'll need a good defense in court. Maybe Franklin's sister could take your case."

"I'll talk to Franklin," Parker said.

Simon closed up his store and went with the three of them toward Franklin's house. As they were passing the Old Hex Inn, they saw Peter and Peggy Groundsquirrel playing hide-and-seek with Jamie Otter in the flower garden. "Franklin may be here, too," Parker said. "Let's stop and see. I'd like a mug of honey brew in any case."

In the main public room, they found a large crowd listening to Arabella tell how she and the children had been chased from Cherrystone Lake. Pausing just inside the door till she finished, they were glad to see that Franklin Groundsquirrel was one of the group.

The crowd was very much disturbed by what Arabella was saying. They listened silently for the most part, giving their full attention—though there were

occasional groans and shocked whispers. When she was done, they all burst into an excited buzz and chatter, trying to decide what it all meant, and what should be done about it.

Perched on a light fixture above Arabella's head, Oliphant Owl fluttered his wings nervously and cried: "I don't understand it! You weren't bothering them or doing anything wrong. Why would they chase you away for hunting *fossils*?"

Arabella shook her head. "It wasn't for hunting fossils. It was for trespassing on their land, for being where they didn't want us to be."

"But why didn't they want you there?" Oliphant said. "They aren't using that land for anything. Why should they *care* if you're up at the bluffs? It just doesn't make sense."

"Farmer Green would be furious if he knew what was happening!" said Thaddeus Higgins.

Roscoe Lynx, his hands tucked into the bib of his apron, was frowning angrily. "I can't believe the Sudge-Buddle man would've actually had you *arrested*, Arabella. Like you were a criminal or something. Surely he was just trying to scare you—don't you think?"

"That's not my impression," said Arabella. "No, he'd have called the sheriff if we hadn't left. He said he had his orders."

"Then what we should do," said Elizabeth H., with the crisp determination she was known for, "is go straight to the man who gave the orders and tell him what we think of his rules and his orders. Convince him he's wrong. Who would that be? The factory manager?"

"He might see we don't mean any harm," said Priscilla Possum eagerly. "And if he saw there wasn't any need to worry, he might be willing to let us in for certain things like fossil hunting, or picnics, or boating—just so we asked his permission first!"

"And it may be just a misunderstanding," said Ambrose Fieldmouse. "You know—a rule much too general to apply in all cases. Maybe the manager would see that if we brought it to his attention."

"I think we should tell him we don't like his rules," said Elizabeth H. And she flung her sketchbook down on an empty table.

At this point Ambrose Fieldmouse noticed Izzy and Prosper, Simon and Parker standing near the door. He hurried over to the newcomers and said, "Have you heard what happened to Arabella and the children up at the Lake?"

"Yes, and we have some news for *you*," said Izzy. She raised her voice so the whole crowd could hear: "Parker was arrested and thrown in jail by the Sudge-Buddle Company!"

A shout of dismay went up from the group, a clamor of questions. Izzy raised her hand for silence, then quickly told the story of Parker's arrest and his having to go to court a week from Wednesday. They were all shocked. Elizabeth H. said loudly, "Well, now we see how far we'd get talking to the manager!" Priscilla Possum was too stunned to say anything. M. Lucius Ferret required another mug of honey brew.

"We were wondering if your sister could be Parker's lawyer," Simon said to

Franklin. "I'll call her tonight," Franklin said.

M. Lucius Ferret, somewhat recovered from his state of shock, drew upon his knowledge of the law and volunteered: "As for pleading 'guilty' or 'not guilty' before the judge, you'd better wait for your lawyer's advice, Parker. 'Not guilty' would give you a trial by jury, and the Sudge-Buddle Company would have to prove you stole the pipes. If you plead 'guilty,' you're simply admitting that the charge against you is true, and you'll get no trial."

"But they're calling me a thief!" said Parker. "I'm not going to plead guilty to *that!* I gave fair exchange for everything I took."

"*More* than fair exchange, if you ask me," muttered Izzy.

"I should file a complaint myself," said Oscar Otter, "and charge the Sudge-Buddle Company with disturbing the peace. They work on that factory day and night. Lights blazing, machinery clanking and thumping, trucks roaring. We haven't been able to get a good night's sleep since they started. And their trash keeps floating down Little River past my back door."

"He's right!" said Tonia Turtle. "Except with us, the trash goes by the *front* door. Why, the river is so dirty that Tim and I don't like to go swimming anymore!"

"Why *don't* you file a complaint?" M. Lucius suggested. "They shouldn't be allowed to disrupt the whole neighborhood."

Oscar nodded. "I'll talk to Victoria about it."

Roscoe Lynx began wiping down the counter, his face very troubled and grave. Priscilla Possum leaned toward him and said despairingly, "Where's all this going to end? Roscoe, what's happening to us?"

"I don't know," Roscoe replied. "Izzy and Prosper are going up to the Lake tonight to see what's being built at the western end. Maybe they'll learn something."

"I hope they don't run into trouble," Priscilla said fervently.

Prosper the Cat turned from the window. "It's a dark night, Izzy. Thick clouds playing hide-and-seek with the moon."

"Good," said Izzy, as she put the last items into a wicker basket on her kitchen table. "The darker the better. I think I've got everything packed: flashlight, chalk, collecting jars, fast-growing potion, seeds of the night-creeping arbutus. Are you ready to go?"

"Ready," said Prosper, standing before the mirror to put on his long, black cape. "Then let's go," said Izzy.

They left the store and hurried into the woods behind Maple Crossing. They went straight toward the western end of the Lake, moving through the dense underbrush on one of the trails Izzy used when she went out collecting herbs and mushrooms. Crickets were chirping, and dew was just beginning to form on the leaves and grass. Now and then the moon gleamed through the branches

overhead; but when it did, it only made the shadows darker where they walked. They did not need the flashlight, for Prosper could see quite well without it, and Izzy was so familiar with the path that she could have walked it with her eyes closed. Only six times did she use the light—to check the growth of certain favorite patches of fungi, and to gather some herbs. While Prosper held the flashlight, she would crouch down and gently nip off the leaves—pluck! pluck!—and put them into the collection jars, singing a quiet little song:

“Bloodwort, toadflax, Queen Anne’s lace,
 Mix with oil of arrowroot;
 Grind with dried nasturtium,
 Monk’s foot, basil, licorice;
 Boil with powdered peppermint,
 Fennel, sassafras, and thyme;
 Cool with juice of bladderwort;
 Cork with poppy seeds and chervil;
 Store it in a warm dark place.”

“It sounds delicious,” Prosper remarked.

“It’s not a drink you serve to your friends,” Izzy replied.

They continued through the forest, stopping here and there to check Izzy’s plants. “The henbane is doing well,” she commented, “but not the figwort. Something’s been eating on it.”

Suddenly, in a faint gleam of moonlight just ahead, they saw an owl sitting on a low tree branch, staring at them with great yellow eyes.

“Hello there,” Izzy said. “Is that you, Oliphant? And why are you standing on your head?”

The owl said nothing, but merely stared with its great yellow eyes.

They approached, and Izzy faced the owl at eye-level. “Oliphant?” she said again.

In a thin, squeaky voice the owl said, “No comprendo.”

Izzy gasped and took a step backward. “What did it say, Prosper?”

“It spoke Spanish,” answered Prosper. “It said ‘I don’t understand.’”

“Well then, it can’t be Oliphant,” Izzy said. “He doesn’t know Spanish.”

“No,” Prosper agreed, “it’s not Oliphant.”

“I never saw such a flat-looking owl,” Izzy continued, peering at it closely. “Ask him if he’s been run over by a steam-roller.”

Prosper began speaking to the owl in Spanish. It answered him. Then they carried on a rather long conversation while Izzy waited impatiently. Finally Prosper turned to her with his report. “No, he hasn’t been run over by a steam-roller. He’s not even an owl, Izzy.”



RDS

"Well, he certainly looks like one," she said. "Except for the flatness, of course."

"He's an Owl Butterfly from Central America travelling north. We ran into him while he was resting for the night."

"A butterfly!" Izzy exclaimed, looking at him even more closely. "Why, so he is! But why is he trying to look like an owl?"

"He's not trying to look like an owl," Prosper explained patiently. "Those eye spots are just color designs on his wings. He can't help how he looks. Anyway, his name's Carlos Caligo, and he's coming north to visit friends."

"Do they live around here?"

"No, further north. He's just spending the night."

"Does he want to come with us to look at the Sudge-Buddle doings up at the Lake?" Izzy asked.

Prosper spoke to the butterfly in Spanish, and immediately Carlos Caligo began fluttering his wings in great agitation and piping back shrill phrases.

"What is it, Prosper? Why is he so excited?"

Prosper was frowning as he turned to answer. "He knows about the Sudge-Buddle Company already. They built a factory in his country, too; and it caused a lot of damage. He says he didn't know the Company was here also. He wonders if it's everywhere."

It was Izzy's turn to frown. "Does he want to come with us?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then let's go."

The three of them hurried on through the woods. Carlos flew beside them chattering excitedly, while Prosper listened intently to what he said. "Bad news, Izzy. He says that when the factory was built in his country, it poisoned the streams and blighted the crops. Several banana plantations were completely ruined, and a lot of people who lived near the factory were forced to leave and find homes elsewhere."

"What did that factory manufacture?" Izzy asked.

"They never found out," Prosper answered. "But the government seemed to be in favor of it, and let the Sudge-Buddle Company have the land cheap."

They saw the Lake just ahead, a bright gleam through the trees. Izzy motioned for them to be quiet. A short distance to their left was a pile of machinery and the small houselike shed the Company had built. A light shone from one of its windows, but nobody seemed to be present.

As they got closer, they saw that one side of the shed was built out over the water. From the opposite side, a large round pipe, perched on little trestles, angled off down the hill into the trees and darkness. Electrical wires swooped down from a pole and entered the shed under the roof.

Making no sound, they crept to the window and peered in. The light came from a naked bulb hanging from a cord in the center of the room. Under it, a large pipe came out of the floor, turned with an elbow joint, passed through a boxlike machine, and vanished into a metal control panel on one wall. The panel was covered with dials, levers, switches, and pressure gauges. From the top of the

box the pipe passed through, a large valve-wheel rose, gleaming brassy yellow.

"What's this equipment *for*?" Izzy whispered.

Prosper pointed to the control panel. "I think there's a motor in there. See the electrical cable running into it? They've built a monstrous pump for taking water out of the Lake. That valve-wheel in the center regulates the amount of water coming through the pipe at any one time."

Carlos Caligo suddenly began whispering urgently in Prosper's ear. "Look out!" Prosper said, nudging Izzy. "Somebody's coming along the lakeshore!"

"Night watchman," said Izzy, as they crouched down beneath the lighted window. "He's been out getting a breath of fresh air."

Carlos Caligo fluttered away to the branch of a nearby tree. They all waited breathlessly while the night watchman approached along the shoreline, his shoe soles crunching on the pebbly beach. He was a tall man dressed in a gray uniform with a gray cap. As he got closer, Izzy and Prosper moved slowly along the wall of the shed to keep out of his line of sight. When he reached the shed, the man stood for a moment looking into the woods, then went in and shut the door.

Prosper crept back to the window, edged his head up over the sill, and looked into the room. The watchman sat in a chair near the valve-wheel reading a magazine.

"We can get to work now," Prosper whispered.

Izzy set her basket on the ground and rummaged through it till she found two small brown bottles. "I don't like this place," she said. "I'm going to fix it."

Crawling on her hands and knees, she began planting seeds around the base of the building. First she would dig a small hole with her finger, then drop in the seed; then, before covering it over, she'd sprinkle the seed with a few drops of red liquid from the second bottle. "Is that the night-creeping arbutus?" Prosper asked, watching her with great interest. "Yes," she answered, "with a little super-grow potion added."

Before she had gone halfway around the building, the first seeds had sprouted. By the time she had finished her planting and sprinkling, long vinelike shoots with broad green leaves had sprung from the ground, formed a thick carpet, and begun to send a tangled network of long snaky runners up the walls of the shed. Izzy walked around the building once again, sprinkling the stems and leaves with the red liquid, all the while chanting softly:

"Up, little sprout, higher, higher,
Thick as a wrist, and tough as wire!
Grow, little shoot, taller, thicker,
Weave a tight basket, quicker, quicker!"

The vines were beginning to cover the windows, and already they were on the roof, prying under the shingles. "Now," said Izzy, "the final touch!" She took a piece of blue chalk from her basket, and began to draw a five-sided figure on the door of the shed.

The door whipped open. And there, face to face with her, stood the night watchman. His mouth dropped open, his eyes bulged as he saw, right before his nose, the blue chalk raised in her hand, her startled face framed by the leaves of the night-creeping arbutus. He gave a choked cry of surprise and staggered back. Izzy grabbed the doorknob and slammed the door shut. "Run for it, Prosper!" she yelled. "Get my basket!"

By the time the watchman had the door open, Izzy and Prosper had taken off in different directions. Prosper, clutching the wicker basket, made straight for the woods. Izzy, taking a more roundabout route, ran through the tools and building materials; and there she jammed her foot into a bucket, which wouldn't come off. "Stop!" shouted the night watchman. "Stop or I'll shoot!" And sure enough, he fired two shotgun blasts. "Oh, very bad!" muttered Izzy, crouching down low as she went clumping along with the bucket. Every four steps or so, she tried to shake the bucket off her foot. But it was no use; the bucket might as well have been part of her leg.

In the shelter of the trees, she crouched down behind a fallen log and looked back to see what was happening. The watchman wasn't chasing them. He was just standing with his mouth agape, staring at the pumphouse. For the shed was completely covered by the broad green leaves of the night-creeping arbutus. Moreover, the plants had gotten inside, and were quickly filling up the room. There was no way for the guard to go back inside.

Smiling with satisfaction, Izzy limped quietly away. She circled through the woods and finally came to the pipeline that led downhill from the pumphouse. There Prosper was waiting for her, and Carlos Caligo.

Prosper was sitting on the pipe, his cape neatly spread around him; Carlos hovered near his shoulder, gently fanning the air with his wings. "Here's your basket, Izzy," Prosper said, pointing to it with his walking stick. "Why are you wearing a bucket on your foot?"

"Because I couldn't get it off," she answered, sitting down on the pipe. "I'll need your help."

He obliged, and began pulling for all he was worth while she braced herself against the pipe. "It's really wedged on," he panted, tugging and hauling.

"Don't pull my leg off," she grumbled. "I'm sure it's my rubber-soled shoes."

"I'll twist the bucket," said Prosper. "Like unscrewing a bottle cap."

"That doesn't sound good at all," Izzy interjected nervously. "Be careful, will you?" He twisted the bucket. "Ouch!" Izzy cried. But the bucket did come off—wrenching loose with a whooshing pop, and a sickening sucking sound. Prosper lurched violently backwards, and sat down with a thud.

"You really ought to be more careful next time," Prosper said, brushing off the seat of his pants.

"It did make my getaway a little harder," she agreed, rubbing her foot. "I thought I'd had it when the guard began shooting at us."

"He didn't shoot at us," said Prosper. "Carlos says he fired into the air. But I wasn't looking back to see. When I heard the shots I just kept going."

"Let's follow the pipeline and see where it goes," Izzy suggested, gathering up



her basket. While Carlos flew overhead, they walked along the pipe on a road newly made for its construction. Downhill the pipe took them in a fairly straight line. Here and there, trees had been chopped down to make way for it. They could tell it was heading for the factory.

At the edge of the Chickalooga Forest the pipeline stopped, unfinished. But dead ahead, across the sloping expanse of Farmer Green's eastern meadows, its direction pointed down the valley, across Little River, to the lights which marked the site of the Sudge-Buddle factory. Before them, in the moonlight, they could see sections of pipe strung out on the ground, waiting to be hooked onto the pipeline as it advanced down the valley.

As Izzy and Prosper stood at the end of the completed section of the pipeline, and Carlos Caligo flew in circles above them, they became aware of a shadowy figure in the distance poking about among the sections of pipe lying on the ground.

It came closer, and they saw that it was Randy Possum.

"I suppose you know you're trespassing on private property," Izzy said.

"Nobody's told me that," said Randy, "Though there are some signs posted here and there. I've just come from visiting the Otters, and thought I'd take a shortcut across the meadows along this little road the Company's made. You find some interesting things lying about in the pasture these days. Thought I'd check it out. What brings you out tonight? And who's your friend?"

"This is Carlos Caligo, an Owl Butterfly from Central America," said Izzy. "He's travelling north to visit friends. He told us some things the Sudge-Buddle Company did in his country. It seems they're down there, too, Randy." She paused a moment, thinking. "And Prosper and I were out walking to see about some plants. We were up at the Lake—"

"I heard the shots," said Randy.

"Well, they've built a pumphouse to pipe lakewater down to the factory. But—" she added brightly "—they seem to be having some trouble with weed control. The night-creeping arbutus is threatening to take the place."

"Ah," said Randy, "the night-creeping arbutus!"

Izzy took her piece of blue chalk and went to the open end of the last section of pipe that was already hooked up. She reached inside and drew a five-sided figure on the inner surface. "There!" she said. "That should do it!"

They said goodbye to Carlos Caligo, who winged away in the moonlight to find a comfortable place to spend the rest of the night. Then Randy, Izzy, and Prosper started south toward the Old Hex Inn. "There's time for one mug of honey brew before turning in," said Izzy. "A proper end for a good night's work."

Chapter 7

ALITTLE OVER a week after Izzy planted the night-creeping arbutus, Parker Packrat appeared before Judge Fox in Rawlinsville to answer the charge of theft against him. Franklin's sister had agreed to be his lawyer, and she had urged Parker to plead "guilty" in the hope of receiving a suspended sentence.

"But I'm *not* guilty," Parker had protested. "Not of theft, at least. It would be more truthful to plead 'not guilty!'"

"Yes, I know," Victoria had answered patiently. They had been over it many times. "And pleading 'not guilty' would give you a jury trial. But I don't think the jury would see it your way. And we know the Sudge-Buddle Company doesn't. To the judge, the law is the law. You *did* take the pipes and tubing. You admit that."

"Yes."

"Then I advise you to plead 'guilty' and hope that the judge will be easy with you since it's your first offense."

So Parker had gone to court and pled "guilty." And sure enough, the judge gave him a suspended sentence and a year's probation, in which time he would have to stay out of trouble and prove that he was a law-abiding citizen. Parker was also required to return the things he had taken, and pay court costs.

"But," he later told his friends at the Old Hex Inn, "when I took the things back, the Sudge-Buddle Company didn't give *me* back the things I left in exchange for them. They said they'd thrown them away! Mr. Snade the factory manager just laughed at me. I'll never see any of them again—not the steering wheel, or the cash register, or the bucket with the star-shaped hole, or the gilt picture frame—"

"It's a bad business!" said Roscoe Lynx with an angry shake of his head. He was filled with feelings he couldn't express—anger, frustration, sadness; maybe later, he thought, it would all get said in a poem. He began watering his prize geraniums. "Well, now that it's over, what are you going to do next?"

"Get back to work, I guess," Parker replied. "Start re-doing the Tenth Level."

"I think I know why the Company is working day and night on the factory," Oscar Otter remarked. "They want to get it finished and operating before cold weather comes." His voice was bitter, and his eyes red from lack of sleep.

When Victoria Groundsquirrel was in town to handle Parker's defense, Oscar had asked her about the possibility of his filing a complaint against the Company for the noise and disturbance they had inflicted on his family. But Victoria had told him she thought he wouldn't stand a chance of getting any action taken against the Company. "They would claim that the noise is unavoidable and

beyond their control. The court would probably agree with them." She had patted his shoulder sadly in farewell and gone back to the city. Oscar had then tried to soundproof his house by stuffing rags around the windows. It had done no good. The noise was still there; and, with the windows closed, the house had become unbearably hot.

"Maybe if they get it finished, things will be better this winter," Oscar continued. "But now the heavy machinery shakes the walls! We live with a constant rattle, and banging, and grinding noises that set your teeth on edge!"

Doctor Badger had stopped by the Old Hex for a mug of honey brew after a late afternoon house call to Elizabeth H., who was suffering from a bad chest cold. As he sat listening to Oscar, the doctor noticed how tired he looked.



Naturally a rather glum person, he got glummer as Oscar talked. Doctor Badger tended to be abrupt and snappish in his manner, short on words and impatient with idle chatter—a no-nonsense, let's-look-at-the-facts kind of person who gave little ear to people who didn't know what they were talking about. But he listened very carefully to Oscar, just as last week he had listened carefully to Izzy's account of what Carlos Caligo had said about the Sudge-Buddle Company's operations in Central America. He didn't usually enjoy talking with Izzy (and Prosper irritated him mightily with his fine ways and his gold-headed walking stick); but this time he had paid close attention to what she said. He saw grim troubles coming.

When Oscar had finished speaking, Doctor Badger cleared his throat and said gruffly, "This may sound like giving in, Oscar—but have you and Lucy considered moving away from the noise? Further upstream, say—*above* the factory?"

"We've talked about it," Oscar replied. "But where we're living is our *home!* We don't want to move out. And we shouldn't *have to!*"

"Yes," said Doctor Badger. He sank lower in his chair and frowned at the opposite wall.

Franklin Groundsquirrel came in, followed by Peter, Peggy, and Jamie Otter. He had brought his flute in order to practice the second movement of Arabella's sonata. He greeted them all and went straight to the piano, where Arabella was making some final additions to the music score. "I've got the second movement down pretty well," he told her, "but those changes you made at the end have been causing me trouble." He opened the flute case and took out the instrument.

"Well, I really should be going," said Doctor Badger, rising from his chair. "I've got two more calls to make, and lots of other work to do."

"I'd better leave too," said Oscar Otter. "I promised Lucy I'd watch the baby while she went shopping. Jamie, do you want to come home now?"

"No," said Jamie, "I'll stay here and play with Peggy and Peter."

Parker Packrat finished his brew in one gulp and muttered something about getting back to the Tenth Level. Ambrose Fieldmouse took one last pretzel and sauntered off toward his apartment. Behind the serving counter, Roscoe Lynx quickly put in his ear-plugs and began polishing mugs.

Peter and Peggy and Jamie weren't in the mood for music, either. They left by the side door and began wandering about on the neat paths that Roscoe had laid out through the flower beds. They were bored and wanted something exciting to do. "There ought to be *something!*" Peter said, kicking a pebble along the path.

"Well, we could always play tag," said Peggy. But she wrinkled up her nose at the thought. Things were pretty bad when you were reduced to playing tag.

Jamie suggested they go swimming. Peter and Peggy didn't want to. "Then what?" Jamie asked.

From close by, they heard the sound of muffled hammering. "Let's go see what's happening," Peggy suggested. That seemed to be a better idea than any others they had come up with; so, with growing curiosity, they hurried to the

source of the sound. The hammering was coming from Fergus Fisher's workshed which stood some distance behind the Old Hex Inn. They opened the door and peeked in—and there was Fergus, working on his flying machine!

"Hello, Fergus," Jamie said. "Can we come in?"

"You seem to be in already," Fergus observed. "Close the door; I don't want to disturb anybody with all this hammering."

The children moved about the flying machine, viewing it from all angles with curiosity and admiration. The last time the three of them had seen it, Fergus had been bolting sheet metal to the frame. Now it appeared to be almost finished.

"What do you call it?" Jamie Otter asked.

"I haven't picked a name for it yet," Fergus answered. "Its project classification is F/EXFM-1/HTAFC-BS."

"That's quite a classification," said Peggy.

"It stands for 'Fisher Experimental Flying Machine One: Heavier Than Air Flight Craft—Bird Simulator.' But that will never do for a name."

They agreed that it wouldn't. But they all agreed that the project was worthy of such an impressive classification. They had never before seen anything like it. Which was not surprising, for there had never before *been* anything like it.

The F/EXFM-1 had a long, cigar-shaped body of riveted sheet metal, thicker in the middle than at the ends. On top, in the center, was a circular cockpit open to the air, with one seat and a set of controls. At the rear was a fan-shaped tail, very like a hawk's, of thin overlapping metal plates. From the cockpit, these could be spread apart or pulled together as the pilot wished. The wings were formed of jointed metal plates, hinged into segments, each of which could be made to move independently of all the others. This flexibility made it possible for the wings to move up and down, forwards and backwards, to flap, or to stiffen into solid sheets for gliding and soaring.

"Does it really fly?" Peter asked.

"I don't know yet. I've never tried it out." Fergus set down the hammer on a workbench against the wall. Oliphant Owl was perched on a shelf above the bench, fast asleep. "Oliphant wanted to keep me company," Fergus explained, "and he did get some parts sorted out for me. But last night we were up very late star-gazing, and he's all tuckered out."

"Don't *you* ever sleep?" Peter inquired.

"Sometimes," Fergus replied, crawling beneath the bird simulator, "but there's always so much that needs to be done." He poked his head through a hatch into the body of the machine, and his voice came to them muffled, with a hollow metallic echo. "Could one of you hand me that wrench on the workbench?"

Peggy handed him the wrench. "Do you think it *will* fly?" she asked.

"Well, I have to hope so," Fergus answered from inside the machine.

"What made you want to build an airplane?" Jamie Otter asked.

"It's not an airplane!" Fergus boomed. "It's a bird simulator! There's a world of difference."

Oliphant opened one yellow eye and shifted his feet sleepily from side to side. "As a matter of fact," he said in a drowsy voice, "the difference is so great

there's really no comparison. The similarity is so small it doesn't even count."

"Well, it sort of looks like an airplane," said Jamie. "Not much, but a little."

Oliphant shook his head. "And an airplane looks a *little* like a bird. But planes are rigid—their wings and bodies don't move. Now, the F/EXFM-1 is made almost entirely of moving parts. All it lacks is feathers."

Fergus Fisher crawled out from under the machine and began wiping grease from his hands with a rag. "Birds are the best flyers going," he said to Jamie. "They've got it all figured out. Airplanes aren't nearly so well put together. Feeble substitutes! Now, when I decided to design a flying machine, I went to the birds for my model. As you may imagine, Oliphant has been a great help."

"When will you try to fly it?" Peter asked.

"I think it'll be ready next week. If I can get the frosket to behave properly."

"Phooey!" said Peggy. "We'll have gone home by then."

Fergus picked up his hammer. "The F/EXFM-1 will be around for some time to come. You'll get to see it fly. Won't they, Oliphant?"

But Oliphant had gone back to sleep.

The next afternoon at two o'clock, Simon Skunk stopped by Franklin Groundsquirrel's house to go with him and the Twins to Maple Crossing. Though the day was hot, they walked fast, for the heavy sky, dark with massed clouds, threatened rain. "Hurry," Peggy urged, "the rain will start before we get to Priscilla's." "No, it won't," said Simon. "Will," said Franklin. "Won't," said Peter. It didn't, but by the time they reached Izzy's General Store, thunder was rumbling above the Chickalooga Forest.

The store was closed. A sign taped to the front door said: GONE HERB GATHERING. BACK AT FIVE O'CLOCK. "She'll get wet," said Franklin, "and Prosper, too."

"And Prosper doesn't like getting wet," said Peggy.

They hurried past the house of Thorstein and Rebecca Raccoon, and through Priscilla Possum's gate. Her door was standing open, as it always was when she was in.

Priscilla was at her sewing machine when they entered the fitting room. "Sit down, make yourselves at home," she said. "I'll be free in a minute; I'm finishing a blouse for Arabella." While Franklin and Simon waited, the Twins wandered into the front-parlor showroom where bolts of many-colored cloth were on display. Fine fabrics, row on row—rich velvets, rugged woolens, soft silks and muslins, bright cotton prints. Peggy draped herself in a strip of crimson satin and cried: "Look at me! A movie star!"

"Yeah," said Peter. "I remember seeing you as the victim in 'The Mummy's Revenge.'"

She stuck out her tongue at him. He stuck out his at her. A squabble began, with thumps and scuffling, and Priscilla Possum came rushing in before major

damage was done. "Here now, Peggy, Peter," she said with a smile, "you sound as though you might be hungry. Come with me to the kitchen. I've been baking today. Smell the gingerbread? And I've also made some fresh pickles. Which will it be? Gingerbread or pickles? Take one, or the other, or both if you prefer."

Still scowling at each other, the Twins each took a large square of fresh gingerbread and a fat, juicy pickle. Then they went out on the front porch to wait for the rain.

Back in the fitting room, Priscilla finished her business with Franklin. "I have a picture of the new vest I'd like you to make me," Franklin said, handing her a photograph he had torn from a magazine. "Two pockets—not too low, so I can hook my thumbs in 'em. And I'd like it in gray wool, with gold buttons."

"Fine," she nodded. "Leave me the picture. I already have your measurements."

"By the way, Priscilla," Simon Skunk said, as they started for the door, "how is Randy doing with the buttonholes?"

"Fairly well," she answered. "Much better than he ever thought he'd do. Making decent buttonholes isn't the easiest thing in the world, but it's not the hardest, either. He was just afraid of getting started. And he's done well because he *wanted* to learn how."

"I'm glad," said Simon. "He did say it was 'now or never'."

"Well, by deciding to make it 'now'," said Priscilla, "he's done it, and now it will never be 'never'."

"That makes sense," said Simon.

"To *you*, maybe," Franklin whispered. "It doesn't to *me*."

"Before you leave," Priscilla said, "would either of you like some gingerbread or pickles? They're both fresh."

Franklin chose gingerbread, and Simon took a pickle.

Priscilla watched from the porch as the four of them went down the walk toward the gate. "Now try not to get wet," she called. "It's going to rain bucketsful any minute!" As they reached the road, Peabody the Postman drove up to Priscilla's mailbox in his beat-up jalopy. "It's gonna rain!" he greeted them, putting several letters into the mailbox. The pickles caught his eye. "Is Priscilla giving them away?"

They nodded, and Peabody immediately climbed out of the wheezing car and started up the path. Then he paused, hurried back, and took the letters from the mailbox. "Afternoon, Priscilla! You got some mail."

She smiled at him from the front steps. "Good afternoon, Peabody. Would you care to have a pickle?"

"Why, thanks!" said Peabody. "Don't mind if I do!"

A crackle of thunder split the air directly overhead, and the first raindrops peppered craters in the dusty road. "Here it comes!" cried Peter.

"Quick!" shouted Franklin, "—into The Boundary!" They sprinted across the road and crowded through the doorway of Ferret's Bookshop just in time to



RDS

escape the downpour.

A jangling brass bell above the door announced them. From the back of the shop, a voice called, "Be right with you!" While they waited, their eyes became adjusted to the dimness. It was always dim in Ferret's Bookshop; the shaded bulbs hanging overhead gave just enough light for customers to find their way among the books. Finding their way was no easy task, for books were everywhere: stacked and shelved from floor to ceiling, wall to wall—covering the walls (and windows, too), arranged in seemingly endless rows, and piled in towering columns. Narrow walkways, mysterious and dark, wandered through them like a maze—deep shadowed canyons where customers had to squint and strain their eyes to read the titles stamped in black and faded gold.

Simon and Franklin had spent many happy hours browsing in the dim corridors of The Boundary (it was always a cozy place to spend a rainy afternoon). They loved the musky autumn-leaf smell of old paper, the dry stiff rustle of pages turning, and the faint sneezy tickle of ancient dust.

Peter and Peggy enjoyed the bookshop too. For one thing, there was a large collection of children's books they never tired of exploring. For another, there was M. Lucius Ferret, who was interested in everything and always eager to talk about things that interested *them*. Most of all, they liked swapping ghost stories with M. Lucius. He had an endless supply, and the way he told them was spooky enough to raise goosebumps on a watermelon. And when the Twins in turn told him *their* stories, he seemed never to have heard them before; and he always got so frightened that he had to make a pot of tea and set out a plate of cookies or jelly doughnuts to chase away the jitters.

Though The Boundary had books on almost any topic a person might wish, buying one to take away was not an easy matter. M. Lucius was so attached to his books that he could hardly bear to part with any of them. Whenever someone bought a book, M. Lucius would let it go reluctantly, with a sigh of sadness. It was like saying goodbye forever to a very dear friend. To avoid such melancholy farewells, he put high prices on the books in hopes no one would buy them. It was mainly folks from Rawlinsville who did. His friends from Grover and Maple Crossing, knowing that it caused him pain, never tried. However, though he couldn't bear to sell his books, M. Lucius took great pleasure in *sharing* them with others; he was always eager to lend them out, so long as folks promised to return them in good condition within a month. And knowing this, his friends were glad to borrow them. Though M. Lucius liked to call himself a bookseller, he earned his living—and money to buy more books—by being a paid consultant to the National Academy of Arts and Sciences, and to three encyclopedias.

As they stood in the dark listening to the rain gurgling in the gutters and dancing on the roof, the visitors saw M. Lucius Ferret's tall stooped form emerge from the shadows and come bobbing toward them through the maze of passageways. Reaching them, he gazed at each in turn through his thick shining spectacles: "Well now, well now, a bit wet for travelling out to Ferret's. Well, well, Peter and Peggy! Franklin, too! And Simon! I'm glad you dropped by!"

"It's good to be here," Simon said.

"Drier, too," said Peter.

"You're the first folks in the shop today!" M. Lucius informed them. "I've spent most of the morning going through a box of new books I picked up at an auction last week. Some pretty fine things in it, too, I'm glad to say."

"Anything on fossils?" Peggy asked.

"Not in this box. The last fossil books arrived in March. You can see *them* if you like. But there are several new storybooks in this batch which you might find interesting. And one on volcanoes. And a book on German grammar, and three on submarines, and six on trees and shrubs. Why don't you look through them?" He led them through dark passageways to the rear of the shop. There, hidden off behind a wall of books, snug and private in a pool of yellow lamplight, he had a nook for himself—with desk, and easy chairs, and teakettle. Beside the desk stood the box of new books. Peggy and Peter began going through it at once.

"I didn't have many on volcanoes," M. Lucius continued, "so this one is very welcome. It was published just last year, and written by one of the world's authorities. It's probably the best book available."

"A lucky find," said Franklin, settling into an easy chair facing the desk.

"Now, Franklin," said M. Lucius, handing him a book, "here's one you haven't seen: Orlando Fossquat's *History of the Flute*. It's fairly good, especially Chapter Four. But as a whole, it's not as good as Turnipseed's."

"It would be hard to beat Turnipseed," said Franklin, taking the book with interest.

"Now, what about you, Simon?" M. Lucius said. "Something on bridge building? A treatise on golf? The life of Napoleon? Perhaps a good mystery story!"

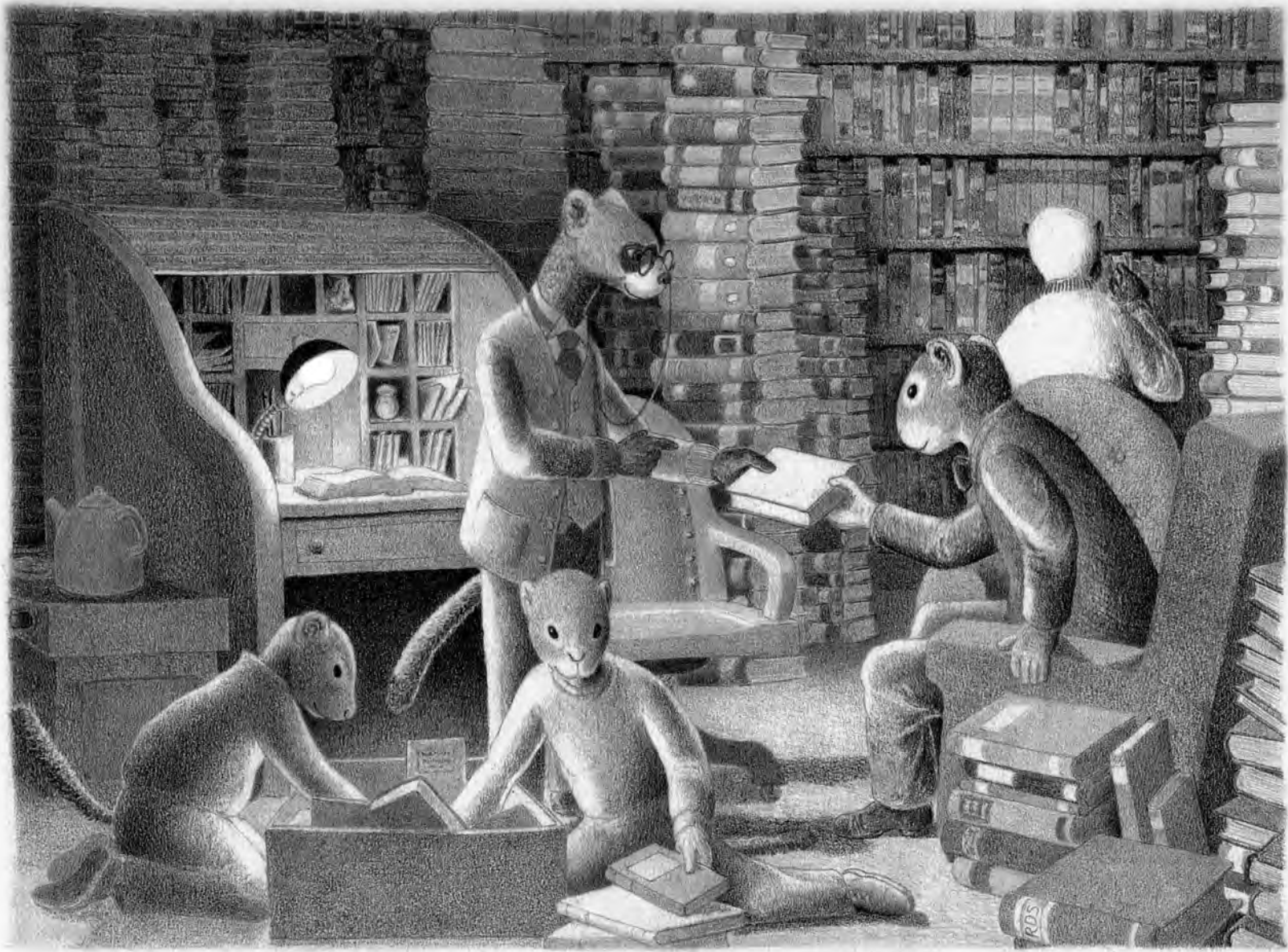
"I think I'd just like to browse," Simon smiled. "I'm sure I'll find something."

"As you wish," said M. Lucius. "Take your time." He began boiling water for tea. Simon wandered off into the stacks. The Twins sat beside the box going through the storybooks. Franklin, cozily curled up in the easy chair, read Chapter Four of Fossquat's *History of the Flute*.

Outside, thunder grumbled angrily—but muffled and remote, as though in another world. Inside, the only sounds close at hand were the drumming of rain on the roof, and the faint whisper of pages turning.

With his elbows on the desk, M. Lucius sat listening to the rain. His diary lay open before him at the page he'd been writing on when his visitors arrived. He took up his pen, dipped it in ink, and re-read what he had written:

"August 8. To Grover, bright and early. Gave Lafayette the information I'd gathered on solar energy for his *Gazette* article. I said I thought he looked a little glum, and he told me that he'd approached Roscoe yet once again about publishing the poems. As usual, Roscoe just laughed and watered his geraniums. Lafayette says he won't give up. That's the spirit! Neither will I, though it's clear that all *my* talking to Roscoe hasn't done any good either. Well, keep at it! Perhaps in time . . .



Stopped by Sheriff Badger's to pick up the book he'd borrowed on Roman art. He wasn't at his office, so I went to Higgins' Coffee Shop and found him there. We talked awhile, and Thaddeus joined us for a cup of coffee. Sheriff Badger said that Parker had received a suspended sentence, probation, etc., for which we were glad. Then Thaddeus said that Mr. Snade, the factory manager, had stopped in to buy some headache pills and seemed furious that the judge had let Parker off so easy. I'm glad I wasn't there; I know I'd have gotten angry and said or done something I'd have been sorry for later. I'll visit Parker tomorrow, and lend him that new book on arc welding.

Then Sheriff Badger took me to his office and gave me back the art book. Said he liked it (I knew he would), and asked me to find him one on covered bridges."

Here the writing stopped, for the brass bell had jangled above the door. M. Lucius pondered what he'd written, started to add something, and found that his pen had gone dry. With a smile he laid the pen down and closed the diary. He would wait till his visitors left before going on.

The teakettle was hissing loudly. M. Lucius got up and filled the pot. When he turned around, Franklin had finished reading and was watching him from the chair.

"Did you hear the outcome of Parker's case?" Franklin asked.

"Yes, when I was in Grover this morning. Sheriff Badger told me what happened. It's just what I'd expected—knowing a little about the law, and quite a lot about Judge Fox."

"But," said Franklin, "the Sudge-Buddle Company didn't return the things he'd traded for the pipes."

"Oh, that's foul!" said M. Lucius. "No, I didn't know that. But I'm not surprised. They probably thought the things were just a bunch of junk."

Somewhere in the darkness Simon Skunk sneezed loudly. "Simon," M. Lucius called, "the tea is ready. Come join us." He poured five cups, two of them a little weak, with lots of sugar, and filled a plate with cookies from a jar.

Peter and Peggy closed their books and went for the cookies. "What new ghost stories have you heard?" M. Lucius asked them.

"Well," said Peggy, munching her first cookie, "Uncle Franklin told us one about 'The Thing in the Garden.'"

"Oh, that sounds like a good one!" M. Lucius chuckled, rubbing his hands together. "Would you like to tell it again, Franklin?"

"If you don't mind," Franklin said uncomfortably, "I'd rather not. It really wasn't a very good one."

"It was *pretty* good," Peter said to M. Lucius, "but Uncle Franklin took it too seriously, and sort of forgot it was just a story."

"Well, that's easy enough to do," M. Lucius said thoughtfully. "I've done it myself. In fact, I'm *always* doing it. If stories are good ones, and they're well-told, the things in them seem *very* real." He handed a cup of tea to Simon

Skunk, who'd just rejoined them. Simon had a smudge of dust on one cheek, and a strand of cobweb hanging from his ear. "In a way," M. Lucius continued, "the things in stories *are* real, if only they're believed in by an understanding reader. They come to have a life of their own." He waved his arm toward the dark canyons of the stacks. "They're in there waiting, pushing hard against the covers of the books!" He closed one eye and raised a finger to his lips. "Listen! Don't you hear them?" His spectacles glinted as he tilted his head. "They're all around us—breathing together!"

In silence, they all strained their ears. All they heard was the rain on the roof and the hissing of the teakettle. But behind the silence, they all could feel the urgent pressure of unseen presences, hushed and expectant in the dim corridors, waiting.

Lowering his voice, M. Lucius said: "When the books are opened by someone who believes, the things in them start jostling together, and come gliding and marching and tumbling off the shelves, just as real as you or me!"

"You're just saying that aren't you?" Peggy asked, looking over her shoulder into the dark. "They don't *really* come alive."

"But they do!" M. Lucius whispered. "Every night great dinosaurs come tromping through the shop. The windows rattle! And rivers rush in rapids, bobbing bottle-cork canoes! Ghosts clank their chains! Ships toss in storms! And Old Dame Scooby glims you with her glittering glass eye! Oh, yes! yes, they're all here, and very much alive!"

The shop was very still. But then—somewhere in the dark—they heard a floor-board creak, and a faint scuffling noise on one of the shelves. Franklin said quickly, "I think I'd like another cookie," and helped himself.

Simon cleared his throat and held up a book for M. Lucius to see. "I think I'm interested in this one. It's about early American furniture."

"Do you mean you want to buy it?" M. Lucius asked, his eyes suddenly anxious behind the gleaming spectacles.

"Uh—no," Simon said hesitantly, seeing his nervousness. "I was wondering if you'd mind—uh, just letting me *borrow* it for awhile."

Smiling broadly, M. Lucius sat back in his chair. "Oh, not at all! Not at all, Simon. Happy to lend it to you. I'm glad you found something of interest. That's the Hendrix Murphy book, I see; very good for colonial chairs." He turned to the others. "Now what about the rest of you? Have you found anything *you'd* like to borrow? And here—who'd like another cup of tea?"

Chapter 8

WHEN FRANKLIN ARRIVED, a large crowd had already gathered in the pasture behind the Old Hex Inn. Roscoe Lynx had set up a table on the grass and, under a blue and yellow tent roof, was serving honey brew and lemonade. Fergus Fisher's flying machine—which (at the urging of Lucy Otter) he had named the *Albatross*—had been towed from the workshed, and was now parked facing north. While folks stood watching excitedly, Fergus lay on his back beneath the machine making final adjustments. Ben Barker, the pockets of his overalls bristling with screwdrivers and wrenches, scrambled about, tightening a nut here, fastening a bolt there, checking and oiling the hinged and jointed plates of the wings. "Fasten down the widgets!" Fergus called out. Farmer Ben fastened them down. "Are they tight? Then run this cable from the gumble to the frosket!" And Farmer Ben ran the cable.

The crowd was in a carnival mood. The children were running races and playing kickball. Several people had spread tablecloths on the grass for picnic lunches. Peabody the Postman, Thorstein Raccoon, and M. Lucius Ferret—having had quite a lot of honey brew—were standing beneath the mulberry tree singing an old marching song in close harmony. Lafayette Lizard, preparing to take pictures for the *Grover Gazette*, had set up his camera on a tripod near the *Albatross*. Franklin wished that Peggy and Peter could have been present, and he was already planning the letter he would write to them describing what they had missed. He found Simon Skunk standing near the flying machine with Priscilla Possum and Izzy the Witch.

"Well, this is Fergus' great day," he said as he joined them. "What he's been working toward for over a year."

"Do you think it will really fly?" Simon asked him.

"Izzy worked a charm," Priscilla said, "to make sure that it *will* fly."

"Not too loud," Izzy cautioned. "Fergus doesn't know about it, and I'd just as soon he not find out."

"I understand," said Priscilla.

"It's *his* project, after all," Izzy continued. "I'm just backing him up. But it *will* fly," she smiled, "mark my words."

Standing nearby, three Swallows were shaking their heads and looking very sour. "It'll never get off the ground," Cassandra Scissortail announced. "Nothing that heavy can possibly fly."

"Not like a bird, at least," her husband Summerfield said. "Those wings can't possibly work like ours. Which is too bad, really, since that's what Fergus wanted."

"And look at that shape!" snorted Scooper Singebottom. "Like an overstuffed



cigar! It'll have too much wind resistance to get anywhere."

Fergus, on his back beneath the *Albatross*, pretended not to hear them, and grimly tightened the last screws. Hadn't great inventors always had to put up with skeptics and scoffers? It was the way of the world.

Farmer Ben leaned down to him and whispered, "Do you think they may be right? It does look awful heavy."

"We'll just have to wait and see," Fergus snapped back. "My plans account for the weight. When the wings start flapping, it should lift right off the ground."

"Really, my dear," said Summerfield Scissortail, "I suppose we should be proud that Fergus modeled his machine after us. He's always said that birds are the best flyers anywhere."

Cassandra sniffed haughtily. "Of course we are. I'm glad that Fergus is able to see that. But why does he have to build—" and here her voice dropped to a whisper "—a *mechanical bird*? It's unnatural. He shouldn't have done it."

Olipphant Owl, who was standing beside her, had been silent till now; but upon hearing this last remark, he could no longer contain himself. Olipphant felt that the *Albatross* was one of the great achievements of modern science. "You're not giving Fergus the credit he deserves! In designing a craft that will simulate bird flight, he's paid us a very high compliment!"

"There's something to what Olipphant says," Scooper Singebottom told her. "Why, Cassandra, you even object to airplanes, and they aren't designed to fly like birds. Fergus does deserve credit for using us as his model."

"A thimbleful at most," Cassandra sniffed. "Why can't Fergus leave flying to the birds? If he'd been meant to fly, he'd have been born with wings and feathers, wouldn't he?"

"Now, now, my dear—" said Summerfield.

Franklin and Simon walked away from the group and got themselves some honey brew. Roscoe Lynx seemed worried as he filled their mugs. "I hope Fergus isn't disappointed," he said. "He's worked so hard on the project. I'll confess, I don't really expect much."

"We'll know in a minute," Franklin said. "He's about ready to start."

They left Roscoe and wandered through the crowd. Miss Proudie Fairblossom had brought a folding chair, and was sitting on it drinking lemonade in the shade of her white-and-purple parasol. "Hello there!" she called to them. "Come sit with me."

As Simon and Franklin joined her, she said, "I've been here for over an hour enjoying the excitement. I don't recall so much fun since Farmer Green's last Harvest Festival!"

"It's a good day for flying," Simon volunteered.

"I wish the *Albatross* was a two-seater," Miss Proudie declared. "I'd like to go up myself. Last time I flew, it was in a superjet. Fergus' machine looks much more interesting. The jet flight was a bore, with piped-in music and people trying to feed me a dinner I didn't want. I'd much prefer to have the wind about my ears, and a cheese sandwich I'd made myself." Her bright blue eyes took on a faraway look, peering back through the years. "I recall once when my brother

took me flying in an open two-seater. It was great fun looking down on the green and yellow checkerboard of the fields. Seeing the toy houses and barns, and the sunlight sparkling on the streams, and nothing overhead but the wide blue sky."

"Do you think there'll be any problem getting the *Albatross* off the ground?" Franklin asked. "It looks awfully heavy."

"I don't see why there should be," she replied. "Fergus knows what he's doing."

An excited buzz ran through the crowd: "He's ready to start!" The people began moving in closer. The children left their games and ran to the *Albatross*. Lafayette Lizard aimed his camera.

Standing beside the cockpit, Fergus dusted his clothes and gave last instructions to Farmer Ben. "While the engine warms up, you start clearing the ground." As Farmer Ben began picking up tools and bits of cable and rope that lay looped and scattered on the grass, Fergus reached into the cockpit and flipped a switch. The engine sputtered, coughed four times, and chugged into a throbbing roar. Rebecca Raccoon hurried forward with her notepad, shouting over the noise of the engine: "Fergus, do you have any final statement to give the press?"

"I'll wait till after the flight," Fergus answered. As Ben Barker took the wooden blocks away from the wheels, the *Albatross* suddenly began to move forward. A cry went up from the crowd. One of the fat rubber wheels ran over Ben Barker's foot. He gave a grunt, dropped the tool box, and went hopping away clutching his injured foot in both hands. Fergus ran alongside the *Albatross*, shouting "Stop!"; but the clanking machine, with belligerent snorts and coughs, continued rolling bumpily across the pasture, trailing behind it the ropes they'd used to pull it from the shed.

The crowd surged forward with shouts and waving of arms. Everyone joined in the pursuit of the *Albatross* except Miss Proudie Fairblossom, who stood up on her folding chair and waved her lemonade and parasol to cheer them on.

Then many things happened fast. One wheel of the *Albatross* caught on a tree stump. As the machine stopped briefly, Fergus caught up, grabbed the side of the cockpit, and made a frantic clutch at the controls. The one free wheel kept moving, and the *Albatross* swung in a circle around the stump, dragging Fergus along in the tangle of ropes which were trailing on the ground. Stretching as far as he could, Fergus managed with the tip of one finger to flip the switch he thought would turn off the engine.

But instead, with a horrendous clanking, the wings started moving up and down. They groaned and creaked. They flapped and fanned the air. Free of the stump, the *Albatross* rolled onward, gathering speed, hissing and rattling and pumping its wings. Fergus lost his footing and fell among the ropes. Tangled and helpless, he was dragged a short distance. Then, with a smooth leap, the *Albatross* rose into the air, its wings chattering rickety-bang, flapping and beating and billowing up a great wind. A gasp went up from the crowd. For as the *Albatross* rose into the sky, Fergus—his foot caught in a loop of rope—was pulled after it to dangle head downward, suspended by one leg. The crowd,

strung out across the pasture, stopped in their tracks and watched in horror as, high above their heads, Fergus, his arms waving, swung upside down, growing ever smaller to their sight, and the *Albatross* gained altitude and headed east.

On the ground, confused babbling, moans and shouts! Some folks just stood with their heads tilted back, watching open-mouthed. Many others, including most of the children, began running east to follow Fergus on the ground. Oliphant and the Swallows took to the air. Doctor Badger ran for his medical bag. Lafayette Lizard, the one fixed point in all the confusion, stayed behind his camera taking pictures of the vanishing *Albatross* as fast as he could.

Fortunately, the *Albatross* was not flying very fast, and those running along below—though lagging far behind—were easily able to keep it in sight. "It's leveled off!" Simon cried, as he and Farmer Ben vaulted over a stone wall. "But it's heading over the woods!" shouted Elizabeth H. "That'll slow us down!" "It's going toward Maple Crossing!" cried Randy Possum, as he and Franklin Groundsquirrel made a running leap over a water-filled gully. Randy made it across without breaking stride. Franklin didn't, and vanished with a splash.

High above them, Fergus Fisher was a dark speck against the clouds. When the pursuers reached the woods, they were slowed by crowded saplings, thickets of underbrush, fallen logs, and bramble patches. In a moment, the *Albatross* was gone from sight.

If anything, the flight of the *Albatross* was even more exciting for Fergus than it was for his friends. Giddy and amazed, he had watched the pasture fall away beneath him; had seen the tiny upturned faces of his friends, and the rapidly shrinking tops of trees, like fluffy green cotton balls. It wasn't quite clear to him how he'd come to be hanging head-downward high above the ground. He remembered falling while trying to turn off the engine, and being dragged, and having his leg severely yanked. But here he was, a rope tight about his ankle, swinging back and forth in slow arcs like a doll at the end of a string. As he swung, he turned slowly through the points of the compass, and the landscape beneath him spun in slow circles. The Old Hex Inn was no bigger than a shoebox, his friends no bigger than ants.

As the *Albatross* climbed, the countryside spread out below him like a map. To the west, Little River sparkled blue and brown, curving east to flow through Ben Barker's land and Fairblossom Farm; then south, past Rawlinsville in the far distance, to join the Winnawanna River. On the far bank of Little River, due west, stood Grover, straddling the highway that arrowed northward to the city. Upstream, Little River glittered in the sun past Otters' house and, further north, the gray-white concrete blotch of the Sudge-Buddle factory. To the east and straight ahead lay the Chickalooga Forest and, somewhat north, the broad blue basin of Cherrystone Lake. Fergus had never before had such a vantage point to see it all, and the view fairly took away his breath.

Trailing him, but catching up, were the three Swallows and—at a greater distance—Oliphant. Scooper Singebottom was the first to reach him: "Are you all right, Fergus?"

"So far," Fergus answered, trying to grab at his eye-glasses which hung on

their black ribbon far below his head. The rope swung him away from Scooper, then slowly swung him back. Scooper was bravely holding his position, flying at the same speed as the *Albatross*, but he was being badly buffeted by the air currents whipped up by the flapping metal wings.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Scooper shouted, as Fergus swung toward him.

"Can't think what it would be," Fergus shouted back. "Only I know how to operate the steering mechanism. And I certainly don't want you to turn off the engine!" He was gone again; but as he swung away from Scooper, he made a close approach to Summerfield and Cassandra Scissortail, who had finally joined them.

"Then I guess all we can do is keep you company," Summerfield said sadly.

"Well, that's *something*," said Fergus. "Thanks for coming." He swung away from them; but on the return, he said to Cassandra: "Well, the experiment worked: the *Albatross* did get off the ground."

"And I'm surprised that it did," said Cassandra. "But you'll never convince me that it was a good idea."

"I have some doubts myself," Fergus admitted, swinging away. The air rushing past him was cold, and he was chilled to the roots of his whiskers. He finally did manage to retrieve his eye-glasses by hauling up the ribbon, but he couldn't get them to stay on his nose. Below them, the Chickalooga Forest glided by, a rich carpet of green.

"Just what I was afraid of!" cried Scooper Singebottom. "You're heading straight for Parker's junk sculpture!"

Fergus, turning slowly forward, saw to his dismay that Scooper was right. Dead ahead was the solid wall of Parker's tower, with sunlight glinting cheerily from a thousand bright surfaces.

"You're going to crash!" Cassandra shrieked. And so he was. At the last moment before impact, the Swallows veered sharply away from the *Albatross* in great swooping curves.

Parker Packrat was working on the Ninth Level when the rackety-clang of the approaching *Albatross* reached his ears. He twisted around on the scaffold and saw, coming straight toward him, the monstrous cigar shape flapping its jointed wings.

He just had time to clamp his safety belt to a piano leg and brace himself before an immense shuddering crash threw him off his feet. The sculpture quaked with the shock of impact. Parker's tools shot off the scaffold into the sky; and pieces of the sculpture, jarred loose—large, small, and in-between-size—went tumbling and crashing, bouncing and skittering, tinkling and jingling down the sides of the tower.

Dazed, Parker lay face-down on the scaffold covering his head as objects, peppering the platform, danced and thudded around him. He lay and listened:



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it was a long time till the falling noises stopped. His first thought was of the sculpture: "No, no," he moaned in frantic despair, his eyes shut tight. How could he ever repair it? Sick at heart, he pulled himself to the edge of the scaffold and looked over.

Below him, on the Eighth Level, the *Albatross*, battered and buckled, was wedged into the sculpture, its tail projecting outward like a diving board. "O-o-o-o-h!" groaned Parker, his voice mingling shock and disgust as he tried to estimate the damage. Then he saw a sight that drove from his mind all thought about his damaged work. Slightly below the wreck, against a set of bed-springs welded securely into place, Fergus Fisher hung by one leg, Oliphant and the Swallows hovering about him.

"Fergus!" Parker shouted down to him. "Are you all right?"

"Just shaken up," Fergus answered, finally getting his glasses to stay on his nose. "I'm awfully glad you put the bedsprings where you did!"

"They seemed to belong with the lawn mower and the fan blades," Parker replied. "Just a minute; I'll be right down." He dashed into the sculpture and took the stairs to the Eighth Level, emerging on a narrow platform just above the bedsprings. "Let me get your foot loose. Hold on to the washtub; it's welded tight." After struggling in vain for a long minute to loosen the loop of rope, Parker finally had to cut it with his pocket knife. Hugging the washtub with one arm, Fergus stretched his free hand to Parker, who pulled him up to the platform.

Seating himself firmly with his back to the sculpture, Fergus took a small notebook from his inside pocket and quickly jotted down some notes on the experiment. "Well," he said, putting the notebook away, "that was quite a ride. Not exactly what I expected. But certainly interesting. And did you notice, Oliphant," he said, as the Owl landed beside him, "the horizontal stabilizer worked even better than we'd hoped!"

"I noticed," said Oliphant. "Are you sure you're all right? And how bad is the damage?"

"I'm fine," Fergus answered, looking down to study the *Albatross*. "I wish I could say the same for the F/EXFM-1. I'm afraid there's quite a lot of damage. But with luck we should be able to fix it and have it ready to go again without too much trouble."

Parker Packrat, too, had been studying the *Albatross* with great interest. "Are you *sure* you can get it to fly again?" he asked. "It looks awfully damaged to me."

"I think we can," Fergus answered. "As a matter of fact, I'm sure that our repair job will be easier than yours. Parker, I can't tell you how sorry I am that we ran into your sculpture; I know what it means to you. On the other hand, I'm glad it was there to stop us. I hope you can repair the damage we caused. Do you think you can?"

"I don't know," said Parker with a sigh. "There's a lot of damage, and it will take a lot of work to fix it. The sculpture won't ever be the same. If there are things that can't be fixed, I'll simply have to modify the design. But please don't worry about it or blame yourself. You couldn't help it. I'm just glad you're not



hurt." He paused a moment. "I was about to say, however, that if you thought the *Albatross* was too damaged to fix, you could just leave it here. I'd take good care of it."

Fergus caught Oliphant's eye, then hastened to say: "No, Parker, I appreciate your offer—but we've got to fix it. Do you think we could use your pulley to get it down?"

"I suppose so," Parker said slowly, "if you really think it's worth doing. Now, if I were in your place, I don't think I'd go to all that trouble."

Cassandra Scissortail perched beside them and said crisply: "I agree. It doesn't seem worth trying to repair, if you ask me. Why don't you just leave it here, Fergus? It does add something to Parker's sculpture. It seems to belong here. In fact, if you want the truth, the *Albatross* looks as though it was *made* for this sculpture."

"That's just what I was thinking," Parker said.

"No," said Fergus firmly. "We'll take it down."

Far below, the rescuers began straggling out of the woods: Randy Possum, Arabella Raccoon, Franklin, Elizabeth H., and Farmer Ben. They looked up, saw Fergus on the Eighth Level, and began cheering and waving to him.

Fergus stood up and waved back. "Let's wait until tomorrow to get the *Albatross* down," he said to Parker. "There isn't much of the afternoon left. Now, if you'll show me the stairs, I'll get *myself* down."

After Fergus had left the platform, Parker turned sadly to Summerfield and Cassandra Scissortail. "If he left it here, I'd take good care of it. A little welding here and there, and he'd never have to worry about it falling off."

"He obviously has no appreciation for art," said Cassandra with a sniff.

"Now, now, my dear—" said Summerfield.

Chapter 9

FERGUS WAS not easily discouraged. Though the damage to the bird simulator took nearly a month to repair, the *Albatross* did fly again. This time everything went as planned, and Fergus stayed in the air for half an hour before coming down in Farmer Ben's watermelon patch for a perfect (if bumpy) three-point landing. The *Grover Gazette* carried a large picture-story of the flight, which Roscoe Lynx cut from his copy and framed behind glass in the public room at the Old Hex Inn. The same issue of the newspaper also ran a story reporting the completion of work on the Sudge-Buddle factory, and a short notice announcing the return of Matthew Muddie, the red-haired schoolteacher, from his summer vacation in the city.

Matthew had stayed away longer than he'd planned, and as a result he had much work to do getting ready for school in the last week before it opened. When he got home to the Old Hex after his long absence, the first thing he did after unpacking was to seek out Roscoe Lynx, who was working in the flower garden.

"Roscoe, I ask you," said Matthew Muddie, pointing up-river to the Sudge-Buddle factory, "what do they plan to manufacture in that monstrosity? When I left, they were just starting to build it. Now they've got it all finished and ready to go. They must be in a thumping big hurry!"

Kneeling beside his chrysanthemums, Roscoe looked somberly upstream at the tall red and white striped smokestack that towered above the trees on the west bank of Little River. "You ask a hard question," Roscoe said. "Nobody knows what they're going to make in the factory. Franklin's sister tried to find out for us, but even she wasn't able to, though she did a lot of snooping. She did learn that the Company has factories all over the world which make many different kinds of things. She said she was surprised to see how much they're into. But she couldn't learn anything about *this* factory."

"How soon will it be in operation?" Matthew asked.

"They've announced they'll start next month—before Hallowe'en."

"Incredible!" cried Matthew Muddie.

"And another thing," said Roscoe drily, "there won't be many *people* working at the factory. Machines will be doing everything. There certainly won't be any Groverpeople hired. And the few workers they have—like night watchmen—will all be living in Rawlinsville."

Matthew sat down heavily on a stone bench. "Maybe you'd better tell me what's happened here this summer. I have some catching up to do." He took a sip of coffee and waited till Roscoe, gathering his thoughts, was ready to talk. Then Roscoe began, the words tumbling out faster and faster as he went.

He told Matthew of the Otter family's being unable to sleep nights, of the

sudden appearance of NO TRESPASSING signs, of Arabella's being chased with the children from fossil hunting at Cherrystone Lake. He recounted Parker's arrest and prosecution for theft, the laying of the pipeline to pump water to the factory from the Lake, the building of the new road through the eastern meadows to lay the pipeline and of the railroad track to bring carloads of coal to fuel the factory furnaces. Matthew's face got redder and redder as Roscoe talked; finally the schoolteacher shook his head and cried: "Does this mean that people can't go walking in the woods anymore, or boating on the Lake?"

Roscoe nodded. "All of what used to be Farmer Green's land is now off limits. Even Izzy got chased out of her favorite herb-hunting ground. They said they'd call the sheriff and have her arrested if she didn't leave."

"Izzy too?" said Matthew, so surprised that he dropped his coffee cup. "That wasn't very wise of them. I wouldn't want Izzy mad at *me*."

"They don't know she's a witch," Roscoe explained. "Or else they might have been more careful. She's already caused them some trouble, though they don't know she's responsible." And he told Matthew about Izzy's visit to the pumphouse to plant the night-creeping arbutus. "They had to tear down the shed and build another one!" Roscoe grinned. "It took them two weeks to get things back the way they were. But now they keep a guard there *all* the time."

Matthew smiled at this, but then became serious again. "I'll tell you what worries me, Roscoe. The factory gate and the main driveway are right across the road from the schoolhouse. I've seen how their trucks go zooming in and out. This winter there's going to be a lot of heavy traffic which the schoolchildren will have to watch out for. The truck drivers won't be watching out for *them*."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Roscoe, with a concerned frown.

"What does M. Lucius think about all this?" Matthew asked.

"He hasn't said much. He was very interested to learn that Victoria Groundsquirrel couldn't find out what the factory will be making here."

Matthew rubbed his nose thoughtfully, glaring up-river. "I think I'll go up to Maple Crossing tonight. Think I'd better have a talk with M. Lucius. Get his opinion. He may have some new books in, as well."

"Ask him if he has anything on chrysanthemums," said Roscoe. "Mine aren't doing very well this year."

Matthew Muddie's worst fears were justified. When school opened six days later, the Sudge-Buddle factory was a churn with activity. Huge trucks roared in and out the gate all day long, lining up sometimes four and five deep on the narrow road that ran through the outskirts of Grover and past the school. They billowed up great clouds of dust, grumbling and grinding their gears, and belching out dark fumes. They carried heavy machinery and large crates into the factory, and, after unloading, zoomed out the gate, turned sharply and took off for Rawlinsville or for the city.

There was only a shallow ditch separating the road from the school playground. "Stay away from the road!" Matthew Muddie warned the schoolchildren. "During recess, play around on the other side of the building." As he watched the trucks roaring by, turning dangerously close to the ditch and



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sometimes jouncing into it, he thought, "We'll have to put up a fence." He went right in and wrote a note to Mayor Higgins about it.

But in October, when the factory went into operation, the situation became much worse. Every day, long coal trains pulled up on newly-built tracks by the river and unloaded heaps of black coal to feed the factory furnaces. The factory fires sent huge clouds of black, or yellow, or dirty white smoke mushrooming up from the towering smokestack that overshadowed the town. Sometimes, when the wind was wrong, or the air was damp, the smoke would settle like a thick fog over the school, the village, and the farms around. On these days, Matthew Muddie was forced to close the schoolhouse windows and run an electric fan in the classroom; for the smoke was filled with tiny particles of tarry black soot which settled on everything, and stuck, and wouldn't come off. It speckled people's hair, their clothes, and their food. It peppered their houses and cars and windowpanes. On such a day, the schoolhouse windows would be coated with a greasy gray-black film so thick that Matthew could write in it with his finger. Even worse, the smoke contained chemicals that caused people's eyes to itch, and water, and burn. Red-eyed, they developed runny noses; and before the first of December, Thaddeus Higgins had suffered a severe attack of asthma, and nine of the schoolchildren had come down with recurrent fits of coughing.

And the traffic continued just as before. But now the trucks left the factory as loaded down as when they came. No one knew what they carried into and out of the factory. The fence that Matthew had asked for was put up; but Mayor Higgins said she couldn't do anything about the smokestack fallout, for the factory lay just outside the village boundary. "But," she said to Matthew, "if you want to talk to the factory manager, I'll go with you. We've got to complain about the smoke."

"Let's go," said Matthew. "We shouldn't have to take any more of this."

On a very chilly morning in mid-December they went to the factory.

A man in a gray uniform stopped them at the gatehouse before they got to the parking lot, and asked them what their business was.

"We want to talk to the manager," the Mayor said.

"Do you have a pass?" the gatekeeper asked.

"No, we don't work here," the Mayor said.

"I know you don't," said the gatekeeper. "Do you have permission to enter the factory grounds?"

"No," said Mayor Higgins, beginning to lose her temper. "We want to talk to the manager."

The gatekeeper looked them over, up and down, for a long while. "I'll call the office and see if you can go in. Who are you?"

"I'm Estella Higgins, Mayor of Grover; and this is Matthew Muddie, the schoolmaster."

The gatekeeper picked up a telephone and dialed a number. "Two people at the gate to see Mr. Snade. The town mayor and a schoolteacher. Shall I send them in?" He hung up the phone. "You can go in," he said. "Wait till I make you out a pass." He wrote something on a card and gave it to Mayor Higgins. "Go across

the parking lot to the glass door in that first building.”

“Not very friendly,” remarked Matthew Muddie, as they headed for the glass door.

“Downright unfriendly,” said Mayor Higgins.

Inside the building, in a small room with gray walls, a metallic voice bleated at them from an overhead speaker: “Do you have a pass? Hold it up to the camera.”

Mayor Higgins held up her card to the gleaming lens of a television camera mounted on the wall. “Go down the hall to the second door on your right,” the voice commanded.

They went to the door, which opened for them as they approached. Inside was another small room containing two chairs and a metal box sitting on a counter. “State your business,” said the box.

“We’ve come to speak to the manager,” said Mayor Higgins.

“Your names,” said the box.

They gave them. “Mr. Snade will see you,” said the box. Another door opened, and they went into a large office with sleek black furniture and a thick green carpet on the floor. At a broad desk on the far side of the room, a tall man sat watching them. He was a gray sort of man, neither young nor old, with a thin face, sharply pointed nose, and flat blue eyes. He was wearing a gray suit with a black tie, and had a little gold pin in his lapel.

“Come in,” he greeted them, rising to shake their hands. “I’m Mr. Snade, the manager. Mr. Ferrell Snade. What can I do for you?” They introduced themselves and took chairs across the desk from him. Matthew Muddie began telling him, as calmly as he could, about the danger the truck traffic was causing for the schoolchildren.

“But I see you’ve put up a fence,” said Mr. Snade.

“Yes, we felt we had to. But we wonder if the factory can’t do something to reduce the traffic, or thin it out during school hours. Or, at the very least, urge the drivers to drive more carefully.”

“I appreciate your concern, Mr. Muddie,” said the manager. “But, as I’m sure you understand, the factory has certain schedules to meet, certain obligations that it must discharge. We have no choice but to do our work in the way that we must do it. I’m sure you understand *that*, Mr. Muddie, in your position of being responsible for the education of young children. Do you feel that the fence provides protection for the children?”

“*Some*,” said Matthew. “I feel safer now that it’s up—”

“Good, good,” said Mr. Snade with a smile. “Perhaps the Sudge-Buddle Company can contribute to the cost of putting it in. Mayor Higgins, why don’t you send us a statement of the cost? We’ll be glad to pay half. Glad, because the Sudge-Buddle Company firmly believes in being a good citizen and fulfilling its civic responsibilities in those communities in which it chooses to locate its facilities.”

“It didn’t cost very much,” said Mayor Higgins.

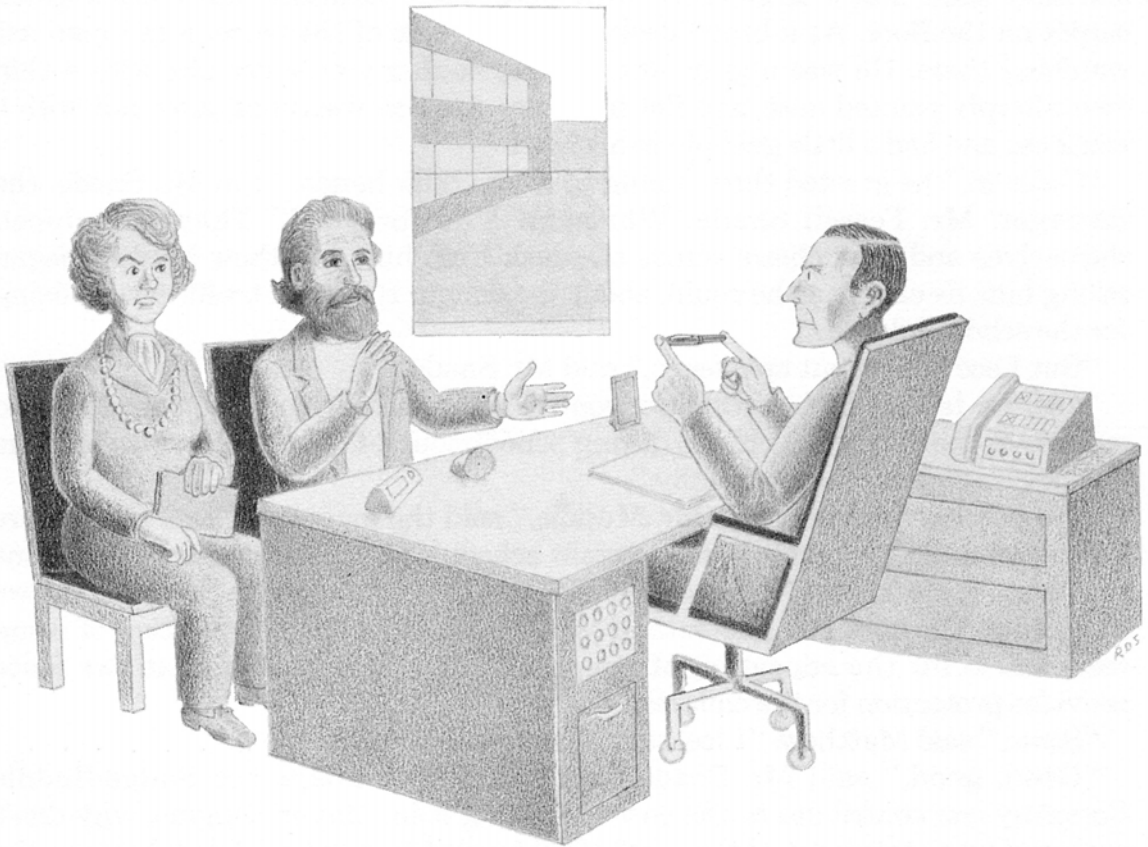
“You just send us a bill,” said Mr. Snade. He smiled and rose from his chair, as though he assumed the meeting was over.

"There's something else," Matthew Muddie said. Mr. Snade looked somewhat surprised, then smiled broadly and sat down again, waiting expectantly.

"Something's got to be done about the smoke, and the chemical fumes, and the gummy fallout," said Matthew Muddie.

Mr. Snade frowned in puzzlement. "By 'gummy fallout' I presume you mean the particulate matter?"

"I—I suppose so," Matthew said doubtfully, rubbing his beard. "I don't know what that is. I mean the little black particles that get on you and won't come off—the sticky film that forms on windows and walls. The whole town is bothered by the smoke—and the farmers, too. On bad days it comes down like a blanket, and folks can hardly breathe. Some of the schoolchildren have developed bad coughs that won't go away. And the Mayor's husband has found his asthma getting much worse."



"Yes, sometimes it does get rather thick," Mr. Snade agreed. "There are days when I have to keep my air conditioner running round the clock. But I know of no way to reduce the discharge, Mr. Muddie, beyond what we've already done. We're already using the best equipment available to cut down on stack emissions. We

have the best exhaust system that money can buy. What would you say, Mr. Muddie, if I told you that the Sudge-Buddle Company has spent over two million for cleaner operations?"

"I'd say that's a lot of money," said Matthew.

"Precisely!" said Mr. Snade. "So you see, the Sudge-Buddle Company *is* aware of the problem, and is doing what it can to solve it. You may rest assured that no expense will be spared in obtaining better and better equipment as it comes on the market!"

"That's good to hear," said Mayor Higgins. "But about the children—"

"The Sudge-Buddle Company will pay half the cost of the fence," Mr. Snade repeated. "The children must be protected. But at the same time, we can't let children stand in the way of progress, can we? This factory in Grover is a major step forward in production technique."

"We understand it won't be hiring any workers from around here," said Matthew Muddie.

"Right!" said Mr. Snade. "And therein lies the progress! This factory is entirely automated: machines do *all* the work! The only people employed here are myself, the watchmen, and the maintenance crew. Surely I don't need to tell you how important such an experiment will prove to be for the Sudge-Buddle Company and for the industrial world at large!" Mr. Snade rose smiling from his chair. "As for the problems you mention, you may be certain that the Sudge-Buddle Company is deeply concerned with doing what it can. We *must* be. We can do no less." He came around the desk and started moving them toward the door. "Thanks so much for coming to see me, and for sharing your concerns with us. It has given us a chance to share *our* concerns with you. That's what the world needs—more communication. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have many things to do, and not nearly enough time to do them in. I'm sure *you* must understand that, Mayor Higgins! But, here, before you go, I'd like for each of you to have a handsome ball-point pen with the compliments of the Sudge-Buddle Company. You'll see that our name is printed right there on the pen. Goodbye. And thanks again for coming. You can go out just the same way you came in."

The door closed behind them. In silence they left the building and started toward the gate.

Mayor Higgins was the first to speak. "Well, we can't say Mr. Snade didn't talk to us."

"True," said Matthew Muddie. "But we can't say that he dealt with our complaints, either."

"I feel like we've been for a ride on a merry-go-round," she said, "going in circles with lots of oom-pah-pah, but not getting anyplace."

"I feel like we've been talking into a dead telephone," said Matthew Muddie, "or to a pre-recorded message."

"Do you think things will get better now that we've seen him?"

"No," said Matthew. "Nothing we said will make any difference."

They walked on in silence. Then Mayor Higgins said hotly: "He can be sure I'll send him a bill for the fence! But it'll be for the *whole* cost!"

Matthew could control his anger no longer. He raised his arm and, with all his strength, flung the ball-point pen as far as he could across the parking lot. The pen flashed in the sunlight as it skittered on the concrete. High overhead, the red and white smokestack was belching out great clouds of gray and yellow smoke.

The rest of December was very cold. Then, just before the end of the month, there was a slight warming, and snow fell heavily for three days and two nights, gusting and swirling in a stiff north wind. Deep drifts piled against the fences and heaped standing ridges in the fields. Excitement raced through Grover like an electric shock: time for the Winter Carnival!

As usual, Miss Proudie Fairblossom chaired the planning session at the Old Hex Inn. Farmer Ben reported that the ice on his pond was thick enough for skating. Mayor Higgins and Sheriff Badger volunteered to organize the parade down Main Street and the costume contest. Randy Possum was put in charge of getting the Grover Brass Band to provide music, and Thaddeus Higgins agreed to supply refreshments—glazed doughnuts and hot apple cider.

The Carnival would last two days, opening with the parade, the costume judging, and the ice-skating competition. On the second day, there would be a village hike to Maple Crossing for a bonfire and community sing with hot chestnuts, popcorn, and toasted marshmallows—a change from previous years, when the bonfire had been built at Cherrystone Lake, on the spot now occupied by the Sudge-Buddle pumphouse. And of course there would be sledding on the hills north of Pheasant Run, and a contest to see who could build the best snow figure in the pasture behind the Old Hex Inn.

Snow fell steadily while the plans were made; then suddenly, on the night of the third day, the clouds moved on, leaving the sky clear. Beneath the thin sliver of moon and the brilliant stars, the snow glistened like thick smooth icing on a cake.

In the observatory on the roof of the Old Hex Inn, Fergus Fisher and Oliphant Owl sat huddled in a blanket, spellbound by the beauty of the scene. Below them, as far as they could see in all directions, the world was smoothly white. As though by magic, the well-known objects of the landscape had taken on new and unfamiliar shapes. No boundary lines were visible; no landmarks looked the same. Near at hand, all that could be seen of Roscoe's flower gardens were trees, and tops of shrubs, and parts of statues. Further off, throughout the pasture and beyond, all the trees seemed shorter than before as they stood black, against the white, in pools of dim blue shadow.

"It's all so beautiful," Oliphant said after a long silence. "So pure and peaceful. I wish that I could write poetry. I'm filled with feelings I wish I could express. Do you know what I mean, Fergus? It's like a big bubble inside of me that wants to burst."

"I know the feeling," Fergus said quietly, tilting the telescope toward the stars. "I also know a poem that Roscoe wrote last night after everyone went home. Though he probably wouldn't admit it if you asked him. Do you want to hear it?"

"Please," said Oliphant.

"It goes like this," said Fergus:

"Tonight, unbroken is the snow,
 No track yet laid upon it:
 Blank as a sheet of paper
 Before a pen makes jottings on it.
 Tomorrow, with the smoothness broken
 By tracks of feet
 And a criss-cross patchwork
 Of twin sled-runners' lines,
 I'll read with joy what's written
 And leave *my* marks upon the sheet."

"That's a nice poem," Oliphant said thoughtfully. "It says a *little* of what I'd like to say. But if *I* could write a poem, I'd want to mention how the snow glitters in the starlight like sugar crystals. And how the trees wear gumdrop hats. I'd want to talk about the drifts, like stiff whipped egg-whites in lemon-pie meringue."

Fergus nodded slowly. "The snow is there for all of us; yet each of us will pick out different things to see. Now, *I'm* fascinated by how much starlight it reflects. Think, Oliphant, if the moon were full, how bright the night would be! Like a summer dusk!" He looked up at the stars. "They're so very clear tonight! The winter constellations laid out like a chart. There's Taurus the Bull, and Cancer the Crab; Draco the Dragon, and Orion, belt and dagger, trailed by Sirius! Let's find the Orion Nebula!" He swiveled the telescope into position and began to focus it.

Suddenly Oliphant touched his arm and whispered, "Look! Something's happening at the factory!"

On the other side of Little River and far upstream, a faint glare of reddish orange puffed larger, glowing. Fergus swung the telescope around and aimed it at the spot of light. "It's coming from the top of the smokestack," he announced, peering through the scope. "The glow is a reflection at the base of the smoke column. They must have fired the furnace."

Oliphant looked through the telescope. "The smoke is really chuffing out," he said, "and see—above the stack, it flattens out to make a long plume in the sky, all gray and chalky blue in the moonlight."

"It's going to mess up our viewing," said Fergus grimly, training the telescope once again upon Orion's dagger. "It's already blotting out some of the stars. We'll have to hurry if we want to see the nebula."

Next morning when the Winter Carnival began, the sky was clear and blue except for the fat plume from the Sudge-Buddle smokestack that stretched

across it like a dirty gray smudge. The parade went well. It started with a speech by M. Lucius Ferret dressed as King Winter in a false white beard and cap with sleighbells, and ended in Grover Park with refreshments. The band played fairly well, considering the short time they'd had to practice. And Priscilla Possum won the costume contest by coming dressed as an icicle.

By mid-morning, a crowd had gathered at Farmer Ben's pond. Swept clear of snow, the dark gray ice was aswirl with the bright coats and scarves of skaters. Farmer Ben had built a bonfire at the edge of the pond for folks to warm themselves, and throughout the day he was kept busy hauling up scrap lumber and tree stumps to keep it burning. In the pasture behind the Old Hex Inn, an even larger crowd had gathered to build their entries in the snow figure contest. Till noon they were rolling great balls of snow to make their statues: some thirty-five people in all, including thirteen members of the Fieldmouse family, the three Otter children, and Roscoe Lynx—who kept them all supplied with coffee and hot chocolate.

For their figure, the Fieldmice were making a large Swiss cheese; the children took great delight in carving out the holes. Grandfather Fieldmouse directed the operation, pacing nervously about in his brown overcoat and red earmuffs, giving orders to Ambrose who passed them on to the rest. Nearby, Arabella Raccoon and Simon Skunk were working together on the figure of an elephant. The Otter children were building a large birthday cake with fancy decorations and seven candles. Thorstein and Rebecca Raccoon were constructing a long, scaly dragon. And Peabody the Postman was off by himself creating something which no one could identify. Some thought it looked like a steam locomotive; some thought it was to be a polar bear; still others thought it would become a grand piano. Peabody wasn't saying.

As the day progressed, many statues took on recognizable shape. There was a turtle standing on squat legs, a man carrying a ladder, a tall castle complete with moat and drawbridge, a tiger, a steamship, a politician giving a speech (with one arm raised), a large shoe with neatly tied laces, and a peacock with a spread tail. Some of the children from Grover and the surrounding countryside had built two sturdy snow forts on one side of the pasture, and on and off throughout the day kept up a raging snowball fight.

Cassandra Scissortail wandered about from statue to statue, supervising the work, making a suggestion here, a criticism there. She stared at Peabody's figure for a very long time, viewing it from all angles. She could not identify the figure he was making, try as she might. Cassandra didn't like being baffled. She moved in close and stood beside him as he happily patted the snow into place and shaped and trimmed the figure. "That's a very nice alligator," she commented. "Especially the tail."

"It's not an alligator," said Peabody.

"Did I say 'alligator'?" she said. "How silly of me! Of course I meant to say 'a very fine snail'."

"It's not a snail, either," said Peabody, working away.

She studied it some more. "Beehive, then."

"Nope."

"Loaf of bread?"

"Nope."

"Well, what is it, then?" she cried, losing all patience.

"It's a whale," said Peabody.

"Oh, I see," she said. But she didn't. And she quickly left and went to help the Otters with their cake.

During the afternoon, the skating contest got underway at Farmer Ben's pond. The crowd had grown much larger after lunch, and Elizabeth H., Miss Proudie Fairblossom, and Thaddeus Higgins had to step fast to keep everyone supplied with refreshments. At two o'clock, Roscoe Lynx arrived with his skates and, to everyone's delight, immediately streaked onto the ice and began doing graceful spins and loops and glides on the glassy surface. Since no one could match his skill on skates, Roscoe would never think of competing in the contests; but he liked very much being asked to judge them.

"An old hockey player like me has an unfair advantage," he remarked to Lafayette Lizard, who was reporting the competition for the *Grover Gazette*.

"As a contestant, yes," Lafayette agreed, "—but it makes you the best judge possible."

"I know what to look for," Roscoe acknowledged gruffly.

Lucy Otter won first prize in the figure skating contest, with Randy Possum taking second place. A boy from Grover named Quincy Clyde won the barrel jump, and Farmer Ben the novelty event—by skating backward through a flaming hoop with one leg raised while playing "The Honey Brew Rag" on his harmonica.

Between events, other folks—who wouldn't dream of competing for prizes—went skating for fun. Amidst roars and shrieks of laughter there were many spills and sudden sitting-downs. The three Otter children went sliding about without any skates at all, and got up such speed that Jamie shot headfirst off the pond into a snowbank and had to be pulled out by Tim Turtle and Randy Possum.

During one of the breaks between competitions, Matthew Muddie—on snowshoes and sipping hot chocolate—approached the group huddled about the crackling bonfire. "It's a good Carnival," he said, his breath making a frosty puff in the air. "I'm glad people are having so much fun."

"Yes, but I'm keeping my fingers crossed," said Doctor Badger, warming himself at the fire. "So far no one has gotten hurt on the ice, but M. Lucius Ferret has fallen down at least thirty times."

"I think he must enjoy falling down," said Tim Turtle, "he does it so frequently; and he always gets up to do it again."

"I wouldn't enjoy falling down," said Priscilla Possum with a smile, "and that's exactly what would happen if I put on skates. I enjoy watching *him* at

it—he does it so well; but I wouldn't think of going out on the ice myself.”

“I'm troubled by one thing, though,” Matthew Muddie continued. “I'm sure you've noticed it, too. The snow stopped falling early last night; it should still be fresh and clean. But look—” and he pointed to the untrampled snow a short distance from the fire “—those black particles like soot are everywhere. I went out for a walk this morning, bright and early—to try out my new snowshoes—and there it was all over the snow, gritty and foul, everywhere I went. And I went pretty far.”

“Yes, we've noticed it,” said Miss Proudie Fairblossom. She held up her hand, and they saw that her white glove was soiled with a tarry black smudge. “Once it gets on your clothes, it doesn't come off. And it has a very bad odor. Like burnt sulfur.”

“It is a burnt sulfur smell,” said Izzy the Witch; and Prosper, his eyes closed, nodded agreement.

“Close to Grover it's worse than here,” said Thaddeus Higgins. “There the snow is peppered almost entirely black.”

“There's no escape from it,” said Matthew Muddie. “And see, it's still coming down!” They looked up. Overhead was the dense gray haze of the factory smoke. The air above and about them was filled with tiny black particles, near and far, sifting gently down; had they been white, they could have been mistaken for tiny snowflakes.

During the night the wind changed direction, and next morning the sky was overcast with gray clouds which promised more snow. The Carnival plans for the day called first for a hike from Grover to the Old Hex Inn for the judging of the snow statues, then for the trip to Maple Crossing for the bonfire and marshmallow toast. Early in the morning, the folks who had built snow figures went to the pasture to put finishing touches to their statues. A shock awaited them.

“Look!” cried Arabella Raccoon, as she and Simon approached their elephant. “It's covered with black spots!”

And so were all the other figures: the dragon, the cake, the turtle, the Swiss cheese, Peabody's whale—all grimed with mottled black blotches.

“Can we clean them off?” wailed Rebecca Raccoon, as she and Thorstein grimly went to work on their dragon. First they tried to remove the black spots by plucking them off; but the particles had melted into the snow where they had fallen, and removing them left deep gouges in the surface of the statue. And even worse, the splotches were sticky and moist, like tar, so that people's hands quickly became smeared with black goo. Next they tried to use fresh snow to cover up the pits and gouges in the statues. But the snow on the ground was equally speckled. When this new snow was patted into place with their tarry gloves, the statues changed from white to dirty gray. “Do we want a gray elephant, or shall we just leave it spotted?” Simon asked Arabella. It was a hard choice to make. But after a moment, she replied: “Let's leave it spotted.”

And in the distance, the Sudge-Buddle stack continued churning out great cauliflower clouds of thick black smoke.

Chapter 10

EVERY SPRINGTIME, after planting their vegetables and taking down the storm windows, Elizabeth H. and Farmer Ben spent several weeks painting pictures of the countryside. Elizabeth H. really preferred painting autumn colors, but she was glad to get outside in the fresh spring air after being indoors all winter. Farmer Ben, on the other hand, much preferred the pale, delicate colors of sprouting grasses and newly budded leaves; he held the bright colors of autumn to be something of a bore.

Elizabeth H. was quite an accomplished painter. As a young woman she had studied for several years at the Grundtvig Academy of Art before returning to Grover to take care of her mother during her last illness. She enjoyed painting landscapes (especially autumn ones), but was very good at portraits, too—and over the years had done fine likenesses of Tonia Turtle, Arabella Raccoon, Estella Higgins (not Thaddeus—he refused to sit), Victoria Groundsquirrel, Cassandra Scissortail, Miss Proudie Fairblossom, and Peabody the Postman. Long before their marriage Farmer Ben had admired her paintings; and after their marriage he asked her to teach him how to paint. She'd agreed, and after two years of hard work, he had become a fairly decent painter too (a fact which continually surprised him). He only did landscapes, however; for all of the portraits he'd ever tried turned out to be disasters. "I have trouble with noses," he used to say. But it wasn't just noses; it was eyes and ears and mouths and teeth and cheeks and chins and all of them together. After a dismal failure in attempting a likeness of Priscilla Possum (in shades of green, mostly)—which, when she saw it, caused her to faint dead away in the middle of his living room—Farmer Ben gave up portraits altogether, and stuck to landscapes. These he did very well; he was better than Elizabeth H. at painting skies (though she was better than he at painting water).

In budding time and blossom time, folks might run across them anywhere perched on their folding stools with easels and canvas before them, paints and brushes at their side. They each had their favorite spots, of course, which they returned to year after year. But frequently, without warning, they would turn up in new and unexpected places—the back pasture at the Old Hex Inn, or Roscoe's flower garden, or the Piney Woods on the south flank of the Chickalooga Forest. Cherrystone Lake had been one of their very favorite spots when Farmer Green had owned the land, and they felt a keen sense of loss at no longer being able to go there.

Elizabeth H. usually went painting alone, claiming that she could think better when by herself. But sometimes Miss Proudie went with her, or the young Otters, or Tonia Turtle, or even—on rare occasions—her husband. When he did,

he would sleep or read a book while she worked. Farmer Ben's motto was "One painting at a time is quite enough." So, when she went with *him*—which was not often—she would leave her paints at home and bring instead her sketchbook and drawing pencils or her knitting. She too felt that "two was one too many."

In the spring following the Winter of the Speckled Snow, Elizabeth H. began her painting activity at the Old Marsh Place. Ben Barker began his by spending several days in The Cattails at the back of Fairblossom Farm. When he was done there, he moved to Flat Meadow on the east bank of Little River, across the water and slightly downstream from the Otters' house.

His choice proved to be a mistake. For after he had been painting for only an hour, the gentle May breeze changed direction and brought down upon him the smoke from the Sudge-Buddle factory. A foul, choking stink assailed him, causing his eyes to burn and water. Tiny black particles dotted the wet canvas, and within four minutes his picture was speckled with tar-like spots. When he tried to pick them off, they blended with the paint. When he tried to paint over them, they followed his brush with streaks of runny black slime.

After vainly struggling to repair the damage, Farmer Ben leaped up shaking his fist and shouting terrible things at the smokestack which towered high above the trees. Rubbing his eyes, and wiping his nose with his shirt sleeve, he tumbled his tubes of paint into the carryall, flung his brushes in after them, folded up his stool and easel in slam-bang fury, and went stomping away downriver through the clover and pepperweed.

Heading toward the Old Hex Inn, he came to the grassy hollow which was called The Glen. There he saw Izzy the Witch cropping herbs on her hands and knees beneath the willow trees—putting the leaves into jars, and the jars into her wicker basket. In the shade of a nearby tree sat Prosper, his eyes closed.

"Be careful where you walk!" Izzy called out in alarm when she saw him coming. "There's patches of liverwort here—a very rare type—and some adder's tongue, too!" Then she saw the expression on his face. "What's wrong?" she demanded. "You look like you're ready to go off like a rocket!"

"Just look at this picture!" he sputtered, holding up the canvas. Prosper opened one eye and regarded the painting without moving from the tree. Izzy studied it and asked with a puzzled frown: "Is it supposed to look like that?"

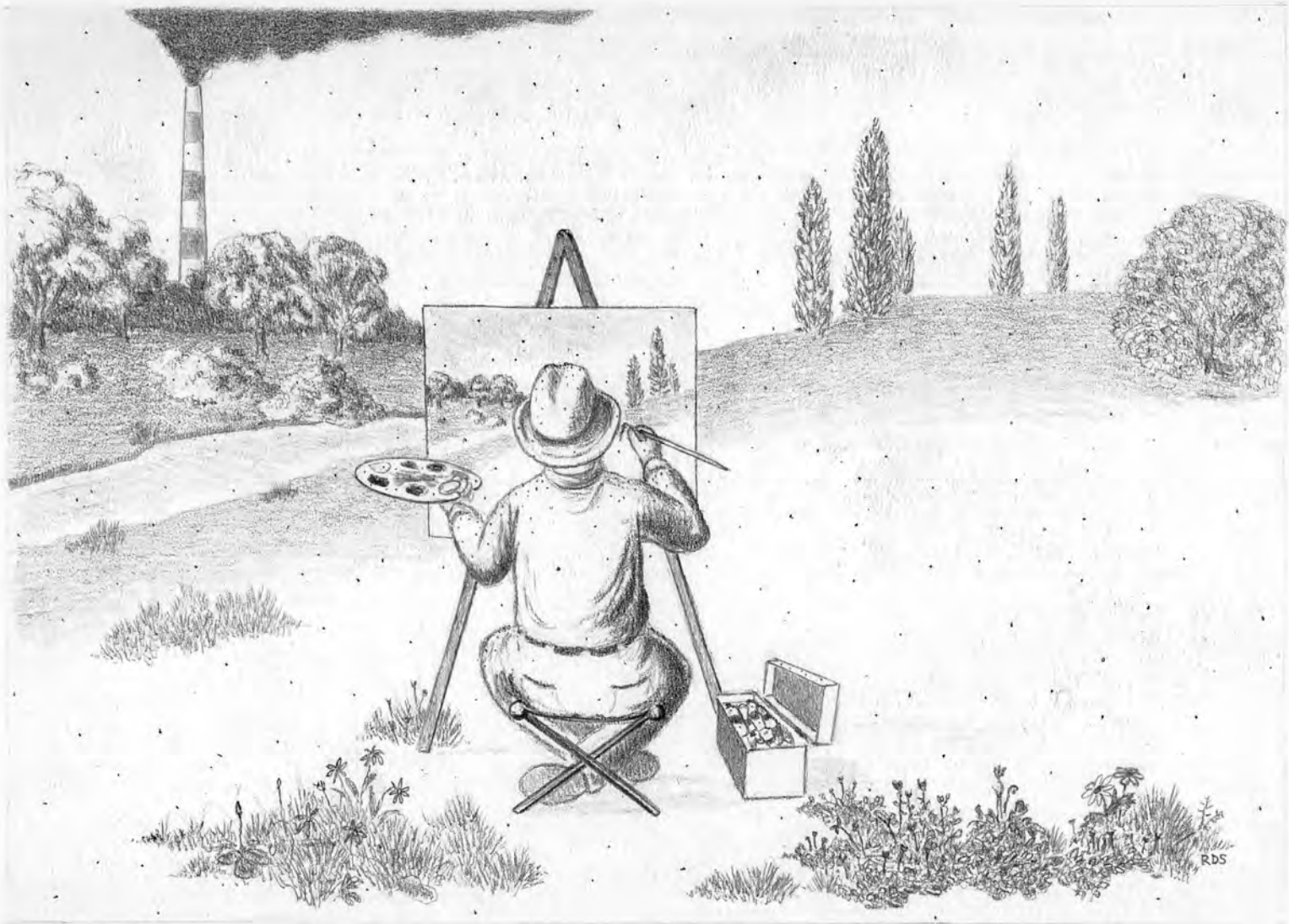
"It is *not*!" he shouted.

She looked at it again. "Well, it's not finished—"

"It *is* finished!" he roared. And with a vicious fling of his arm, he hurled the picture to the ground and raised high his foot to stomp it.

"Oh wait!" cried Izzy. "You threw it on the liverwort!" She grabbed his descending foot and heaved it upward. Thrown off balance, Farmer Ben gave a whoop and heavily toppled over backwards. The easel flew to the left and hit a willow tree. The stool flew to the right and mashed a mushroom. The carryall arched upward like a high pop fly and came down with a crunch on Prosper's foot. Prosper gave a gasp and opened both his eyes at once.

"Oh, no!" Izzy wailed at Farmer Ben, who sat dazed and shaken by his fall. "You sat on the adder's tongue!"



RDS

"Oh—oh—sorry," he stammered, shifting his body to look nervously at the crushed ferns beneath him. "I didn't mean to."

Clutching her forehead, Izzy stooped down to inspect the damage. It was extensive. "Well," she sighed, "I guess the liverwort *was* more important."

Prosper leaned forward with one elbow on the carryall. "Don't you see what's wrong with his painting, Izzy? It's got Sudge-Buddle blight all over it."

"Well, so does everything else," she said. "Yesterday when I hung my wash out to dry, the sheets looked as if they'd been peppered. This morning they were full of little holes."

"What's to be done?" Ben Barker groaned, holding his head in his hands. "Nothing we try does any good! After the Winter Carnival, Mayor Higgins wrote two letters of complaint to the Company's home office. They didn't even answer them. Then, after that, Matthew Muddie tried to get in to see Mr. Snade a second time, and couldn't even get past the gate."

"I know what I'd *like* to do," said Izzy.

"Izzy—" Prosper said warningly. "When you got your witching papers you had to promise you'd never do that one. Now, don't go back on your word. You don't want to lose your license!"

"That's true," she said. "I promised. Well, I don't have the necessary ingredients anyway. They're very hard to get nowadays."

"But we've got to do something!" Farmer Ben cried in despair. "It's not just my painting and your bedsheets. Every house in Grover has gotten grimy gray. And there's no use trying to paint them: the soot would cover them again before the paint was dry! You know what happened when Simon tried to paint his workshop."

"A nightmare," said Izzy. "I couldn't believe my eyes."

Prosper stood up and tapped her shoulder with the end of his walking stick. "It's time to go, Izzy. Thorstein has been tending the store for two hours."

Izzy nodded and gathered up her jars and basket. Farmer Ben collected his painting equipment. With Prosper pacing behind them in solemn dignity, they went downstream to the bridge.

"Would it do any good to write another letter to the Company's home office?" Izzy asked, as they reached the road and prepared to go their separate ways. "Mayor Higgins could try again, or I could write it, or you, or all of us together."

"We might as well," said Farmer Ben. "What can we lose? Why don't *we* do it this time? You and I. And Prosper, of course."

"It really ought to be done," said Prosper. "One more time."

And with that agreement they separated, Farmer Ben starting off thoughtfully toward Grover, Izzy and Prosper more briskly toward Maple Crossing.

When Ben Barker got home, he showed his ruined painting to Elizabeth H. "Oh, Ben!" she cried, staring horrified at the tarry specks and smears. "And your clouds were coming along so nicely!" Too upset to talk further, he went to the kitchen and started making a pot of coffee. With clenched fists, Elizabeth H. stood before the ruined painting, her whole body trembling as she struggled to contain the anger surging within her like molten lava. In her fury she wanted to

strike out and smash something. But that wouldn't accomplish anything. An eruption should be made to serve some purpose. Dark lightnings flashed in her eyes. She went to the telephone and called Tonia Turtle.

"I'm going to the factory to talk to Mr. Snade," she announced. "The smoke has just ruined Ben's latest painting. Do you want to come with me?"

Tonia could tell from her voice how angry Elizabeth H. was. "Indeed I do," she answered. "Tim and I want to complain about what's happening to the river water. All the plants are dying. But do you think we can get in? Mr. Snade refused to see Matthew the last time he tried."

"I'm determined to see him," said Elizabeth H. "If he tries to keep me out, he'll find that it won't be easy."

"When shall we go?" asked Tonia.

"This afternoon," said Elizabeth H. "I'll call some others. Let's meet at the schoolhouse at three o'clock."

From the schoolhouse porch they watched the trucks coming and going through the factory gate across the road. Elizabeth H. had managed to assemble a sizable group for such short notice: Tonia Turtle, Lucy Otter (who had been planning to bake a cake that afternoon), Hilda Badger, and Arabella Raccoon (who had closed the shoestore in order to come). Elizabeth H. showed them Ben's ruined painting, and Lucy Otter displayed the blackened pillowcase she had brought along. "We'll just walk in the gate," said Elizabeth H., "as though we have every right to be there. If they stop us, we'll demand to see Mr. Snade and won't leave till he talks to us."

"I can spend all afternoon if we have to," said Arabella.

"I hope it won't be necessary," said Elizabeth H. "Let's go." The five of them crossed the road and marched toward the gate. A large truck roared past them into the parking lot. They followed it, moving quickly past the gatehouse.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?" a man in a gray uniform shouted from one of the windows.

"Keep moving," Elizabeth H. whispered to the others. They were well past the gate and into the parking lot. The guard came running after them. "Stop right where you are! This is private property, and you're trespassing!"

Tonia and Hilda Badger, at the head of the group, stopped in confusion, and those behind jostled up against them. "What's your business here?" the guard shouted.

"We've come to see Mr. Snade," said Elizabeth H.

"Do you have a pass?" the guard demanded.

"Look out!" cried Lucy Otter. They all scrambled out of the way as a truck zoomed by them, through the gate, and onto the road.

"Of course we don't have a pass," said Elizabeth H.

"Then you can't come onto the property," said the guard. He started herding them toward the gate.

"We want to talk to Mr. Snade," said Elizabeth H. "As citizens of Grover we insist on seeing him."

"You can't go in," the guard said. "I have my orders. No one gets in without a pass."

"Then get us one," snapped Hilda Badger. "And be quick about it."

The guard stared at her. There was something in her tone that told him it would be unwise to argue. "I'll call the manager," he said finally, "and see if he'll give you a pass. Wait here, *outside* the gate."

He went into the gatehouse and picked up the telephone.

"Mr. Snade, this is the gatekeeper. There's some people here from Grover who want to talk to you. I said they couldn't go in without a pass."

Lucy Otter, who was standing beside the window (and who had very good ears) heard what Mr. Snade was saying (in a very loud voice) on the other end.

"How many people? Who are they? And what do they want?"

"Five," said the guard. He asked them their names, which they gave, and what they wanted, which they refused to say. "We'll tell him ourselves," said Elizabeth H. The guard frowned and reported their names into the telephone.

"Umm," said Mr. Snade, "the doctor's wife, Ben Barker's wife, the shoe-store person—is the Mayor there, or that schoolteacher—Matthew What's-his-name?"

"No, sir."

"All right, I don't want to see them. Don't let them in. They've already written two letters to the Home Office complaining about the factory. My orders from the Home Office are not to waste time talking to them anymore. They're just trying to make trouble. The Company's run into this many times before."

"They say they insist on seeing you since they're citizens of Grover," the guard said.

Mr. Snade gave a short laugh. "Insist? Why, our property isn't even inside the village boundary! We purposely built just over the line. Get rid of them. And if they won't go away, call the Sheriff. *I'll* file a complaint and have them arrested for trespassing!" Mr. Snade hung up with a loud click. The guard leaned out the window and shook his head.

"No pass," he said with crisp authority. "You can't go in."

"Then we'll wait," said Elizabeth H. "Mr. Snade will have to come out to go home to Rawlinsville."

"No waiting," said the guard. "You'll have to leave. That's an order. Or else I'll call the Sheriff and have you arrested."

"Arrested?" cried Tonia Turtle.

"I have my orders," said the guard. "Get moving."

"We're going to talk this over among ourselves," Lucy Otter declared, "to decide what we wish to do."

"I've got the Sheriff's number," the guard said.

"It'll just take a minute," said Lucy. They huddled a little distance away, and Lucy told the others what she'd heard Mr. Snade say on the phone.

"So the Home Office *did* get Mayor Higgins' letters!" said Tonia. "But they never answered them."

"And it sounds like they don't intend to," Arabella snapped.

"But they told Mr. Snade about them," said Hilda Badger coldly.

"And they think we're just troublemakers!" said Tonia.

"Well then, I feel like making a little trouble," said Elizabeth H. "I want to show Mr. Snade this ruined picture."

"And I want to show him my pillowcase," said Lucy.

"And I want to tell him about Little River and the dying plants," said Tonia.

"Then let's go," said Arabella Raccoon. She tilted her blue baseball cap forward and started for the gate. The others followed her, running hard.

"Hey!" the guard shouted. "Get back there! You can't do that!" He pressed a button in the gatehouse, and the high chain-link gate swiftly slid shut in front of them. It also slid shut in front of a large truck which was coming out of the parking lot at a rather good clip. The driver gave a startled cry and just managed to stop short of the gate with a horrendous screeching of brakes. He immediately began shouting nasty things at the guard.

The five Groverpeople spread out along the gate, forming a line which blocked the driveway on their side. It was the best they could do, since the fence was too high for them to climb. The truck driver leaped out of his cab and ran to the gatehouse shaking his fist. The guard seemed badly confused—but only for a moment: he grabbed for the telephone and quickly dialed Sheriff Badger's number.

"What do you think you're doing?" the truck driver shouted through the window. "You made me almost have a wreck!"

"It's all their fault!" the guard shouted back at him, pointing to the five on the other side of the fence.

"Open the gate!" the driver shouted. "I've got a schedule to meet!"

"I can't!" said the guard. "They'll get *in!*"

"Yeah, but I want *out!*" said the driver. He snatched the telephone receiver out of the guard's hand and hung it up. The guard reached for it and the driver slapped his hand. "Open the gate!"

"No!" cried the guard, and he slammed the window shut. The truck driver flushed purple with rage; it was lucky for the guard that the only door to the gatehouse was on the road side of the gate. While the guard shakily dialed the sheriff's number a second time, the truck driver hurried along the fence and began shouting at the Groverpeople. "He says it's all your fault!" he bellowed. "What do you think *you're* doing?"

"We're waiting to see Mr. Snade," Arabella answered.

"We know he's in there," said Tonia. "If he'd just come out and talk to us, you'd be free to leave."

"*He's* the one you want to talk to about opening the gate," said Hilda.

The truck driver tugged hard at the gate and found that it was locked fast. Muttering under his breath, he marched off angrily to the Administration Building: he sure *would* talk to the manager! Mr. Snade wasn't *his* boss; he worked for Trotter Trucking Company—and he was looking forward to the chance of telling Mr. Snade what he thought of managers who botched up a



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man's work schedule. "Tell him we're waiting!" Hilda Badger called after him.

From the direction of the city, two other trucks had arrived, turned off the road, and, finding their way blocked, stopped short in the driveway with their engines idling. "What's going on here?" one of the drivers called out. "Why is the gate closed?"

"The guard shut it," Tonia Turtle shouted back. "And only he can open it."

The driver climbed down from his cab and hurried into the gatehouse. The guard still hadn't been able to reach Sheriff Badger; the phone had rung nineteen times with no answer. The guard was becoming frantic. It was a pity that he didn't know Sheriff Badger's afternoon habits; for if he had, he could have reached him at the Old Hex Inn, where at the moment he was enjoying a mug of honey brew and a game of checkers with Grandfather Fieldmouse.

"When are you gonna open the gate?" the truck driver asked.

"I—I don't know," the guard said. By now the sheriff's phone had rung twenty-six times. The guard would have been even more frantic if he'd known that while he spoke, Mr. Snade—confronted in his green-carpeted office by a furious desk-pounding truck driver employed by another Company—was on *his* phone trying desperately to reach the gatehouse, but unable to do so because the line was busy.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" the newly-arrived driver growled at the guard. "You got some kind of mechanical problem?"

The guard motioned out to the driveway, where three trucks now stood with their engines idling—one of them parked on the road. "It's those *people!*" he said. "They want to see the manager!"

"So why close the gate?" the driver asked. "Let 'em in to see the manager."

"Mr. Snade doesn't *want* them in!"

"It looks like Mr. Snade doesn't want *us* in, either."

"No, it's not Mr. Snade. *I* closed the gate."

The driver looked at him for a long time as he stood there holding the telephone receiver. "Well, buddy, you sure do got a problem," he said finally. "But it ain't mechanical." He turned and left the gatehouse. The guard hung up the phone and peered nervously out the window. There were four truck drivers now, walking about and talking with the five Groverpeople.

The telephone rang. At last! The guard grabbed the receiver and said, "Sheriff, I've been trying to reach you—"

"This isn't the Sheriff, you idiot! This is Mr. Snade. What's going on down there?"

"They won't go away, sir. The gate's locked. And trucks are piling up."

There was a pause, and over the phone the guard heard voices squabbling, and the sound of a fist pounding on a desk. "No, I will not see them!" he heard Mr. Snade shout. Then, into the phone, Mr. Snade growled: "Guard, I take it you weren't able to reach the Sheriff."

"No, sir. I tried, but there wasn't any answer."

Another silence, with voices in the background. Then: "Guard, I'll be leaving in two minutes. I trust you'll open the gate for *me!*" The phone slammed down in

the guard's ear. He hung up the receiver and leaned forward to peer out the window, his finger above the pushbutton.

Elizabeth H. and Lucy Otter had been having a good conversation with two of the truck drivers. They had explained to them why they were trying to get in to see Mr. Snade, and were answering the drivers' questions when Hilda Badger suddenly cried, "Look! There's Mr. Snade!"

Standing silent in the clogged driveway, they watched through the fence as Mr. Snade dashed from the Administration Building to a small garage, got into his car, rolled up the windows, and locked the doors. By this time, seven trucks were lined up outside the factory gate, four of them strung out along the road. Mr. Snade drove slowly toward them across the parking lot, his face frowning through the windshield. The guard pushed the button, and the gate slid back. The truck drivers retreated as the car drove through, but the Groverpeople pressed forward, forming a narrow channel for the manager's car. He glared straight before him, ignoring the people pressing in from all sides. Elizabeth H. rapped her knuckles on the window glass and held up Ben's ruined picture. Lucy Otter opened out her blackened pillowcase. Looking neither right nor left, Mr. Snade threaded his car between the stationary trucks till he reached the road; then he turned sharply left and, with a squeal of rubber, sped off toward Rawlinsville.

The truck drivers went back to their cabs. One of them paused a moment to say, "It's too bad you didn't get to talk to him."

"He got the message anyway," said Elizabeth H.

"Well, good luck," the driver said as he climbed into his seat.

The Groverpeople crossed the road and started back toward town.

"Well, there you have it," said Tonia Turtle. "We never got to tell him about the river."

"It wouldn't have made any difference," said Lucy Otter.

"Which leaves us pretty much where we were before," said Hilda Badger.

"Worse," said Arabella, "for it's clear now there isn't any *hope* that the Sudge-Buddle Company will do anything to improve the situation."

"Did you get a good look at his face?" asked Elizabeth H. "His skin had a very interesting coloration: mottled in patches of red and white. It really needs to be *seen* to be believed. I think I'll paint a portrait of Mr. Snade—from life!—and see if Roscoe will hang it at the Old Hex Inn."

Chapter 11

AMONG THE Groverpeople, the rout of Mr. Snade quickly came to be called The Standoff at the Factory Gate. Sheriff Badger's reaction when he heard the story was one of surprise: "How was I to know that someone would call my office? Most folks know where I can be found at three-thirty in the afternoon."

"You're as regular as clockwork," Grandfather Fieldmouse smiled. "If it's not checkers, it's darts."

"Well, they've got to make a complaint before I can do anything," said the Sheriff. But a week went by, and Mr. Snade made no complaint against the five. "I guess it *is* a standoff," said the Sheriff. "Which leaves the question, What do we do next?"

For despite the amusement the incident provided, the Groverpeople saw quite clearly what it meant. It was indeed as Arabella had said that afternoon: there was no longer any reason to hope that the Company would do anything to clean up the factory's operations. Their laughter merely served to keep them from despair. And they sensed that once they gave way to despair, they would be unable to come up with any solutions at all. As Sheriff Badger said, the important thing was to figure out what to do next.

"What else *can* we do?" Matthew Muddie inquired of a group gathered at the Old Hex Inn. "We've tried to get through to them, but they won't listen to us. Would there be any chance of winning a lawsuit if we took them to court?"

"We could certainly claim damages," said M. Lucius Ferret. "As for winning, I don't know."

"I'll call Victoria," said Franklin Groundsquirrel, "and get her advice. She'd know what our chances are."

"We might also be able to get a court order to stop the factory from fouling the air," said M. Lucius.

"Why just worry about the air?" Tim Turtle asked. "Have you folks looked at Little River lately?"

"I have," said Roscoe Lynx, wiping his hands on his apron. "Down by the bridge it stinks like a sewer. Sometimes there's an oily film on the water, sometimes a cheesy gray scum. All the plants along the edge are yellowish and sick."

"Just upstream from our back door," said Lucy Otter, "the factory has three big pipes that pour liquid waste into the river. Oscar and I haven't gone swimming for ages, and we don't dare let the children play in the water."

"Not play in the water!" cried Matthew Muddie.

"We *can't*," said Lucy bitterly. "It's not safe. We don't know what's in that

stuff they're flushing out of the factory. Doctor Badger is sure that it's all sorts of harmful chemicals."

"Used to be some days were worse than others," Oscar added. "Now it's always the same."

"Franklin, call Victoria," Matthew Muddie said. "Ask her if she thinks we could take the Company to court."

M. Lucius Ferret knew how anxious and depressed the Otters were. Over the last few weeks he had watched the worry lines deepening about their mouths, the ever more exhausted look shadowing their eyes. He reached out and gripped their arms. "There's still another possibility," he said. "Some time ago the government set up a Pollution Control Agency to hear citizens' complaints. We can ask them to come down here and see for themselves what the Sudge-Buddle Company is doing! And they have the power to make the factory clean itself up; if it doesn't they can shut it down. Who wants to go with me to the capital to talk to them?"

"I'll go," said Matthew Muddie. "With great pleasure."

"Count me in," said Roscoe Lynx.

"Me too," said Rebecca Raccoon.

"We can take my truck," said Farmer Ben.

"When shall we go?" asked Oscar Otter.

"Tomorrow!" M. Lucius cried.

The next afternoon found them crowded into Ben Barker's pickup truck trying to find a parking spot in the capital city. By telephone M. Lucius had arranged a two-o'clock meeting with somebody named Pearson Renwick at the Pollution Control Agency. "I don't know who he is," M. Lucius said, "but that's who they let me talk to when I called."

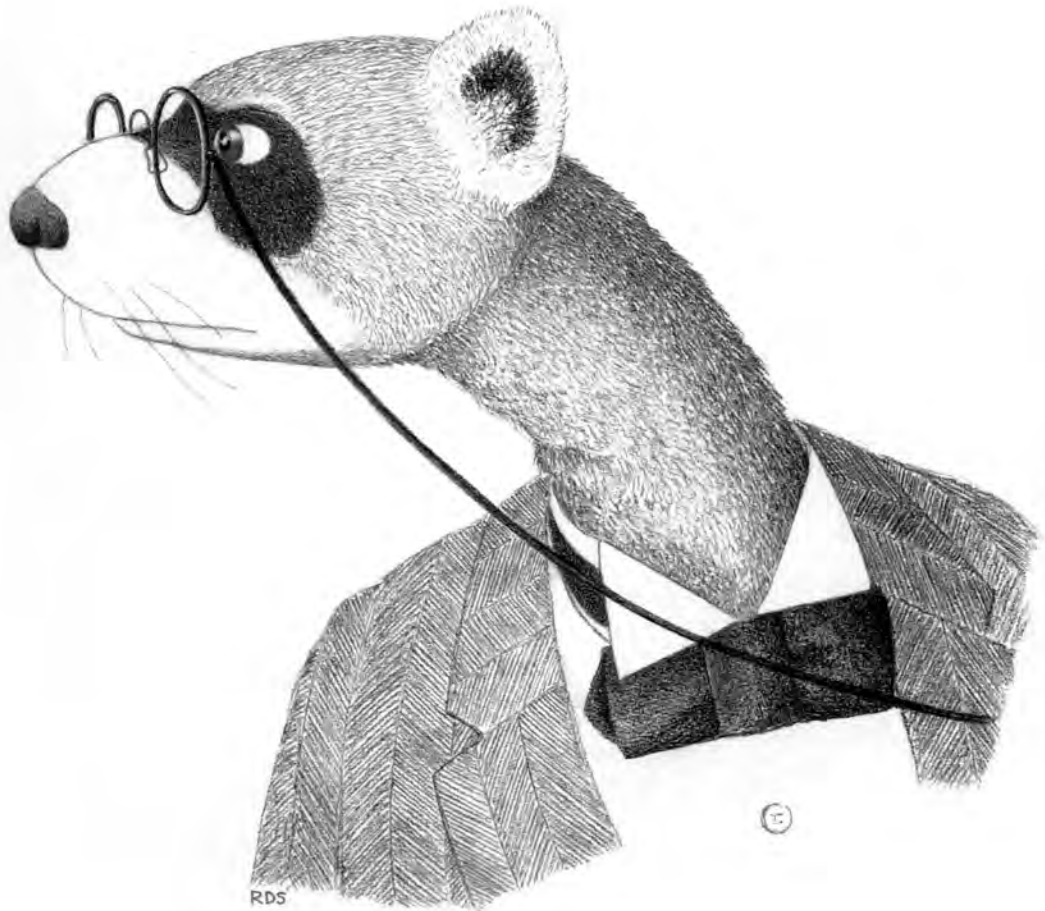
"We'll find out soon enough," said Rebecca Raccoon, as Farmer Ben squeezed the truck into a tight parking space across the street from the Government Office Building. "One thing's sure: since some of our tax money goes to pay his salary, he'll have to help us."

Their spirits were high as they entered the building; up the steps and into the foyer they chatted and joked, their eyes bright with excitement. It had been a long time since they'd been in such a jolly mood. And when they saw the tall gray marble walls of the downstairs hallway, the polished marble floor, the bronze bannister on the imposing staircase, and the heavy bronze elevator doors—all looking as solid and official as the State itself—they felt a surge of confidence and hope.

"I think we should have come here sooner," said Rebecca Raccoon, as they waited for the elevator.

"It's very impressive," said Matthew Muddie.

Oscar Otter gave a chuckle. "I hope Mr. Snade is equally impressed when the Pollution Control Agency comes visiting!"



"It does seem just a little cold," Farmer Ben said thoughtfully. "All this gray marble needs some color to liven it up. I wish they had put some pictures on the walls." The bronze doors slid open, and they stepped into the elevator.

When they got off on the tenth floor, they found themselves at the end of a long hallway with many side corridors. Here the floors were still marble, but the walls were plaster, painted yellow. "Well, where's his office?" Oscar Otter asked. They were puzzled as to which direction they should go. "None of the signs on the doors say anything about the Pollution Control Agency," Farmer Ben remarked. They looked at one another. "The directory said it was on the Tenth Floor," said M. Lucius a little nervously. "Then let's hunt for it," said Matthew Muddie. They started off.

It took them ten minutes to find Mr. Renwick's office in the maze of hallways. But they did find it: a little cubbyhole just beyond a fire hose at the end of a side corridor that branched off the third cross-corridor which opened off the main hall. They passed by it the first time round, thinking it was a broom closet. But no, there on the frosted glass window of the door was the name "P. RENWICK" in tiny black letters.

"Come in!" a voice answered to their knock. As they entered, a thin, stoop-shouldered, rather dumpy little man came to meet them from behind a desk piled high with papers. He shook hands with each of them while regarding them gravely with his watery brown eyes. Then, while fingering his pale brown mustache, he said, "I'm sorry that my secretary is out to lunch. You're a citizens' group from Grover, I believe. I'd invite you to sit down, but as you can see, there aren't any chairs. There's been a severe cutback in our operating funds this year. Uh—now, which of you is Mr. Ferret?"

M. Lucius identified himself. "I'm sorry we're late," he added. "but we couldn't find your office."

Mr. Renwick coughed, then quickly smiled: "Yes, it is a little out of the way, isn't it? But that's the way I like it: not so many people walking past my door, and I can get more work done. But I can understand your difficulty. Sometimes I can't find it myself." At this, he gave a little laugh; but seeing that they didn't even smile, he cleared his throat and walked quickly behind his desk and sat down. "Now," he said, looking up at them, "in what way can I be of service to you?"

M. Lucius got right to the point. "We have a problem. Last year a factory was built at the edge of Grover, and since then we've had nothing but smoke, and stink, and noise, and ruined river, and black fallout, and—"

Mr. Renwick raised his hand. "By 'black fallout' I assume you mean particulate matter?"

"I mean big and little specks of black grit which come from the smokestack," M. Lucius answered.

"Fly ash," said Mr. Renwick.

"What?" said M. Lucius blankly.

"Ash. Fly ash."

"Well, whatever it is," Matthew Muddie broke in impatiently, "it settles on

everything and won't come off. Windows, houses, cars, people—"

"We can't even hang out our wash on the line," said Rebecca angrily.

"Fresh paint, trees, grass—" said Roscoe Lynx "—flowers—"

"And last winter, even the snow!" cried Oscar Otter.

"That's right," said M. Lucius. "Everything is fouled and grimy! Some of it settles as a gummy residue—like splatterings of tar."

"Ah," said Mr. Renwick, blinking his eyes.

"And on the worst days," said Matthew, "the smoke comes down like fog. I teach school. My pupils had bad coughs all winter long."

"What does the factory manufacture?" Mr. Renwick asked, jotting notes on a pad of yellow paper.

"As far as *we* can tell," growled Roscoe Lynx, "it manufactures just one thing: pollution."

Mr. Renwick glanced up, blinking.

"What he means," Ben Barker quickly broke in, "is that we don't know what the factory manufactures. We've tried to find out, but we can't. But it's owned by the Sudge-Buddle Company, if that's any help."

Mr. Renwick stopped writing, raised his eyebrows, and began fingering his pale mustache. "Oh, the Sudge-Buddle Company, you say! That's a very big corporation. One of the very biggest."

"Do you know what they manufacture?" M. Lucius asked.

Mr. Renwick smiled. "The Sudge-Buddle Company manufactures a great many things—from toothpaste to submarines. It has factories all over the world, Mr. Ferret. Offhand, I wouldn't even try to *guess* what's manufactured in the Grover factory."

"I don't think it's submarines," said Farmer Ben.

"Whatever it is, it's destroying the river, too," said Oscar Otter. "They're dumping chemical waste right at my doorstep."

"The fish have all left, and the water plants are dying," Roscoe added.

"Terrible!" said Mr. Renwick. "Something should be done to stop it."

"That's why we came to you," said Matthew Muddie pointedly.

"Yes, of course." Mr. Renwick reached into his desk and rummaged about first in one drawer and then another, shuffling through a jumble of papers, envelopes, chewed pencil ends, rubber bands, and paper clips. The search lasted awhile, but at last he pulled out a thick sheaf of printed forms. "Here they are," he said. "Now you fill these out to make an official complaint, and turn them in to this office." He handed the papers to M. Lucius Ferret, who stared at them in bafflement and dismay.

"But there are so many!" M. Lucius exclaimed. "And so much on them to fill out!"

"We need to have all the facts if we're to make an investigation," Mr. Renwick explained.

Oscar Otter looked over M. Lucius' shoulder and studied the papers. "At the top is a list of names," he said. "Yours is the fifth one down. You're called the Assistant to the Deputy Assistant Director, whose name is Mr. Gitch."

"Yes, that's right," said Mr. Renwick, nodding vigorously.

"And above Mr. Gitch is the Assistant Director, Mr. Gooch; and above him is the Associate Director, Mr. Pinkie; and above him is the Director, Mr. Purvis. Shouldn't we give our complaint to Mr. Purvis, since he's the Director?"

"No, *no!*" said Mr. Renwick quickly with a violent shake of his head. "No, *I'm* the one who should receive your complaint. If I and my assistants feel you have a case requiring action by the Pollution Control Agency, I'll see to it that it moves up the line to Mr. Gitch. He'll give the matter his full attention; and if he thinks you have a case, he will make a recommendation to Mr. Gooch—"

"And *he* will study it," Ben Barker said, "and if *he* thinks there's a case, he'll pass it up to Mr. Pinkie—"

"Right!" said Mr. Renwick. "And if *he* thinks there's a case, he'll send it on to Mr. Purvis. Now, if Mr. Purvis thinks you have a case, he can authorize the Agency to take action against the Sudge-Buddle Company. But I should warn you," he added, with a note of sadness in his voice, "the State hasn't given the Agency very much money to work with. We've had to let three of our lawyers go this year because we couldn't pay them. I'm not in a position to guarantee that the Agency can really do anything, even if we think you have the best case in the world."

"How long will it take to find out if we *do* have a case?" Oscar Otter asked.

"That's hard to say," Mr. Renwick answered. "We're very busy now, dealing with so many complaints—"

"Well, *guess* how long," said Oscar Otter.

"Well, that's very hard to do," said Mr. Renwick. "I wouldn't want to mislead you, or raise your hopes too high. No, I don't really think I should try to guess."

"Three weeks?" Matthew Muddie asked.

"Six weeks?" asked Rebecca Raccoon.

With a little laugh, Mr. Renwick touched his mustache and said, "Well now, that would be a *very* short time. It's been known to take a year or more."

They all looked at each other.

"In a year there won't be anything left worth saving!" Roscoe Lynx exploded.

"Well, I'm sorry," Mr. Renwick said, "but I don't know what else to tell you. We're understaffed and overworked. We don't have nearly enough money to do these investigations as they ought to be done. If you file a complaint, it will go through the proper channels—Renwick, Gitch, Gooch, Pinkie, and Purvis—and I assure you we'll work on it just as fast as we can. I can't promise any more than that."

"It'll take a week just to fill out all these forms," M. Lucius grumbled.

"Then you should probably get started on them right away," said Mr. Renwick. "The sooner the better."

He stood and shook hands all around, ushered them out of his office, and closed the door. They stood in the corridor glaring at each other and at the frosted glass. M. Lucius Ferret was the first to break the silence. "I must confess I'm disappointed," he volunteered.

"You can't help wondering if they really want to do anything," said Roscoe,



P. RENWICK

RDS

jamming his hands into his pockets. His shoulders slumped dejectedly. He felt a poem coming on.

They went down the corridor to the cross-corridor, where they stood puzzled, uncertain which direction to turn. "Do you remember which way we came in?" Oscar asked. They gazed up the long hallway in one direction, then down it in the other. Either way, it looked the same—featureless gray marble floor, pale yellow walls, rows of dark doors, each with a pane of frosted glass.

"I think it was this way," said Ben Barker, pointing to the left. "No, it was that way," Matthew Muddie said, pointing to the right. They followed Matthew's direction and marched along together past the fire extinguishers and steam radiators that clung to the walls, their footsteps echoing on the marble floor.

"I think we came down this corridor," said Rebecca, pointing down a narrow hall that branched to the left. They turned down it, came to another corridor, turned down that, and finally began to realize that they were lost.

It took them fifteen minutes to find their way out of the building. When they got back to Farmer Ben's truck, they found that the parking meter had run out, and Farmer Ben had received a ticket.

Chapter 12

BY THE end of the following week, M. Lucius, Oscar, and Rebecca Raccoon had filled out the complaint forms and mailed them to Mr. Renwick. They described in great detail the effects of the factory's pollution and—for proof—included the most shocking of Lafayette Lizard's photographs. Three weeks later, Mr. Renwick sent them a note saying that their forms had arrived safely, and that he would "start the wheels turning."

"I hope he doesn't get caught in 'em," said Oscar darkly.

Six days after they received the note, Victoria Groundsquirrel came, at Franklin's request, to see for herself what the factory had done to Grover and the surrounding countryside. She and Richardson could stay for only one day, but they had brought Peter and Peggy for a two-week visit.

Luckily, the day they came was a "good" day for Grover. The smoke from the Sudge-Buddle stack boiled upward in a straight column and didn't settle on the town. But the effects of the "bad" days were everywhere; and Victoria and Richardson were appalled.

They were especially upset at seeing what had happened when Simon Skunk had tried putting fresh white paint on his workshop wall. "I was halfway through," Simon explained, "when the wind shifted, and a gummy black film settled on the wet paint. They mixed into a gray slime that oozed down the wall like liquid icing on a cake. That was over five weeks ago, and it's not dry yet. Oh, I've wiped a lot off, but more always settles on the stuff that's damp. I'll never get the wall clean."

"It's awful," said Victoria. "Much worse than I'd imagined when Franklin wrote about it."

"Since we were here last," Richardson observed sadly, "things have really gone downhill. And it was bad then."

"I've certainly gone downhill," said Thaddeus Higgins. "My asthma is much worse. On really bad days I get so choked up I can hardly breathe."

Even today, with the air fairly free of smoke, he was having to struggle in slow, painful gasps to get his breath. His voice was a thin labored wheeze. When Victoria and Richardson had first seen him that morning at the coffee shop, they had been stunned at how very ill he looked—his face gaunt and wasted, the skin chalky white about his lips. Though they'd said nothing, they were very much alarmed.

"Now that you've seen what we're up against," said Arabella Raccoon, "what do you think we should do?"

"There are two things you might do," Victoria replied. "First, you can try to get a court order to shut the factory down. That's called injunctive relief—"

"Any kind of relief would be welcome," said Thaddeus.

"—and the second thing you can do is sue the Company for damages. A class action suit, where your attorney would represent everybody in town, would be best. Ask for *lots* of money in payment for damages. If you win the case, the Company will have to pay money to everybody. It might discourage them enough to close the factory themselves. Get Lafayette to take pictures, and have a laboratory do a chemical analysis of the smoke and of the water in Little River. That will be your evidence in court."

"Will you take the case for us?" Franklin asked.

She shook her head. "I'd better not. I don't have any experience with class action suits. And besides, I'm too close to the people involved. You'd be better off with a lawyer who doesn't know you, and who has handled class action cases before."

"Can you suggest a lawyer?" Rebecca Raccoon asked.

Victoria thought for a moment. "I know one in the city who's had several cases like this. Well, not *exactly* like this—but close enough. I'll talk to him and let you know what he says."

Late in the day, she and Richardson left for the city. Franklin and the Twins started home in the company of Fergus Fisher and Oliphant Owl, who would go with them as far as the Old Hex Inn. While listening to Victoria, Fergus had been struck with a fine idea. The more he thought about it, the better it seemed, and the more excited he grew. "Guess what!" he said, when they were halfway past Farmer Ben's peach orchard.

"What?" said Oliphant, knowing that with Fergus' ideas, it was impossible to guess.

"I'm going to do my *own* chemical analysis of the water in Little River!"

"Hey!" said Oliphant.

"Hey *hey!*" said Franklin.

"There's no need to hire an outside laboratory to do it," Fergus went on. "I've got all the equipment necessary. I've been curious for a long time about what's in that water."

"So has Doctor Badger," said Franklin.

"Well, now we'll know," said Fergus. "I'll collect samples of the water tomorrow morning and get right to work on it."

"Can we go with you?" Peter asked.

"Sure. Stop by the Old Hex about nine o'clock. I'll wait for you."

When Franklin and the Twins reached home, Franklin went inside to fill some stamp orders for his customers; Peggy and Peter went to the back yard to inspect the treehouse.

Peggy had been unusually quiet all afternoon, and had said almost nothing during the walk from Grover. Now, as they approached the treehouse, she said thoughtfully, "I've never seen Mom and Dad so upset as they were today."

"Me neither," said Peter.

"It's kinda scary," she added. "What's happening, I mean—to Grover, and Thaddeus—" She paused, and he looked at her.

"And Uncle Franklin?" he said.

She nodded. "You saw how he was today. He didn't smile or talk much—just stood around and looked sad while folks showed Mom and Dad the damage. I don't like it! I want to see him be his old self, Peter—and laugh and joke with us like always!"

"Maybe he'll be better tomorrow," Peter said, "when Jamie Otter's here for lunch. Having Jamie around always puts him in a good mood."

They had reached the oak tree; and there above them was the treehouse, with two stories, a lean-to, and a railing around the lower platform—just as they'd left it last summer. Peter climbed up the ladder-slats nailed to the tree trunk and stepped onto the platform. "Uh oh," he said.

"What's wrong?" Peggy asked anxiously, below him on the ladder.

"There's tarry black stuff from the factory all over everything," he said.

She climbed up over the edge and looked. The boards were covered with a greasy black film. "Can we clean it off?" she asked. Peter rubbed his finger along the roof of the lean-to, and it came away black. "For now," he answered, "but it'll just come back again."

They climbed down from the treehouse and crossed the yard to Franklin's back door. "Hey, you've got some on your pants," Peggy said. Peter looked down at the black streaks on his trousers. "You've got some, too," he said, pointing at her shirt. Peggy rubbed at a black smudge on her sleeve but stopped when she saw that rubbing only made it worse. They stood on the back step staring at one another for a long minute. Then they both turned and looked at the treehouse.

"All *right*, then!" Peggy cried angrily. "Let's get some rags and clean it off!" They went to the tool shed where Franklin kept a supply of rags and old newspapers, gathered up some of each, and climbed back into the treehouse. It took a full hour and a great many rags to wipe away the factory fallout. When the lower platform was as clean as they could get it, they spread newspapers over the floor, weighted them down with stones, and went to Franklin's kitchen to wash up.

Franklin was there, stewing turnips for supper. The Twins had been afraid it would be turnips again, but tonight they didn't complain.

At nine the next morning, when Peggy and Peter arrived at the Old Hex Inn, Roscoe Lynx was weeding a bed of snapdragons near the front door. "Good morning," he greeted them. "Fergus said that you should go on up to the third floor." The Twins looked at one another in surprise, then bolted into the Inn and up the stairs. Never before had Fergus invited them up to his laboratory! To them it was a mystery spot where strange things happened. A source of odd and sometimes very bad stinks which came wafting down to Arabella's apartment, or to the public rooms on the ground floor. A place to which Peabody the Postman delivered large packages with foreign stamps and labels, and from which Fergus carried large buckets with sealed lids out to the garbage dump. Many times they

had examined these buckets after he had left them; often they were marked in red: DANGER! KEEP THIS LID ON! And they always had.

Once, while they were looking at Arabella's fossil collection, loud bumping noises had come through the ceiling, as though Fergus were pounding something heavy against his floor. When they'd asked about it, Arabella had looked up in surprise from her letter-writing, listened, and given a laugh: "Oh, I don't even hear it anymore! He's been doing it off and on for three weeks." And another time, while they were playing in the garden, a muffled explosion had come to their ears, followed by a billow of thick white smoke from the third-floor window. Roscoe Lynx had looked up from weeding his petunia patch and said, "Nothing to worry about. That was a small one." And a moment later, Fergus had poked his head out the window to gulp deep breaths of air. Peggy had called up, "Is everything all right, Fergus?" And he had looked down in a puzzled way and said, "Of course. The experiment was a complete success."

So today, when Fergus threw open his door and let them into his laboratory, they were abuzz with curiosity and a little bit nervous about what they might find inside. At first glance, the room was a jumbled hodge-podge of bottles and papers, instruments and tools, twisted glass tubing, books, and drawing boards. But as their eyes moved here and there sorting things out, a kind of order gradually became apparent. On the far side of the room was the chemistry lab, with row on row of shelves holding clear and brown-glass bottles filled with liquids and powders of various colors; two long tables, with sinks, bristling with beakers, racks of gleaming test tubes, round- and flat-bottomed flasks, coiled condensers in shiny glass jackets. The sunlight sparkling on the glassware dazzled their eyes.

In the center of the room, one work table was covered with electronic devices, soldering irons, pliers, and tiny screwdrivers. Another was covered with star charts and photographs of the moon. A third was heaped with fat reference books, rulers, colored pencils, and pads of paper. The walls were papered with charts and diagrams. In one corner a balsa wood model of the *Albatross* hung suspended by wires.

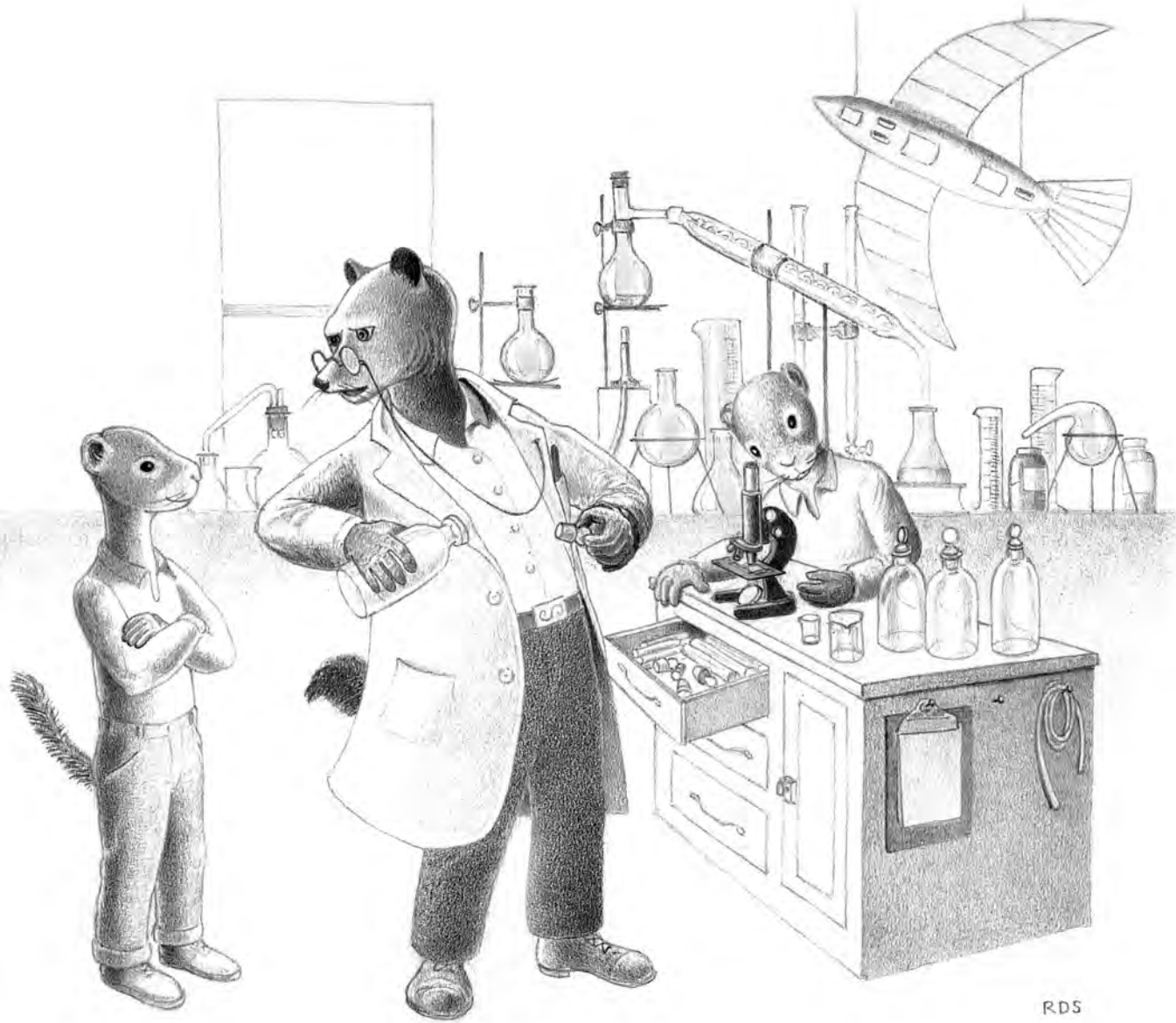
Amazed, Peter said, "You sure have a lot of stuff in here, Fergus."

"This is where most of it happens," Fergus replied, "—whenever it *does* happen. Also in the garden plot down the road. And in the shed out back. And the cellar. And the observatory, of course."

"Does all this stuff get used?" asked Peggy.

"Sure," Fergus answered, going to a supply cabinet and taking down several empty bottles. "Sooner or later. Usually sooner." He rummaged in a drawer to find glass stoppers to fit the bottles. "I usually have four or five projects going at the same time. The mushrooms in the cellar go on all the time, so they don't count. And the experiment in crossing radishes with watermelons—" he broke off thoughtfully, then said, more to himself than to them: "—no, that one doesn't count either."

"How are you coming with that one?" Peggy asked. "Have you crossed them yet?"



RDS

"Not yet," said Fergus, "but I'm sure I'm on the right track. Right now I'm developing a new plant food which may do some good. It'll be the third formula I've tried."

"Don't you ever get discouraged?" Peter asked. "You've tried for so long to grow the raddermelish."

"Now and then," Fergus admitted, "but I can't let that stop me."

"Do you think the world's ready for the raddermelish?" Peter asked.

"Sure," said Fergus. "It always has been."

"I don't see how you can keep so many projects going at the same time," Peggy said. "Don't you get confused?"

"Nope," said Fergus. "Sometimes accidents happen." He finished fitting stoppers into the bottles. "There! Now we're ready to collect our samples."

"Can we watch while you do the analysis?" Peggy asked.

"Well, it'll take awhile, and you may get tired of it," he replied, "but you can watch as long as you like."

"Will there be explosions?" Peter inquired. He hoped there would be. Nothing big, of course—just little ones.

"No explosions," said Fergus. "At least not by design. Just measuring and heating and weighing, and adding chemicals, and more measuring and heating and weighing, and—well, more of all that. As I say, it'll take a long time." He looked at his watch. "Time to go. It's too bad we don't have some samples of the water as it was before the factory came. That would give us something to compare the analysis with. But we don't; so the best we can do is to sample the water *above* the factory, before it gets to the pipes."

They went to the river and collected their first sample at the bridge by the Old Hex Inn. Even this far downstream from the factory the river was foul and murky—olive green, with a skin of oily scum that gathered in the hollows along the banks, a thick gray slime pebbled with trapped bubbles rising sluggishly. The grass and reeds along the banks were blighted and pale.

Fergus stooped and filled two bottles with water and scum. "It's no wonder the fish have left," he remarked, frowning as he watched the slow bubbles rise.

"Ugh!" said Peggy. "It smells like sewer gas."

"Worse," Peter said, holding his nose.

"All the dragonflies have gone, too," Fergus observed. "There used to be so many. And the water bugs. And the snails."

They walked slowly along the river bank, keeping well back from the blighted margin. They came opposite the house of Tim and Tonia Turtle. The low arched door leading into the bank was boarded up; and nailed to the boards was a sign, bleached and faded: "WE HAVE MOVED AWAY. ASK PEABODY FOR OUR NEW ADDRESS. T. & T. T."

"Then they've gone, too?" Peggy cried in disbelief.

"They moved out last month," said Fergus. "They'd both been feeling sickly for a long time, and they decided they'd better leave while they could. Said they'd come back if things got better. Randy Possum helped 'em move—and Priscilla and Thorstein Raccoon. They're living up at Cherrystone Lake, on the south

shore. Secretly, of course. Mr. Snade doesn't know they're squatting on Sudge-Buddle land."

In gloomy silence they passed through The Glen and the clover field that led to Flat Meadow. Here Fergus filled two more bottles with river water, carefully labelling each of them with the place the sample was taken, the date, and the time of day. In his notebook he recorded how the water looked, and described the appearance of the plants growing along its edges. "It's worse here than down at the bridge," he commented, as they continued walking upstream toward the factory. Above the treetops, ahead of them and to the left, the red and white smokestack was belching out a yellowish gray cloud. "Do you smell the sulfur?" Fergus asked. "Some of that will mix with water vapor in the air and come down as acid in the rain."

As they neared the Otters' house, which stood on the opposite bank, they heard Oscar Otter's voice raised angrily: "I've told you time and again not to go swimming in the river!" And through the bushes they saw the whole Otter family standing on the boat dock by the back door—Lucy with two of the children, Oscar and Jamie facing each other. Oscar was shaking his finger in the air as he scolded Jamie. Jamie, still wet from his swim, looked sheepish but was standing his ground.

"So they caught him," Peter said to Peggy. "I was afraid they would."

"Do you mean that Jamie still goes swimming in the river?" Fergus asked.

Peggy looked up at him. "Sure. Though he knew his Mom and Dad didn't want him to. But he's been careful. He doesn't go near the places that have the scum and the bubbles."

"He really *shouldn't* be swimming in this water," said Fergus. "I think it might be filled with dangerous chemicals. Doctor Badger doesn't trust it, either." The Twins stayed watching through the bushes till Fergus urged them to move along. "You stand staring like you don't know what a scolding is," he said. "I know better than that. I've seen *your* Dad talk loud to you—like the time you dug up Priscilla Possum's newly-planted tulip bulbs, and that time you were climbing around on Parker's junk sculpture without his permission."

"We'd only got to the Fifth Level," Peter said. "And Dad stood at the bottom shouting for us to come down 'quicker than quick!'" The Twins looked at each other and grinned.

"All right," said Fergus drily. "Even Parker was afraid you'd fall."

"He didn't scold us, though," said Peggy.

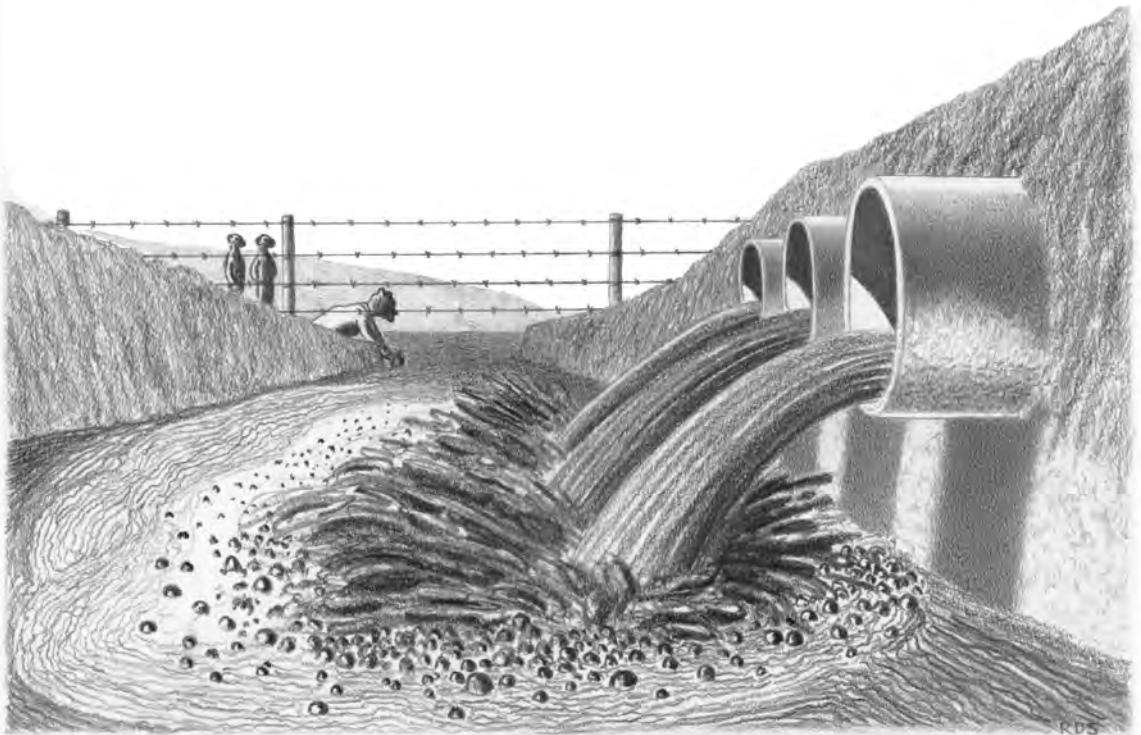
"Wasn't his place to," said Fergus. "That's what fathers are for. Besides, your Dad could handle it much better than Parker—having had so much practice." He stopped walking and opened his specimen bag.

They had reached the boundary line of the Sudge-Buddle property. A barbed wire fence blocked them from going further. Fergus knelt down at the edge of the river and collected two more samples of water, labelling them and making notes as before.

"And there's where it's coming from," said Peggy, pointing across the river to the three pipes spewing thick streams of greenish black liquid into the water. The

pipes were big enough for her to crawl into if she'd so desired. The riverbank around the mouths of the pipes was spattered with dried chemical salts—a mildewed-looking white and yellow crust.

"I'd like a sample of that stuff, too," Fergus said. "But I'll have to go to the other side to get it. You won't catch *me* wading across that water! And it'll take sneaking through their fence, too—which will be a pleasure. Maybe Oliphant and I can come down tonight and get some, as well as some samples upstream from the pipes." He stripped off his rubber gloves and carried them gingerly between two fingers. "Let's go back now and start the analysis. As I said, it will take a long time. But not—" he added with a grin "—as long as it takes to grow a raddermelish!"



Chapter 13

SIMON SKUNK wiped his hands on his apron, gave the walnut chair a final pat, and stood back pleased with his work. "It looks almost as good as new," he told Farmer Ben, "and the back is even stronger than before." Ben Barker nodded with satisfaction and placed his money on the counter. "Elizabeth H. will be pleased," he said. "It's her favorite chair."

"It was easily mended," said Simon, as he put the money into the cash drawer. He followed Ben Barker out and stood watching thoughtfully as he hoisted the chair into the bed of the pickup truck and tied it down with a padded rope. There was something else that Simon wanted to say; but he didn't quite know how to bring it up—for it was on a subject he knew Farmer Ben felt strongly about, and Ben hadn't mentioned it himself. Finally, as Ben Barker was about to climb into the truck cab, Simon managed to get it out:

"It doesn't look like you're going to have much of a peach crop this year." He said it hesitantly, not knowing how Farmer Ben would react; for not only were the peaches Ben Barker's main source of income, they were his pride and joy. Everyone agreed that his peaches were the finest they had ever seen—large and plump, faintly fuzzed and rosy golden, tingling sweet and firm with juice. One of Farmer Ben's greatest pleasures was to share his peach crop with his friends. Every year at harvest time, he would post a sign on Roscoe's bulletin board: "Peach Pickin' Time! Help Harvest, and Take What You Need."

But this year, no sign had appeared; and it was already long past the time that the harvest usually began. Several times a week, when he traveled east on the Old Cherrystone Road, Simon passed the orchard; and all summer long he had been dismayed at seeing how sickly the trees were, how shriveled their leaves.

After Simon spoke, Ben Barker rubbed his chin and stared down at the pavement. Then, with a shrug and a helpless wave of his hand, he heaved a big sigh as though relieved that Simon had brought the subject up. "There isn't going to be a crop this year," he said. "The whole orchard is blighted. The peaches are ruined. And it wasn't frost, and it wasn't disease, and it wasn't too much or too little rain. Oh, no!" He reached into the pocket of his overalls and brought out a handful of small, round, brownish objects like large marbles and held them out for Simon to see. "Look here! They should be ripe now—fat, and juicy, and ready for pickin'—but *these* are what's fallin' off the trees to rot! They're all shrunk up, and hard, and woody inside. I've never seen anything like it."

"The factory?" Simon said in a dull voice, knowing that it was.

"It's as though a giant's breathed on the whole orchard with a poison breath!" said Ben Barker. He jerked his thumb viciously northward, where the smoke-

stack was chuffing out its thick black plume. It was a "bad" day: the air about them was filled with tiny black particles.

"Oh, I saw what was happening," Ben Barker went on, talking faster and faster. "Day by day, week after week. And all the while getting angrier, hoping against hope that something would happen to save them. But nothing could! Simon, the factory's destroyed my *crop*! Because of that smokestack I don't have any peaches to sell this year. I don't even have any to give to my friends!"—his voice faltered and broke—"So this year *nobody* will have jam, or pies, or preserves, or peaches-and-cream!" His face had gone scarlet as his rage—held back so long—came flooding out. He gritted his teeth, and with a violent swing of his arm, threw the ruined peaches to the street and smashed them under his heel. Then, flushed and trembling, he turned away and leaned against the fender of the truck.

Simon had never seen Ben Barker so furious; he didn't know what to say. He looked at the wall of his workshop, still damp and oozing the gray-black slime that had come from his painting attempt nine weeks ago. Then he said, "Victoria's attorney friend is coming tomorrow. Maybe he'll be able to help us."

"Maybe so," said Farmer Ben in a choked-up voice, "but I still wish Victoria had taken the case."

"So do I," said Simon, "but I see her point—about being too close to the situation and not having enough experience. Remember, though, she *does* have confidence in the law firm that agreed to take the case—what's its name again?"

Farmer Ben pulled a card from his shirt pocket and read it: "Butcher, Skinner, Flesher, and Tanner—Attorneys at Law."

"Skinner's our lawyer," said Simon. "Now, Victoria says he's won a lot of cases."

Farmer Ben climbed into the truck. "Is there any news I should take home?"

"Nothing much," Simon answered. "Lafayette's writing a story on what Fergus found when he analyzed the water in Little River. Matthew Muddie's coming back from the city next week—earlier than usual. He wants me to build new storm windows for the school. Peabody sold me part of his stamp collection. And Jamie Otter's sick."

"Jamie? What's wrong with him?" asked Farmer Ben.

"I don't know. Oscar was talking about it yesterday. He seems worried."

"Well, I hope it's nothing serious," said Farmer Ben, starting the engine. "See you at Town Hall in the morning." As he drove away, Simon stood on the doorstep, a pencil behind his ear, looking after him. Under his feet the step was gritty with tiny black particles. Overhead, the sun was a dull bloody red through the smoke. Instead of returning to his shop (where he had a lot of work to do) he went on up the street to the newspaper office.

Through the plate glass window, between the large gold letters that spelled GROVER GAZETTE, Simon could see Rebecca Raccoon sitting at the front desk before a typewriter. Miss Proudie Fairblossom was in the room also, looking over the greeting cards and fine notepaper displayed for sale. On the floor, a small electric fan was turning slowly from side to side. As Simon stepped into the

office, he was met with the pleasant mixture of smells always present at the *Gazette*: fresh newsprint, fine bond paper, rubber cement, printer's ink, and glue.

Miss Proudie smiled when she saw him. "Hello, Simon." Then, looking at him more closely, she added: "What's troubling you?"

Rebecca Raccoon stopped typing and looked up quickly. "Farmer Ben's peaches are ruined," he announced. "Destroyed by the Sudge-Buddle factory."

With her lips pressed tightly together, Miss Proudie nodded. "Elizabeth H. told me last week," she said. "She didn't want me to say anything—partly because Ben's been so upset and worried, partly because she thought *he* should be the one to tell folks there won't be any crop this year. She'd been keeping a close eye on the orchard all along, and knew it was coming."

"I mentioned it to Ben," Simon said. "To let him know that I knew. I don't think he would have been able to talk about it on his own."

"According to Elizabeth H.," Miss Proudie said, "he didn't want to admit it to himself. He kept pretending that things would get better—though he knew in his heart they wouldn't."

"What hurts him most," said Simon, "is that there won't be any peaches for the *rest* of us. He feels we've *all* been cheated."

Miss Proudie's eyes flashed. "Ben and Elizabeth H. aren't rich," she said. "The peaches and the little bit of corn they raise are their only source of income! They earn their *living* from their crops!" Never before had Simon or Rebecca heard her speak so harshly, with so much bitterness. She drummed angrily on the countertop with the end of her pink parasol. "There *must* be a way to stop this destruction! We've got to find it!"

She strode to the front window and, trembling with agitation, stood looking into the street. "So far nothing's worked," she went on, snapping her words out like lashes of a whip. "We've written three letters to the Company—*three!* and they've never answered! Mr. Snade refuses to talk to us. And we haven't heard one word from those people at the Pollution Control Agency for over two months! What's Mr. Renwick doing? *Sitting* on our complaint to see if it hatches? And no matter how successful this lawyer, Mr. Skinner, is in winning our lawsuit, *that* will take months before anything is settled! And meanwhile the destruction goes on. I think we should go straight to the courts and try to get them to order the factory to stop its pollution right now. No more waiting!"

"But Victoria isn't sure that the court would issue an order," Rebecca reminded her.

"With all due respect to Victoria," said Miss Proudie, "I think we ought to go ahead and try it. I don't see what we stand to lose. But I certainly see what we stand to lose if we *don't*."

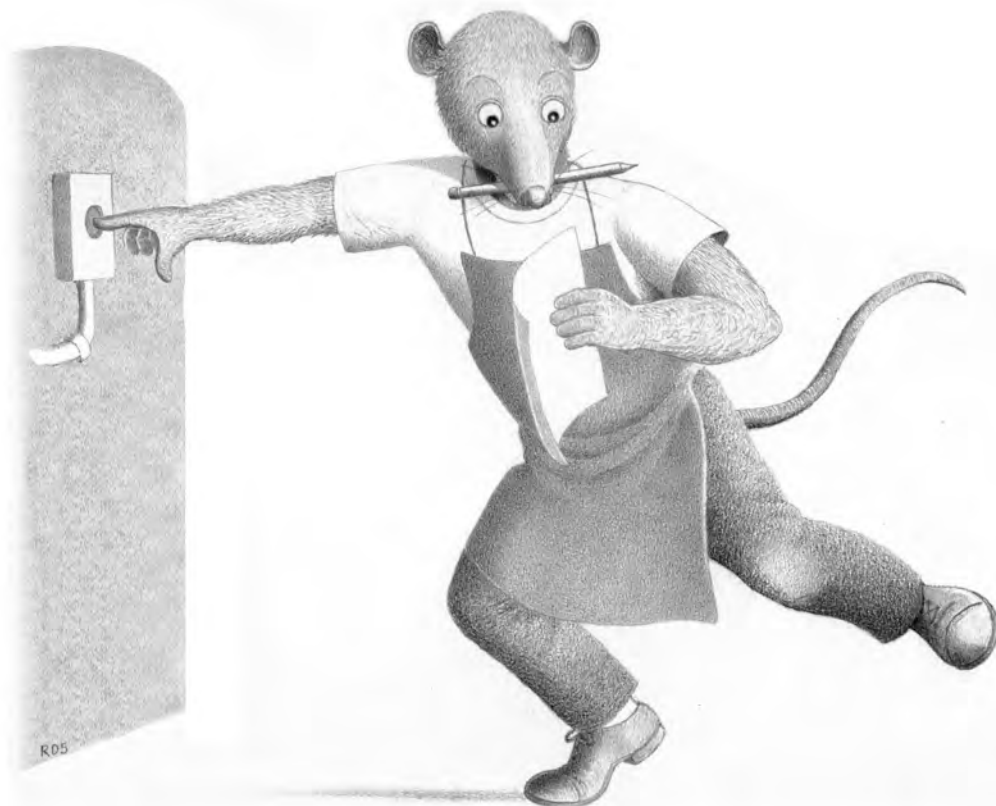
"Let's talk to Mr. Skinner about it tomorrow," Rebecca suggested. "Maybe he'll be willing to try it for us."

"Indeed," said Miss Proudie, "let's bring it up with Mr. Skinner."

Simon left the front office and went into the back room where the presses were. One press was running when he entered: beside it stood Randy Possum as—chugging clackety-clack—it spewed out sheets of printed paper. Seated at a

desk across the room, Lafayette Lizard was talking to Fergus Fisher. Randy waved to Simon as he entered: "Hello there! We're just about finished printing your order—here's a sample to look at: new letterhead stationery for 'SKUNK'S FURNITURE AND CABINET MAKING.'" He handed Simon a sheet of the freshly-printed letter-paper. "How does it look?" he asked, with a little smirk of satisfaction.

Simon studied the sheet. "It looks good, Randy—very neat and businesslike. There's only one problem that I can see. My name's 'Skunk'—not 'SKONK' as you've printed it." He handed the paper back to Randy, whose eyes were boggling in thunderstruck amazement. "Stop the press!" Randy cried, dashing to the switch; with a booming clunkety-clunk the press slowed and stopped.



"I don't understand how it could have happened!" Randy groaned, his face bewildered and blank as he stared at the botched letterhead.

"You must have set it up with the wrong type," Simon said helpfully. "My name really isn't very hard to spell."

"Well, thank goodness we only printed five hundred of them," said Randy. He gave a sigh. "We'll change it and start over, and get your order finished as soon as we can. Of course, since it was our mistake, you won't have to pay for the bad ones."

"I'd prefer it that way," said Simon.

"But the question remains," Randy mused, "what do we do with five hundred copies of letterhead paper for 'SKONK'S FURNITURE AND CABINET MAKING'?"

"It seems a shame to waste that beautiful job of printing," Simon said. "But since my name's not Skonk, I just can't use it. I don't want to misrepresent myself to my customers."

"Do you know of any Skonk who *could* use it?" Randy asked.

"Not one," Simon answered. "And certainly none in the furniture and cabinet business."

"We'll use it for scratch paper," said Lafayette Lizard from across the room. Both he and Fergus Fisher had been watching them with great interest. Simon joined them while Randy was gathering up the fresh stack of scratch paper.

"This person is very hard to interview," Lafayette said, pointing at Fergus. "I want just plain simple facts, and he keeps throwing all his big scientific words at me. Fergus, *Gazette* readers don't want to chew on all those fancy names. They just want to know, in plain simple English, what's in the water!"

Fergus, obviously somewhat irritated, was trying hard to be patient with him. "But it's not all that plain and simple!" he replied, clutching the sheet of paper that contained the results of his analysis. "I want the story to be accurate. *You* should want the story to be accurate. The analysis was difficult and complicated, and there are *many* things in the water which come from the factory—sulfur, lead, and arsenic compounds, chlorinated hydrocarbons. To be absolutely certain that the factory's the cause of it, we'd have to have a comparative study showing what was present before the factory was built. But I'm sure the analysis is correct. If an independent analysis should be done to establish evidence for our lawsuit, I'm sure it would show a close correlation with mine!"

"See what I mean?" Lafayette groaned, turning to Simon for support. "You'd think he could say it more simply than that! We've got to get his story into the paper. I've already written an editorial that blasts the factory for pumping harmful chemicals into the river. But Fergus' story has to appear first—to give me a basis for printing the editorial. Why can't he just say it in plain simple English?"

"Sulfuric acid," Fergus said quietly, reading from his paper. "Potassium cyanide. Lead sulfide. Sodium silicate—"

"All right, all right!" Lafayette cried in desperation, clutching his head in both hands. "We'll use your language! But we still have to have a plain simple explanation of what it all means. Can you summarize it in twenty words or less? Can you say it so people who don't want to read all the scientific names can still understand what's happening to the river? Try, Fergus. Please try."

Through his spectacles, Fergus looked at him long and soberly. "It means that the water is very dangerous. It means that the river is very close to being unable to support life. As plainly and as simply as I can put it—it means that the water is poisoned, and probably deadly."

There was a pause while they took this in. Then Lafayette sighed a deep sigh

and said, "That's what I thought it meant. Okay, let's get it written up. It'll be in tomorrow's paper."

"You probably shouldn't put this in your story," Simon volunteered, "but you might keep it in the back of your mind while you're writing it." And he told them about Farmer Ben's peach crop.

Lafayette sat slumped at the desk supporting his head with one hand, as though it had suddenly become very heavy. Fergus nodded sadly: "You could see it coming. The trees looked sick, and the peaches never developed properly. But I didn't know of any way to help, and it wasn't something you felt like mentioning to Farmer Ben. Better that he mention it first."

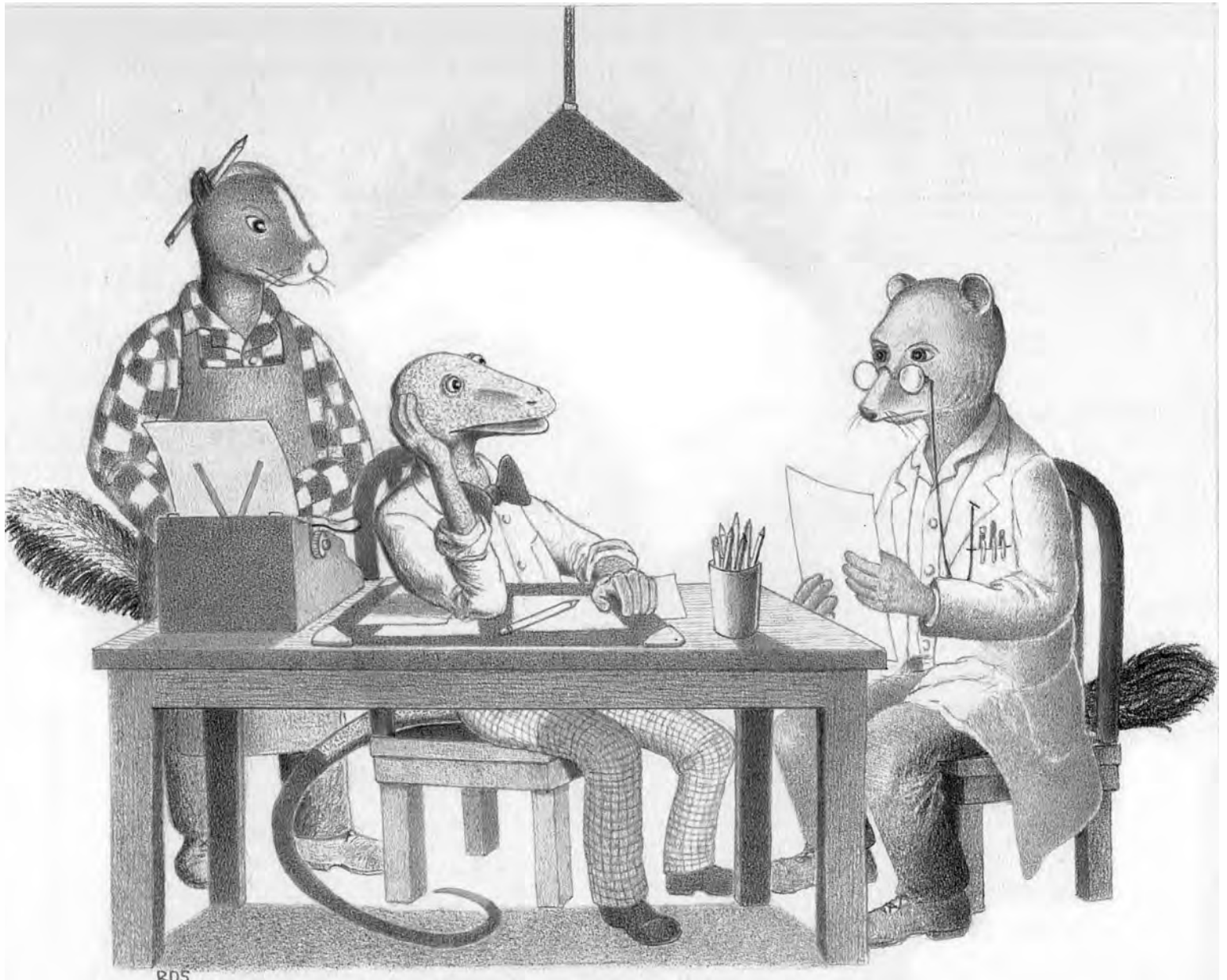
"Tomorrow," said Lafayette, "we will talk to Mr. Skinner."

At ten o'clock the next morning, the Grover Town Hall was crowded with people who were excitedly awaiting the arrival of J. Philpot Skinner, the noted attorney who'd agreed to represent them in a class-action suit against the Sudge-Buddle Company. At eleven o'clock they were still waiting. There had been no word from J. Philpot Skinner. The excitement was gone, and folks were getting restless, impatient, and hungry. Franklin Groundsquirrel was very much embarrassed; for since he and Victoria had arranged the meeting, he felt personally responsible for bringing all these people together to sit closely cramped on the uncomfortable wooden chairs in the hot and stuffy Council Chamber. With his back to the crowd, he stood by an open window watching anxiously for the first sign of their guest. Cars passed in the street from time to time, but none stopped.

Where was J. Philpot Skinner? Everyone was asking the question except Oscar Otter, who was pacing nervously back and forth at the rear of the hall, and Miss Proudie Fairblossom, who had fallen asleep in her chair. Mayor Higgins was asking it very loudly and frequently, hovering at Franklin's elbow and alternating her glance between the street outside and the clock above the speaker's platform. "Where, where?" said Mayor Higgins. Franklin could only shrug and shake his head.

Then, at eleven-twenty, just when Cassandra Scissortail was suggesting over the loud-speaker that everyone go home for lunch, a large shiny car swung into view at the far end of the street and came slowly toward them. Franklin and Mayor Higgins bumped heads in their eagerness to look out the window at the same time. "It must be!" said the Mayor, in a fluster to straighten her neck scarf and pat down her ruffled hair. The car stopped in front of the Town Hall; and from its rear door stepped a tall man dressed in a dark suit and carrying a black briefcase. Mayor Higgins pushed through the crowd standing thick about the doorway and hurried to greet the visitor. Franklin, following behind, got separated from her in the crush, and never made it to the door.

"Mr. Skinner?" the Mayor said, extending her hand. "I'm Estella Higgins, Mayor of Grover. Welcome to our city. Many of our citizens are waiting inside, eager to see you."



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"Very eager," said Cassandra Scissortail.

"Thank you," said Mr. Skinner in a melodious deep voice. As he followed the Mayor into the Town Hall along the narrow pathway opened for them by the crowd, he continued: "I'm sorry to be so late, but I had some urgent business to attend to before leaving the city. I also took time to look at the Sudge-Buddle factory before coming here. It's a monstrous blight on your fair community."

The townspeople took their seats, and Mayor Higgins introduced Mr. Skinner to them. In a calm and detached manner, he briefly outlined what would happen when they filed a class-action lawsuit against the Sudge-Buddle Company; how the Company's lawyers would fight them and try to have the case thrown out of court; how, if the Groverpeople won the case, the Company would have to pay damages to all of them. Very carefully he explained the importance of their asking for a very large amount of money in damages; and he added—to be sure they understood—that *if* they won, his firm would of course be entitled to a portion of the winnings.

"To make it worth their while," M. Lucius Ferret whispered to Priscilla Possum.

"Also, the firm must charge you a fee while the case is in progress," Mr. Skinner continued, "—to cover our costs in preparing and pursuing the case. We have a great many expenses. I believe that Mr. Groundsquirrel has already told you that our fee is—"

"Yes, he has," said Miss Proudie Fairblossom loudly, "and some of us think it's an awful lot of money."

Mr. Skinner's eyes focused gravely upon her. "I suppose it does," his deep voice boomed, "but expert legal advice is much in demand. Our time is valuable. Many clients wish to have our services. You would find that other firms which are comparable in quality to ours would require about the same fee. You don't want to settle for less than the very best, do you? I'm very much afraid that's what you'd be getting if you chose to pay less. In legal matters, as in other things, you pay more to get more. Quality comes high. Cheap advice gives poor results."

"Just for the record," said Farmer Ben, "what happens if we *don't* win the lawsuit?"

"Then the Sudge-Buddle Company wouldn't have to pay damages," said Mr. Skinner.

"But we'd still be out the money that we paid *you*," said Thorstein Raccoon.

"Of course," said Mr. Skinner; and then, catching a murmur in the crowd, he smiled broadly to restore their confidence: "When one brings a lawsuit, one takes a chance on losing. But you would have the satisfaction of knowing that you'd had the best legal advice available. I would remind you that the firm of Butcher, Skinner, Flesher, and Tanner has a very *good* record for winning its cases. I can assure you, sir, that with *our* firm, you are in excellent hands."

"Your firm also seems to expect a large portion of the damages awarded if we *do* win the case," said Roscoe Lynx.

"If we ask for a big enough settlement from the Sudge-Buddle Company, there will be plenty for everybody," said Mr. Skinner with a smile. "Remember too that

if the award is very large, the Company will be discouraged from continuing its operations here."

"That's what we're counting on," said Priscilla Possum.

Izzy the Witch leaned forward and whispered to M. Lucius Ferret, who sat in the row ahead of her: "Is he telling us the truth?"

M. Lucius turned his head and whispered back: "I think so. There are one or two things I want to check in my law books when I get home, but by and large, he seems to know what he's talking about."

"I wasn't sure," Izzy whispered. "He smiles too much."

"There's something else we wanted to ask you, Mr. Skinner," said Miss Proudie Fairblossom. "Since all this legal work will take a long time, and the problem will continue till it's settled, what would our chances be of getting a court order to stop the factory once and for all? Would you help us with that?"

Mr. Skinner shook his head quickly. "I would advise against trying to obtain an injunction. Our case will be stronger if the factory continues its pollution. We'll have more complaints to put into the record, more hardship to declare, and we can ask for an even bigger settlement because more damage has been done."

"And Butcher, Skinner, Flesher, and Tanner can get an even bigger pile of money!" Doctor Badger blurted out, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Humph!" said Arabella Raccoon to her mother. "Mr. Skinner doesn't have to live here and breathe the smoke."

"He ought to," said Rebecca. "Then he'd want a court order."

"Mr. Skinner, do I understand you to say that we shouldn't try to stop the factory from ruining our lives?" asked Fergus Fisher angrily.

"That's not quite what I said," Mr. Skinner smiled. "No, I said I strongly advise against petitioning for injunctive *relief* to stop the factory." His voice became graver and dropped in pitch: "Certainly our firm would not care to pursue both actions at once. That would be against our general policy."

"Could we get another law firm to do it while you handle the lawsuit?" asked Franklin Groundsquirrel.

Mr. Skinner raised one eyebrow. "That would be your decision to make. I am compelled to say, however, that Butcher, Skinner, Flesher, and Tanner would feel severely compromised—if not entirely alienated—by your bringing in another firm on this unrelated matter. I fear it would jeopardize your chances of winning the lawsuit."

"What's he saying?" Scooper Singebottom whispered. "I don't understand him."

"He's saying that his firm wouldn't like it, and might pull out," replied Ambrose Fieldmouse.

"Why doesn't he say it in plain simple English?" snorted Lafayette Lizard, taking notes for the Grover *Gazette*.

"So the choice is yours," said Mr. Skinner. He took up his briefcase and made ready to leave the platform.

"A choice is before us!" cried Mayor Higgins, a little confused by the unexpected turn the discussion had taken. "We'd better take a vote!" She leaped

from her chair and rushed to the speaker's stand as an excited babble swept the room. In her haste, she tripped over the microphone cord, lost her balance, and toppled headlong off the platform into the front row. There she landed—with a resounding crunch—on Tim and Tonia Turtle's lunch basket.

Someone screamed, and there was a flurry of panic as people milled about among the chairs. Breathless and unhurt, Mayor Higgins struggled to her feet holding a watercress sandwich; and very awkwardly, with a great deal of bumping and scraping, she was hoisted back onto the platform by several well-meaning friends. The Turtles sat pondering their flattened lunch. Tonia was moved to philosophy: "Just think," she whispered to Tim, "that could have been *us!*" Tim was moved to practicality: "The potato chips are gone," he whispered back, "but we still might save the pickles."

"Ahem!" said Mr. Skinner from the platform, as the crowd grew quieter. "Before you vote, I would only say that our firm is ready to move immediately to file the lawsuit." He smiled: "That is, of course, *if you want our services.*"

Roscoe Lynx stood up to address the crowd. "Franklin and Farmer Ben have already paid some money out of their own pockets toward the fee. I think we should go ahead with the lawsuit."

"I agree," said M. Lucius Ferret. "But since everybody stands to benefit if we win, it's only fair that everybody should pay a part of the fee. The Town of Grover should also contribute out of its treasury."

"I still say it's a lot of money," said Miss Proudie Fairblossom. "I'm for the court order."

"I agree with Miss Proudie," said Elizabeth H. from the back of the room. "There's already been too much damage. We've got to put an end to it."

"Lawsuit!" cried some.

"Injunction!" cried others.

Recovered from her fall and refreshed by the watercress sandwich, Mayor Higgins raised her hands for silence and called for a vote. Just over half were in favor of the lawsuit. "Lawsuit it is!" said the Mayor. Mr. Skinner smiled at them: "You have made a wise decision."

"Now," said Mayor Higgins, "since we're all in this together, I hope that everyone will contribute some money for legal expenses. I'll set up a committee to collect the money and work out some way of deciding what each person's fair share would be."

"Thank you for your time," said Mr. Skinner, stepping down from the platform. "I must leave you now; I have pressing business in the city." To Mayor Higgins he said, "We'll keep in touch with you. The firm will arrange for a professional laboratory to analyze samples of the smoke and the water. We will also send down a professional photographer to take pictures of the damage. I'm afraid the photographs from the *Gazette* aren't nearly enough." He waved, and smiled, and went to his car, which sped away as soon as he entered it.

"Professional photographer, indeed!" snorted Lafayette Lizard. And he jabbed so hard onto his notepad that he broke the pencil point.

Chapter 14

THROUGH THE west window, slanting sunbeams lit four mugs of honey brew with a warm golden glow. Doctor Badger, his cousin the Sheriff, Simon Skunk, and Parker Packrat were relaxing at the Old Hex Inn after what had proved to be a very busy day. Much had happened since Mr. Skinner had left town shortly after noon. There had been a long discussion of what he'd said, and Mayor Higgins had set up a committee to see about raising money for his fee. The Doctor, Parker, and Simon were members of the committee, along with Miss Proudie Fairblossom, Izzy the Witch, and Rebecca Raccoon. After lunch, the six of them had scrambled about collecting cash and promises from everybody else. Sheriff Badger, though not a member of the group, had spent the afternoon driving Parker in his panel truck to several outlying farms to talk to people there. By five o'clock, when the four got together at the Old Hex, they all felt they had earned a rest.

They were midway through their second mugs of brew when Oscar Otter suddenly burst into the room and rushed to the doctor's side. They could tell from Oscar's face that something was dreadfully wrong.

"Come quick!" Oscar cried, seizing the doctor's arm. "Jamie is awful sick!" Doctor Badger set down his mug of brew, leaped up, and grabbed his medicine bag. "Let's go!" he said. "Where is he?"

"At the house," Oscar panted, as they moved quickly toward the side door. "He hasn't felt well for a long time. But we thought it was just summer flu—the stomach cramps and all. But today he got worse. He looks awful bad!" Their voices faded as they hurried out through the garden. Simon, Parker, and the Sheriff sat staring at one another, shocked into silence as though by a sudden chill. They had never seen Oscar so agitated, so afraid.

Roscoe Lynx, his eyes wide and gleaming intensely, came to their table and sat down. "You saw how out of breath he was," he said quietly. "He must have run all the way."

"When I saw Lucy yesterday," said the Sheriff, tapping his fingers nervously on the tabletop, "she was so worried she couldn't keep her mind on the conversation. She said that Jamie was feverish and sleeping a lot."

They were all silent for a long minute; then Parker asked, "Should *we* go over too?"

"We'd probably be in the way," Simon answered. "Let's sit tight for now."

With a sheaf of music under her arm, Arabella Raccoon came down the stairs and started for the piano. Halfway across the room she saw their faces and immediately hurried over to join them. In subdued voices, they told her about Jamie Otter's sickness.

"It sounds quite serious," Arabella said. "Someone ought to be with Lucy." She took her music back upstairs, and a moment later—with her sunglasses and blue baseball cap—she had crossed the bridge and was cutting cross-country toward the Otters' house.

Roscoe poured fresh mugs of honey brew for the others, and a large one for himself. Then they waited. Parker stood up and began pacing aimlessly before the windows. There was nothing that any of them could think to say. Oscar's urgency, bordering on panic—his face and manner—left nothing to be said.

After about ten minutes, Fergus Fisher came down the stairs carrying a waste can out to the garbage dump. They barely looked up. Fergus saw that something was amiss and, after disposing of the waste can, came to join them. As soon as he heard the news, he sat down heavily and began tugging thoughtfully at his ear. "It's the river water," he said, more to himself than to them. "I knew something would happen; it was just a matter of time."

Lost in their thoughts, the five of them sat unmoving as the shadows lengthened in the garden and the clock above the fireplace ticked away three-quarters of an hour. Just after the clock chimed seven, Arabella returned, looking very tired, her face worried and grave.

Roscoe poured her a mug of brew. "What's happening at Otters'?" he asked.

She pushed back her cap and held the mug tightly with both hands, shaking her head and fighting back her tears. Then, while they waited, she brought herself under control with great effort, took a deep breath and said quickly, as though saying it fast would hurt less: "I think Jamie is going to die."

The blunt statement of their very worst fear—that which none of them had dared to say aloud—hit them like a slap. Parker jammed his hands behind the bib of his overalls and closed his eyes. Fergus leaned back in his chair with a long, deep sigh. Sheriff Badger turned from the table and stared at the floor. Roscoe's hand began to tremble violently, and he had to set down his mug of brew. "He's very sick," Arabella continued, "—unconscious, like in a deep sleep; and he doesn't respond to any of Doctor Badger's treatments."

Simon asked: "Does Doc know what's wrong with him?"

She shook her head, and this time the movement caused a tear to finally break loose and glisten down her cheek. "Not for sure. He thinks it's some kind of poisoning from the river water. He made the Otters leave their house. Said 'No more of this!' and packed them off to his own house. He feels that Jamie is better off there, where the supplies and medicines are."

"You say the whole family's moved into Bascom's house?" the Sheriff asked.

"Yes, he felt it simply wasn't safe for them to stay at home any longer. Even now he's afraid that someone else will come down sick."

"I suppose there's nothing any of us can do," Simon said.

"Not for Jamie," Arabella replied. "Even Doc Badger feels baffled and helpless. He told me so before I left, but he doesn't want Lucy and Oscar to know. I guess all we can do is support *them*."

Roscoe got up suddenly, went to the serving counter, and there began slamming cabinet doors and banging bottles about. Finally, with his back to the

others, he began furiously polishing mugs with a cloth. Fergus took off his spectacles, wiped them carefully with a piece of lens paper, put them back on, and stared out the window. Simon and Parker fiddled absent-mindedly with their mugs. Arabella dried her eyes with the back of her hand and tried to drink her brew. The Sheriff sat looking at the clock.

Shortly after eight-thirty that evening, Simon Skunk left his workshop and walked over to Doctor Badger's house. It was a small cottage, enclosed with neatly-trimmed privet hedges. An addition had been built on one side—the doctor's office and treatment-room. All the lights were on. As Simon went up the front walk, he saw Hilda Badger and Lucy Otter sitting in the porch swing, moving slowly back and forth, back and forth in the shadows. The swing creaked rhythmically.

"Hello," he said, climbing the porch steps.

"Hello, Simon," said Hilda Badger. "Come have a seat."

"It's good to see you, Simon," Lucy Otter said, holding out her hand to him.

"I thought I'd drop over," Simon said awkwardly, "to see—well, to find out how Jamie is. Arabella told us that he was here. And very sick. That you'd all come here. I—we—all of us are terribly sad at what's happened." He stopped in confusion, and Lucy gave his hand a firm squeeze.

"Doc thinks it's the river water," she said. "Jamie was always playing in it. We told the children not to go into the river—weeks and weeks ago, when we saw the fish leaving, and what was happening to the plants. But Jamie loved the water—he just couldn't stay out of it—and now—and now—" She stopped and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. Hilda put one arm around her and Simon stood silent in the darkness, turning his cap slowly in his hands. "At least the other children seem to be all right," Lucy continued. "We can be thankful for that."

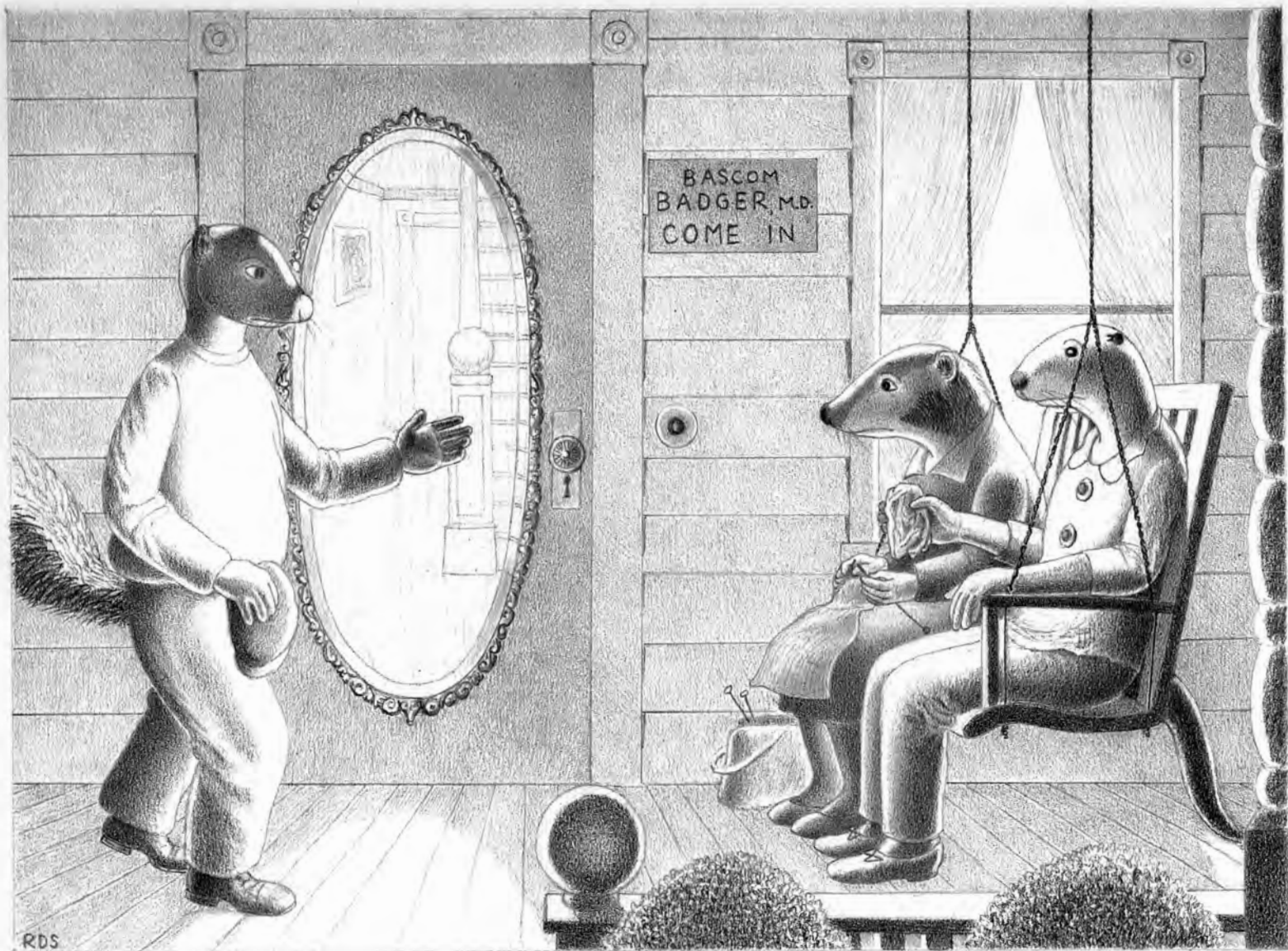
"May I go in and see Jamie?" Simon asked quietly.

"Of course. He's in the bedroom behind Doc's treatment-room."

Simon went into the house, turned into the little hallway that led past the doctor's office and into the treatment-room. The door to the bedroom beyond it was open, and as Simon approached, he heard Doctor Badger saying: "Oscar, I insist that you get some rest. You haven't had any sleep for two days. You're going to collapse if you don't take care of yourself."

Simon tapped on the doorframe and entered. Oscar and the Doctor were standing beside the bed where Jamie lay—small and almost lost amid the white sheets. Oscar was rumpled and frowsy-looking, heavy with fatigue. Simon gave him a strong, silent hug which Oscar returned. "Good to see you, Simon," he whispered hoarsely. He stood trying to think of something further to say, then gave up with a helpless shrug and left the room.

Simon moved closer to the bed to look at Jamie stretched out motionless in the



RDS

semi-darkness. As Arabella had reported, he did appear to be asleep—but only after Simon had been forced to look very closely to make sure that he was breathing at all.

“He’s running a high fever,” said Doctor Badger, “and he’s badly dehydrated; as you can see, I’m running fluids into him through an arm vein.” He pointed to the bottle suspended above the bed and the tube that led from it into Jamie’s arm. “He has a very weak pulse, and won’t respond to anything I do. I don’t know that we can save him, Simon.”

“Have you figured out what’s wrong with him?”

“Let’s go to the office. There’s some iced tea there. No, I don’t know for sure what’s wrong with him. I don’t think it’s a disease. I’m convinced it’s some kind of chemical poisoning from the river water.”

The Doctor sat tiredly in the chair behind his desk, and Simon poured each of them a glass of iced tea. The top of the desk was piled with medical books lying open or turned face down. On the floor were more books and stacks of medical journals, showing in their scattered disarray the haste with which the Doctor had rummaged through them. He indicated them with a sweep of his hand. “I’ve been searching through everything I’ve got,” he said, “for anything that might be of help. Heavy metal poisoning: mercury, arsenic, lead. Fergus’ chemical analysis gave me some idea of what to look for. I thought maybe it was cyanide at first—but I’m sure it’s not cyanide.” Simon nodded and let him talk. “I’m worried about possible liver and kidney and brain damage—but there’s so much I can’t tell! I can’t get the fever broken. For the last few hours he’s stayed the same. I don’t know anything more that I can do. All my medical training, all these books—no help at all! When you came in, I was just going to call for an ambulance to take him to the hospital in the city.”

“How many other people are in danger?” Simon asked. “Little River flows by many homes.”

“Exactly!” cried Doctor Badger, leaping up. “But what does that matter to the Sudge-Buddle Company? Downstream, and it’s not *their* responsibility!” He slammed his fist down on the desk—so hard that the ink bottle jumped. “They’ve got to be stopped from pumping their filth into the river! Somehow it’s got to be done!”

Hilda Badger came to the office door. “Bascom,” she said to her husband, “Izzy the Witch is here.”

“Izzy!” he cried. “Why is *she* here?”

“I sent for her,” said Hilda. “Lucy and I talked it over, and we both decided that Izzy ought to examine Jamie. Maybe she can do something to help.”

Doctor Badger rounded the desk in a fury. “No, I won’t have that woman messing around my patient! Working her spells and charms. Mumbo-jumbo! Superstitious balderdash! With her potions and herbs and spooky ways!”

“I think it’s time to have another opinion on the case,” said Hilda firmly. “You admit that you can’t do anything more. Izzy doesn’t claim to be able to, either. But she wants to see Jamie. And both Lucy and I want her to.”

Doctor Badger sputtered explosively, but Hilda stood firm. “I can’t accept it!”

he said finally, running a hand through his hair. "It's not professional! Fuddlesome hanky-panky! Where is she? I'll talk to her, tell her she'll do more harm than good."

"She's in Jamie's room," said Hilda. "With Lucy and Prosper."

"You let her in with my patient?" cried the doctor. "I'll see about that!" He brushed past her and went storming through the treatment-room with Hilda and Simon trailing behind him. The bedroom door was closed. He tried to open it, found that the doorknob wouldn't turn, and began pounding the panels.

The door opened halfway. Prosper the Cat looked out, said "We're busy in here; could you wait a minute, please?", and closed the door.

Doctor Badger stood open-mouthed, staring at the door. Then he knocked again, much louder. This time it didn't open, and still the knob wouldn't turn. Helplessly tugging at his whiskers, the doctor turned to face his wife. "Hilda, how could you do this? Izzy has no medical training. I have no confidence whatsoever in her being able to do anything for Jamie. I just hope she doesn't make things worse."

"How can she make things worse?" Hilda asked calmly. "You say there's nothing *you* can do to help Jamie. He seems very close to death. It's true that Izzy has no medical training in your scientific sense, but she does have some experience in treating people with medical problems. Think, Bascom! she did cure your athlete's foot after *you* failed to do it. *I* have confidence in Izzy. Though, of course, I realize she may not be able to help Jamie either." She stopped talking and sat on the edge of the doctor's examination table.

Doctor Badger recalled the athlete's foot. He remembered Oscar's despair. He acknowledged that Jamie was dying. As a last resort, he looked to Simon for support—but Simon's face was carefully blank: *he* wasn't taking sides. "All right," the doctor said, hoisting himself up to sit beside Hilda on the examination table. And he added quietly: "She can't do any harm."

They waited. The room was hot and still. Simon went back to the office to get his and Doctor Badger's tea.

At ten o'clock, the bedroom door opened. Prosper came out first, carrying in one hand his gold-headed walking stick, and in the other a wicker basket covered with a red-and-white checked cloth. After him came Izzy, her face thoughtful. Last came Lucy Otter, tired and worn, but nonetheless walking with a kind of spring in her step, and a spark of hope in her eyes.

Izzy went straight to the sink and began washing her hands. "What do you think?" Hilda asked her.

"Do you have any paper towels?" Izzy asked. "Oh, here they are. What do I think? I think Jamie's a terribly sick little Otter. It's going to be a close thing—and I'm not at all sure we can save him. In all my years of helping folks, I've never seen anything like this before." Doctor Badger grunted something from the examination table, and Hilda poked him hard in the side with her elbow. "But we did make some progress in there," Izzy continued. "We managed to break his fever. His temperature is normal again." She looked at Doctor Badger, who was glaring at her from under his eyebrows. "If Jamie lives, it will take both



of us to pull him through," she told him. "Neither of us can do it alone; that's quite clear. But there is a chance with both of us together—and Prosper, of course."

"May I see my patient now?" the doctor asked, getting off the table.

"Yes, I'd like to have your professional opinion," Izzy said. "Specifically, on what you think we need to do next. Look at him and see what you think."

Doctor Badger went into the bedroom, and Simon followed him. Jamie's fever had indeed broken, and he was lying cool, his breathing deep and easy. Doctor Badger timed his pulse, listened with his stethoscope, and looked into Jamie's eyes with a thin shaft of light. "There's some improvement," he announced to Simon. "Not much, but some. A first step. I still think he should be in the hospital, and I'm going to call an ambulance."

When they returned to the treatment-room, Izzy had spread out a sleeping bag on the examination table, and Prosper had placed his velvet cushion on the floor near an open window. "We'll sleep here," said Izzy, "to keep an eye on him during the night."

"Now see here!" cried Doctor Badger. "You'll do no such thing! I won't have you sleeping in my treatment-room!"

"It's no bother," Izzy assured him. "We brought our own sleeping things. We'll be as comfortable as at home, never fear. Besides, you already have a houseful of people, and we wouldn't think of troubling you to put us up. Now, what do you think Jamie needs next by way of treatment?"

"I think he should go to the hospital in the city," said the doctor, "and I'm going to call an ambulance right now."

Izzy shook her head. "I disagree. I don't think the hospital could handle it as well as you and I can working together right here. You've got most of the equipment we'll need. But even more important, equipment alone isn't going to do it. No, I think Jamie should stay here, with you and me to treat him." She turned to Hilda Badger: "Prosper and I would appreciate a little breakfast in the morning—if it won't be too much trouble. Some scrambled eggs, perhaps, and a glass of orange juice."

"And some buttered toast," added Prosper. "Two slices each, with a little strawberry jam. If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"No trouble at all," said Hilda, with a smile. The doctor mumbled something under his breath and left the room.

Under the care of Izzy and Doctor Badger—both of whom worked long hours day and night—Jamie's condition began to show some slight improvement. But progress was very slow; and every time they thought they were making headway, without warning there would be a baffling setback. At least five times both Izzy and the doctor were sure they were going to lose him. On one such occasion, when Jamie stopped breathing entirely, they had to use artificial respiration and oxygen to get his breath going again. Since his body still showed

signs of dehydration, they continually gave him fluids through his arm vein. Worst of all, Jamie never once had wakened from his deep sleep. It was an exhausting business; and after four days of it, living with the constant fear of failure, both Izzy and the doctor showed signs of strain.

On the night of the fourth day, as they sat with a pot of tea in the office, Izzy said: "Yet he's better than he was. Though it's still touch and go, I feel slightly encouraged. What about you?"

"Oh, I'm encouraged," the doctor admitted, helping himself to a piece of cinnamon toast. "The most hopeful thing is that we've kept him alive. If only we could get him to wake up! But, yes, I'm encouraged. Though I don't begin to understand some of the things you've done for him."

For, as her part of the treatment, Izzy had spent long hours mixing odd potions and powders in the doctor's laboratory; she had drawn mysterious figures in red and blue chalk on the floor around Jamie's bed, and stood over him reciting strange charms and incantations. She had mixed some of the potions she prepared with the liquids being fed into Jamie's veins. Doctor Badger had put up a fight when Izzy had brought him the first of these to add to the sugar and water solution he was feeding in. "Absolutely not!" he had cried. "I don't even know what that stuff is!"

"It's extract of adder's tongue mixed with oil of bladderwort and boiled juice of bogberry," she'd snapped. "Now add it in!" And, with extreme reluctance and sinkings of heart, he had done so, watching anxiously to see what the effects would be. He expected the worst. But instead, Jamie's pulse beat slowed down to its normal rate. After that, he hadn't challenged her again.

But no matter what they did for him, Jamie remained in his deep sleep. On the morning of the fifth day, his general condition was so improved that, after standing silently over his thin, wasted body for several minutes, Izzy turned to Doctor Badger and announced: "It's time to wake him up."

"Wake him up?" the doctor repeated in puzzlement. "How do you expect to do that?"

"It will take all three of us," she said, "if it's to be done at all." She called Prosper in from his velvet cushion and pulled down the window shades. From her basket she took six small yellow candles. She placed one of these in each corner of the room, another at the head of the bed, and still another at the foot.

"These won't smell very good when they're lit," she warned the doctor. "But they're necessary." With his surgical scissors she cut out a paper doll roughly in Jamie's shape. "Now we need a lock of his hair." She snipped one off and glued it to the head of the paper cutout. She laid the little image on Jamie's chest, then paused to refresh her memory from a green notebook. "Oh, yes!" she said. She took from her basket a long cord of twisted gray fibers, looped it around each of Jamie's hands, and around his feet, and gave the ends to Prosper. "Now, Prosper, you stand there by the side of the bed and hold both ends of this cord—one end in each hand. And you, Doctor Badger, you stand at the foot of the bed and ring this little bell—jing, jing, jing—about that fast."

Doctor Badger, who had been watching the preparations with a skeptical

frown, recoiled at this and said with some irritation: "Surely you don't expect me to stand there ringing a bell!"

"Why, certainly," said Izzy in surprise, "or else I wouldn't have asked you to."

Doctor Badger backed away, shaking his head. "Then I'm sorry to disappoint you," he said. "No, I really don't think I can take part in this—uh—this hocus-pocus witchery."

"But we *need* you, Doctor Badger," Izzy said, holding the bell out to him.

It was obvious that she wasn't going to accept his refusal. For a long moment he struggled with himself, then, with a sigh, gave in and took the bell. Still frowning, he went to stand at the foot of the bed.

"Good," said Izzy. "When I nod, you shake it—jing, jing, jing. And whatever you do, don't stop shaking it till we're finished. All right?"

She once again referred to her green notebook, then lit the candles. They did smell terrible—like burning manure—and filled the room with swirls of thick blue smoke. Izzy took a small jar of purple ointment from her basket and smeared a little spot of it on Jamie's forehead. With one finger she started rubbing the ointment into his skin. At this point, she nodded to the doctor, who began ringing the bell. Prosper stood with his eyes closed, holding the ends of the cord. As she rubbed, Izzy chanted softly:

"Out, dark sleep, into the image!
Out, dark sleep, not to return!
Out, dark sleep, now and forever—
Into the image I shall burn."

She stopped rubbing, and held the paper doll in the flame of the candle at Jamie's head. The paper blazed up, sputtering.

She dropped the burning image into a saucer, where it flared brightly for a moment and shrank into a crinkled black ash. Doctor Badger kept ringing the bell—jing, jing, jing—while Izzy chanted:

*"Wa-tosh ka-watl wata wa-tosh!
Wa-tosh ka-wata watl wa-tosh!
Koso boto lamba-beek,
Deeko bobba deeko-deek!
Wa-tosh ka-watl watl wa-tosh!"*

Jamie opened his eyes.

"Hello, Prosper," he said, in a very weak voice. Prosper said, "Good morning, Jamie," and began unwinding the cord from his hands and feet.

Doctor Badger stood speechless with amazement, still ringing the bell, while Izzy briskly blew out the candles and shook hands with Prosper across the bed. Jamie was studying with great curiosity the tube that ran from the bottle of liquid into his arm. "You can stop ringing now," Izzy told the doctor, "we're finished." She gently took the bell from his limp hand and dropped it into her



RDS

basket. Doctor Badger passed his hand over his eyes, swallowed with great difficulty, and said, "Tell me, Izzy, however did you do it?"

"I combined the Old Egyptian Method with the Haitian Technique," she answered. "I was afraid it wouldn't work, since I didn't have any mizar root to make the ointment. But I took a chance and used extract of liverwort instead. And it worked! I'll have to write it up for the next edition of the *Witch's Handbook*."

"I'm hungry," said Jamie.

"Aha!" laughed Izzy. "We'll start you out on thin oatmeal. I think there's some ready in the kitchen."

Chapter 15

ONCE HE'D been awakened, Jamie Otter recovered quickly. Within a week he was sitting up and eating solid food with a good appetite. Halfway through the second week, he was out on the front porch talking with his friends and doing jigsaw puzzles. By the end of the third, he was walking about and doing quiet sorts of things—but still taking it easy, for he tired quickly. At the end of the fourth week, he was almost as strong as he'd been before the sickness.

As Jamie got better and needed less care, Doctor Badger's thoughts turned more and more to the danger which the factory was causing for the lives of others. A case in point was Thaddeus Higgins, whose asthma was badly aggravated by the factory smoke. Over checkers one evening, the doctor told Thorstein Raccoon: "It's just a matter of time till someone else gets sick; we're sitting on a time bomb." Both his fears for the future and his rage at the factory's nearly killing Jamie Otter made him constantly ponder ways of stopping the pollution once and for all. The more he brooded, the angrier he got. But nothing he could think of seemed workable or satisfactory; and as one plan after another was considered and rejected with a growing sense of helplessness, the more grumpy and irritable he became.

Then, in early September, just after school had started, Victoria Groundsquirrel wrote Franklin a letter which he shared with his friends. It said:

"Dear Franklin,

I hope things are going well with you and everyone there. We are all fine. We were happy to hear that Jamie has gotten well; Peggy and Peter were simply beside themselves when they heard that he'd been poisoned. They're in school now, and I'm glad to say they've got a better teacher this year than last. Richardson is putting up the storm windows. Mr. Skinner has probably told you that the Grover lawsuit has been filed against the Sudge-Buddle Company. I'm afraid the action will take a long time, for the Company has good lawyers, and it stands to lose a great deal of money if you win. You can expect the Company to fight to the last ditch and play as dirty as they think necessary. Oh, something else: the Sudge-Buddle Company will be holding its yearly stockholders' meeting here in the city at the Pembroke Hotel on October 1. The newspapers say it's a meeting to celebrate the Grover factory's first year of operation, and to honor the manager, Mr. Snade, for his getting the factory to turn a fat profit in its first year. Mr. Sudge and Mr. Buddle

themselves will be there to present him an award. The stockholders will have a noon banquet with a business meeting to follow”

When he read the letter, Doctor Badger became very excited, for he saw in it a possible solution to their problem. Ten days before the stockholders’ meeting, he called a public gathering at the Old Hex Inn to explain his idea. On the appointed night, so many folks came from Grover, Maple Crossing, and the surrounding farms that Roscoe could not supply enough chairs, and many had to sit on tables, or on the floor.

Raising his hands to quiet the buzz of conversation, Doctor Badger said, “It’s good to see so many of you out tonight! It shows we all have a common concern, and a desire to do something about it.” When he had their full attention, the doctor explained why he felt it was necessary to stop the factory’s pollution without further delay. “Time is short,” he said. “You know how close we came to losing Jamie Otter. The only thing that saved him was—” (he was about to say “medical science and simple good luck”, but his eye caught Izzy the Witch smiling at him from the front row, and his wife frowning at him from the second, and he quickly shifted his ground) “—was the quick action and concern of his parents and friends.” Izzy smiled more broadly still, and Hilda sat back nodding her approval. He hurried on: “The next victim may not be so lucky. For there *will* be other victims as long as the factory continues its pollution. No one is safe. Everyone is threatened. We simply can’t wait any longer!” Randy Possum cheered, and there was a noisy scattering of applause.

“But what can we *do*?” asked Grandfather Fieldmouse.

Doctor Badger raised his hand for silence. “A good question,” he replied. “The Company has ignored our complaints. We’ve had no word from Mr. Renwick at the Pollution Control Agency. Our lawsuit is just beginning to wind its way through the courts; but *that* will take a long, long time—longer than we’ve got—and even if we win it, the pollution may not stop. It’s clear that something more must be done—something that the Sudge-Buddle Company *can’t* ignore! And that we’ll have to do it ourselves!” At this, there was stamping of feet, pounding of tables, and shrill whistles of agreement.

“But what *can* we do?” asked Grandfather Fieldmouse, as the noise subsided.

“I’ve got an idea,” said Doctor Badger, “and I want your reactions to it. It came to me from something Victoria said in a letter to Franklin.” He read them that part of the letter which told of the stockholders’ meeting. “That’s just ten days from now,” he said. “The stockholders are folks like us who own shares in the Sudge-Buddle Company. I’m sure most of them don’t know what the Grover Factory is doing to us. If they did, they’d see too that something has to be done. If we can get *them* to hear our complaints and understand our situation, they could put pressure on the Company’s officers to stop the pollution. We’ve got to tell them.”

“But how?” Miss Proudie Fairblossom called out. “They’ll be having a banquet and a business meeting. We can’t just barge in on them.”

"Why not?" demanded Oscar Otter. "We don't owe 'em anything! Certainly not courtesy!" Miss Proudie had nothing to reply.

"What the factory does isn't the stockholders' fault," Tim Turtle said from the back row. "They just buy shares in the Company to earn money on the Company's success. It's the officers who make all the decisions. As Doc says, the stockholders probably don't even know what's going on. If we want to tell them about the factory, this meeting will be the best time to do it."

"It seems clear," said M. Lucius Ferret, "that if the officers haven't answered our letters of complaint, they probably won't want us to speak at the business meeting. I suspect they'd be happier if the stockholders never learned about our problems. So somehow we've got to get the stockholders' attention. What if we staged a quiet demonstration at the hotel, *before* the business meeting? On the sidewalk out front, or in the lobby, say, with signs and posters explaining our protest? They'd have to notice us then."

"And the newspapers will write it up, with pictures!" cried Lafayette Lizard.

"I'll help make the posters," Franklin Groundsquirrel volunteered.

"I'd like to show 'em some of my bedsheets which their smokestack ruined," Elizabeth H. remarked.

"I've got some bedsheets, too," cried Priscilla Possum, "and pillowcases! All covered with black spots and riddled with holes!"

"I'd like to show them what's left of my geraniums!" Roscoe Lynx called out from behind the serving counter.

"And I'd like to take my ruined painting," said Farmer Ben, "and make them see our ruined peaches!"

"If a lot of people want to go," said Matthew Muddie, "maybe we could use the school bus to get 'em there. What about it, Mayor Higgins?"

"Sounds good to me," she replied. "Everyone who wants to go should get the chance. I agree that taking our case to the stockholders is a good plan. But the people *I* want to see are the officers—face to face. Especially Mr. Sudge and Mr. Buddle. If they won't answer my letters, I'll go stand on their toes, and see if they can ignore us then!"

The room was abuzz with excitement. Doctor Badger once again tried to restore some order. "We have several ideas before us," he said loudly, "and we now must decide our best course of action. We've agreed that we should take our complaints to the stockholders. But we still have to decide how to get our message across. What will make the stockholders really listen to us?"

"Stink bombs!" cried Oliphant.

"Posters!" said Hilda Badger.

"Petitions!" shouted Peabody. "We can write up a statement asking them to stop the pollution, and get at least a hundred people to sign it!"

"Photographs!" Lafayette called out.

"Bedsheets!" "Geraniums!"

"Leaflets!" cried Rebecca Raccoon. "Let's hand out bright yellow leaflets which they can carry home and read!"

"Someone should make a speech," Simon Skunk suggested.

“Oscar should!” “Doctor Badger!” “Mayor Higgins!”

M. Lucius Ferret held up a warning finger. “There might not be any opportunity for speeches. If we demonstrate outside the hotel, nobody will stop to listen. If we go inside, a speech would interrupt their business meeting; and that would make them so angry they wouldn’t *want* to listen. And frankly, I don’t think the officers will want to give us a spot on the program.”

“If we really want to reach the stockholders, we *ought* to go into the business meeting,” said Miss Proudie Fairblossom. “I’m sure a lot of them wouldn’t see us if we made our protest outside.”

“I agree,” said Franklin Groundsquirrel. “But *when* should we go in? Victoria said there would be a banquet before the business meeting. Should we go in before they start eating, while they’re eating, or after?”

“Not before,” Arabella Raccoon said. “They’ll be more in the mood to listen to us after they’ve eaten.”

“But after the business meeting has started, it might be harder for us to get their attention,” said Tonia Turtle. “And as M. Lucius says, it would probably make them angry if we interrupted their program. I vote we go in before they eat.”

“I’ve got some photographs that would spoil *anybody’s* meal,” Lafayette whispered to Fergus Fisher.

“Then bring ‘em, by all means,” said Fergus. “The grislier, the better.”

“*During* the banquet would be best,” Lucy Otter suggested. “They’ll be in good spirits, and more inclined to listen. And we wouldn’t be interrupting the business meeting. I agree that we shouldn’t make them angry.”

“I think that’s very important,” Cassandra Scissortail said. “If we want these people to listen to us, and believe what we say, and understand our protest, and do something to help us, we’ve *got* to make a good impression!”

They argued it back and forth, and finally decided on a compromise. They would go in during dessert, when the stockholders were feeling relaxed and happy after their meal, but before the business meeting began. In single file they would march in as quietly as possible with their signs and bedsheets and peaches, and take up positions around the walls, where the stockholders could study their exhibits and ask them questions. They would give their petition to someone in authority among the stockholders, and hand out leaflets explaining their complaints to the people seated at the tables. Doctor Badger would prepare a speech which he could give if there were an opportunity to do so. Then, when the business meeting started, they would thank the stockholders for listening, and leave.

Oliphant was still holding out for stink bombs, but the rest of them voted him down. Roscoe Lynx passed around fresh mugs of honey brew while they decided who would make signs, who would collect names for the petition, and who would print up the leaflets. Lafayette agreed to enlarge some of his best photographs for glueing to posters. Parker Packrat and Thorstein Raccoon took the job of making carrying sticks for the signs. Doctor Badger said that he’d begin writing his speech immediately.

"At last," said Mayor Higgins, raising her mug in a toast to their success, "at long last, we have a real chance of making our voices heard. Going to the stockholders is our last, best chance of stopping the pollution. Our thanks to Victoria—and to you, Doctor Badger—for suggesting this idea!" And everyone cheered.

On the first of October, at nine in the morning, Matthew Muddie began loading the black and orange school bus for the trip to the city. At nine-fifteen, Farmer Ben arrived in his pickup truck with the protest signs, all neatly painted and nailed to sticks. Various people had helped paint the signs, and the messages revealed this; for they ranged from pure information (such as a list of dangerous chemicals which Fergus Fisher had found in the river) to rather blunt statements of feeling: **DOWN WITH SUDGE-BUDDLE!**

As people arrived to board the bus, they brought with them their exhibits and their sack lunches (for they figured they'd get nothing to eat at the banquet). Farmer Ben and Elizabeth H. brought a large basketful of hardened brown peaches, the bedsheet, and Ben's ruined painting. Izzy and Prosper brought a wicker basket covered with a yellow and white checked cloth. Randy Possum had his trumpet, Peabody the petition (with a hundred and sixteen names). Rebecca Raccoon brought five hundred leaflets which she and M. Lucius had worked on for two days; Lafayette, his camera, with lots of extra film; and Oscar Otter, a can of red spray paint (he and Lucy had flipped a coin to see which of them would go, and which would stay home with the children; Oscar had won the toss, which pleased him, for he wanted to go badly). M. Lucius Ferret was carrying a book on Constitutional law, and Fergus Fisher and Oliphant (arriving just before the bus left), a small black bag.

Forty-two persons jammed into the bus. What with the bedsheets, and peaches, and potted plants, and pillowcases, and protest signs, and sack lunches, it proved to be quite a squeeze. Most of them were dressed in their very best clothes, for Priscilla Possum had stressed how important clothes were to making a good impression. Ambrose and Grandfather Fieldmouse each wore a red bow tie; Thorstein Raccoon and Parker Packrat wore their most presentable coveralls; Arabella Raccoon had bought a new baseball cap for the occasion; and Miss Proudie Fairblossom was resplendent in a new "Possum Original"—a purple and white dress with a purple parasol to match. Mayor Higgins was elegant but uncomfortable in a hot wool pant-suit; Thaddeus Higgins was much more comfortable in soft gray flannels; and Doctor Badger was somber and dignified in his black frock coat, black trousers, and vest (his wedding suit from many years back).

The ride to the city was like a holiday outing. It was good to actually be *doing* something to solve their problem, and everyone was excited and full of hope. As they rode, they laughed and chattered, made last-minute plans, and sang exuberant songs. One of these was a kind of march, and it went like this:

“Something must be done!
 But who’s to do it?
 We will do it—
 Every one!

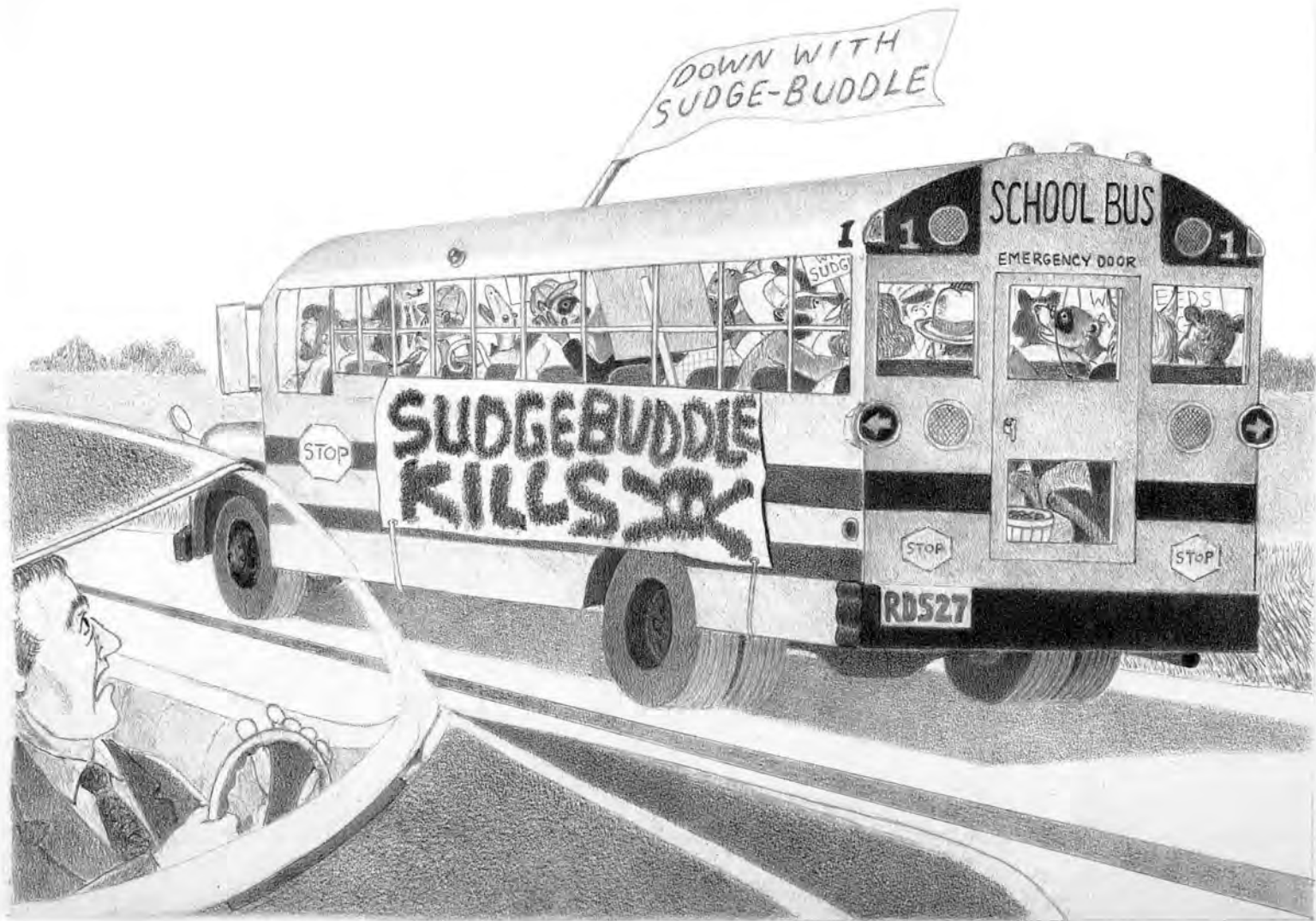
When trouble comes, and skies are dark,
 And the strong give way to fear—
 When mountains quake, and rivers turn,
 And the end seems very near—
 We’ll link our arms
 And clasp our hands
 And know that Truth forever stands!

CHORUS: If we speak the truth,
 And our call is clear,
 Then we’ll have a voice
 That stones can hear!

When trouble comes, and the way seems long,
 And the weak need strength and cheer—
 When the sun goes red, and the moon goes dark,
 And life seems very dear—
 We’ll clasp our hands
 And pledge our trust
 And know that Joy can rise from dust!

CHORUS: If we have a voice
 That stones can hear,
 Then we’ll have a strength
 That *knows* no fear!”

When sung loudly by forty-two assorted voices and accompanied by shrill blasts from Randy Possum’s trumpet, this proved to be a very stirring song. It turned the heads of farmers working in the fields and of drivers approaching them on the road. Some of these folks it stirred to wonder, some to dismay; but no one who heard it remained unmoved. Oscar Otter had draped a bedsheet along the side of the bus facing the other lane of traffic; on it he had outlined, in red spray paint, a skull and crossbones, and written in large red letters: SUDGE-BUDDLE KILLS! Passing motorists slowed and stared from their windows in astonishment. One man’s head was so far turned that he drove his car into the ditch.



As they neared the city, their excitement grew. Noon was fast approaching. Many of them ate their lunches on the way; a few saved theirs for the trip back. Miss Proudie was too nervous to eat anything at all, but Peabody ate three peanut butter sandwiches, and half a cantaloupe.

When they arrived in the city, heavy traffic slowed them down; when they reached the Pembroke Hotel, it was twenty minutes after twelve, which meant that the Sudge-Buddle banquet had already started. But close as they were, with the hotel in sight across the square, Matthew Muddie couldn't find a place to park the bus. In the distance, they could see Victoria and Richardson Groundsquirrel, and Peggy and Peter, waiting for them at the bottom of the steps that led up to the hotel doorway.

"Hurry, hurry, we'll be late!" Priscilla Possum shouted into Matthew Muddie's ear. That was the kind of encouragement he didn't need. "How can I park if there's no *place* to park?" he growled back at her, steering the bus through the slow, heavy traffic, while cars honked their horns at them from all sides.

"Let us out, then!" cried Hilda Badger. "And you go *find* a parking place. We can't wait any longer!"

"All right, all right," he agreed. "I'll let you out by the taxicabs." He steered the bus into the driveway reserved for taxis, stopped with a jolt behind the last cab in a line of three, and opened the doors. People began spilling out of the bus with their signs and exhibits. The three cab drivers leaned from their windows and gawked.

When they were all out and standing crowded together on the sidewalk, Matthew Muddie roared away to park the bus. "Where do we go now?" asked Mayor Higgins.

"Victoria knows!" said Franklin, as his sister and her family joined them.

"You're late!" Richardson Groundsquirrel cried. "They should be starting their dessert by now!"

Victoria beckoned urgently. "Follow me," she called. "Third floor ballroom!" The group surged up the steps to the hotel porch, raising their signs high so the messages and pictures could be seen. Randy Possum lifted his trumpet and began to blow a cavalry charge. "No, no!" yelled Simon Skunk. "This isn't the place for that!"

"I guess he's right," Randy muttered to himself. "Inside would be better."

Getting the signs and peaches and bedsheets through the revolving doors was something of a problem, but they finally managed it, with only minor damage. As they began to spin through the doors into the hotel lobby, people sitting and standing about the room turned, gaped, and retreated to the walls. A woman standing near the doors began to laugh, and an old man leaped up from a chair and angrily shook his cane at them.

With Victoria pulling him across the lobby toward the stairs, Franklin got only a blurred impression of a huge room two stories high with monstrous gold and crystal chandeliers, an arched red ceiling, large plate glass mirrors in fancy gold frames, and—underfoot—a thick red carpet. "We can't wait for the

elevators!" said Victoria. "Go straight up the stairs!" And she led the way to a broad flight of brown marble steps that majestically swept up to a landing, then branched into two separate staircases going left and right.

When he heard the commotion moving across the lobby, the hotel manager had rushed from his office to see what was happening. He now stood before them, at the head of the line, clutching the white carnation in his buttonhole. "Stop!" he commanded. "What's the meaning of this?"

"We're making a complaint," Franklin explained.

"Against the hotel?" the manager cried.

"No," said Rebecca Raccoon, "against the Grover factory." And she handed him a yellow leaflet.

The manager glared at the leaflet, then stepped back in utter confusion and read the signs that were moving past him. "Get out of here!" he shouted. "You turn yourselves around and leave the hotel right now, or I'll call the police!"

"But they're already eating dessert!" Priscilla Possum said, as she jostled past him. There was no stopping now. The head of the line was moving up the stairs. "I'm calling the police!" the manager bellowed—and he ran back to his office to do it.

His announcement caused a flurry of excitement within the group. "Hurry!" Victoria called back from the head of the line. And to Franklin she said: "If the police come, we won't have much time to make our presentation."

"Will we be arrested?" Miss Proudie asked Lafayette Lizard.

"Oh, probably," said Lafayette. "But can you think of a better way to get our story out? I can see the *Gazette* headline now: 'VILLAGE ARRESTED AT SUDGE-BUDDLE BANQUET!' What a story! With editorials to follow! and pictures! And of course the city newspapers will carry the story too."

"But what about Parker?" asked Summerfield Scissortail, who was darting and swooping above them. "He's already been arrested once before. Won't it go hard with him to have a second offense?"

Parker Packrat looked up at him and shook his head. "But I've already served my year's probation on the theft charge. That's all finished, and I've proved my good behavior."

"Summerfield has a point, though," Lafayette said thoughtfully. "A second offense *won't* look good on your record. You'd better try not to get arrested, Parker. Leave early, or something. Take the back stairs."

Behind them, Groverpeople were still coming through the revolving doors. In the center of the lobby, Randy Possum once again lifted his trumpet. "Now?" he asked. And, getting no answer from Simon Skunk, who was struggling to disentangle his protest sign from the fronds of a potted palm, he began to blow the cavalry charge.

"No, no!" shouted Simon. "Don't do that here!"

"You're right," said Randy Possum. "Third floor ballroom."

By the time Victoria and Franklin and Peggy and Peter had reached the landing where the staircase divided, Groverpeople were strung out in a jostling,



jagged file across the lobby and up the stairs, their signs jouncing up and down and turning on their sticks from side to side. The hotel guests, resigned to what was happening, stood back and watched the signs march by. The posters were colorful and carefully done: a lot of work had gone into them.

**WOULD YOU WANT TO DRINK THE WATER?
POLLUTION IS PROFITABLE! ASK MR. SNADE.
HOW MUCH MORE MUST PEOPLE TAKE?
DOWN WITH THE GROVER FACTORY!**

Then the last stragglers were going up the stairs, with Tim and Tonia Turtle at the end of the line.

When the Groverpeople began coming into the ballroom foyer on the third floor, Victoria Groundsquirrel pointed to a set of double doors in the dark red wall: "In there," she said. Franklin opened one of the doors a narrow crack and peeked in. The ballroom was large and lavishly decorated in red and gold. It too had crystal chandeliers, but smaller than those in the lobby. Long tables draped with white cloths and aglitter with dishes and silverware were arranged in rows. At the tables, about two hundred people were eating dessert—vanilla ice cream and chocolate pudding.

At the far end of the room was another table, slightly higher than the others and placed crosswise to them. "That's where the officers are sitting with the guests of honor," said Richardson Groundsquirrel. "Mr. Sudge is the little fat man in front of the palm tree. Mr. Buddle is the tall thin fellow with the red face."

"And the one drinking water," said Mayor Higgins, looking over Franklin's shoulder, "is our old friend, Mr. Snade."

As Groverpeople flooded into the foyer, a booming voice (Mr. Buddle's) came through the open door. "As you finish your dessert, I'd like to start the business meeting. I don't want to hurry you, but we have much to do this afternoon. As you know, this meeting marks the first anniversary of our new factory in the Town of Grover. To begin, let me say that it's been an excellent year for the Sudge-Buddle Company. Our profits have never been higher. And I'm happy to say that the new factory has greatly helped us to achieve this success." (This was met by enthusiastic applause.) "You should also know that the fine performance of the Grover Factory, which has given the Company such a fine return on its investment, is the work of one man: the manager—the man whom we honor today—Mr. Ferrell Snade." (Prolonged applause from the stockholders.) Tim and Tonia Turtle climbed the last steps and reached the foyer. Seeing them, Franklin flung open the door and marched into the ballroom.

Chapter 16

SMILING AS THE applause died away, Mr. Buddle gave an expansive sweep of his arm. "And today," he boomed, "as we—" His voice trailed off. His arm froze. His eyes bulged as he saw the Groverpeople marching with their signs across the rear of the ballroom. At the corner, the leaders turned and came rapidly along the wall straight toward the speaker's table!

The stockholders sat stunned. Most of them put down their spoons and watched with bewildered fear or nervous curiosity as the intruders filed in and surrounded them. A few, refusing to acknowledge the intrusion, went on eating. But that pretense was quickly shattered when Randy Possum entered and finally, at long last, began trumpeting the cavalry charge.

As soon as they were in the room, Rebecca Raccoon, M. Lucius Ferret, and Prosper the Cat—according to plan—began moving among the tables to hand out leaflets. The stockholders responded in various ways to the bright yellow papers handed them. Some read them. Others, after a brief glance, crushed and wadded them into balls and threw them away. Many refused them, and at least twenty of the stockholders made a great show of tearing them into little pieces.

Rebecca immediately ran into trouble. A white-haired man lurched angrily from his chair, blocked her way between the tables, and tried to grab the entire stack of leaflets out of her hands. "For shame!" she cried, pulling them away. "You may have *one*, like everybody else. They're all the same." The man muttered something and lunged for them again. It was developing into an awkward situation. She was rescued from it by Ambrose Fieldmouse, who had been running along beside her down the center of the table. In front of him was a dessert spoon projecting from a dish. He made a flying leap, which brought the handle down upon the table with a thud, and flipped a glob of chocolate pudding into the man's left eye. "Good shot, Ambrose!" Rebecca said; and while the man staggered about wiping his eye, she zipped past him and went about her business.

Prosper had difficulties, too. Three people tore up the leaflets he handed them; one stockholder threatened to hit him with a water glass if he didn't keep his distance; and halfway down one row of tables, a tall thin woman with hard gray eyes snarled at him: "Take your filthy trash out of here! We know your kind!"

"Do you now?" said Prosper, with half-closed eyes. "I strongly urge you to take a leaflet." She did.

M. Lucius Ferret had the most disturbing encounter of all. As he moved briskly along his table, he came to a man who sat as stiffly as a statue with his face buried in a napkin. It was obvious that he was trying to hide. Intrigued by this, M. Lucius said, "Please take a leaflet, sir," and held one out to him. Without

taking the napkin from his face, the man blindly groped for the leaflet with his free hand. M. Lucius continued down the table; and then, when some distance away, he turned quickly and saw the man's face clearly as he lowered the napkin. It was the Assistant to the Deputy Assistant Director of the Pollution Control Agency! "Why, Mr. Renwick!" M. Lucius cried. "Are you a stockholder in the Sudge-Buddle Company?"

As though stung by a hornet, Mr. Renwick jumped from his chair and started for the door, again holding the napkin before his face. This made his exit rather awkward, since he couldn't see where he was going and kept running into chairs. But even more startling was the sudden departure of three other men who jumped up and followed Mr. Renwick out. M. Lucius hurried back to their seats and read the name tags beside their plates: Aha! GITCH, GOOCH, and PINKIE! "Where's Purvis?" M. Lucius wondered; but he didn't see the Director's name tag. "Oh, foul!" he fumed. "Base treachery! Deceitful dirty double-dealing! And those men were supposed to be helping us! No wonder Renwick knew so much about the Company! No wonder we've heard nothing from his office!"

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While Rebecca, Prosper, and M. Lucius were handing out leaflets, Groverpeople continued filing into the ballroom. In less than a minute, the signs had stretched across the back and down one wall to the speaker's table. Here, confronted by Franklin and Victoria Groundsquirrel at the head of the line, Mr. Sudge, frowning darkly, leaned across his ice cream and shouted over the blare of the trumpet: "What's the meaning of this?"

Peabody the Postman handed him the petition. "It's all explained here," said Peabody. "There's a hundred and sixteen names," he added proudly. "You can count 'em if you like."

"We'd hoped to get here before the business meeting started," Franklin said apologetically, "but it didn't work out."

"We couldn't find a place to park the bus," Priscilla Possum explained.

Scarlet with rage, Mr. Buddle thundered at them from the speaker's stand: "Are you stockholders in the Company?"

"Well, not exactly," Franklin replied. "Though I guess you could say we all have a big interest in the Grover factory—"

"A much bigger share than any of us want," added Miss Proudie Fairblossom.

"But we've had no benefits at all," said Franklin.

"Who sent you?" Mr. Buddle demanded.

Priscilla Possum didn't like the tone of his voice. "Nobody 'sent' us," she said crisply. "We're here representing ourselves."

"And all the others who couldn't come," Peabody added.

Mayor Higgins, having arrived at the speaker's table, loudly inquired: "Which one of you is Mr. Sudge?"

Startled, Mr. Sudge answered, "I am. Who are you?"

She introduced herself and said, "You know, I'm relieved to see that you really exist. I was beginning to wonder. Why haven't you answered my letters?"

He stared at her blankly; then, as realization dawned upon him, his eyes got very wide: "Grover!" he cried. "Then you're the people who've started the lawsuit against the Company!"

"That's right," said Mayor Higgins. "We had to do *something* to protect ourselves. And that's why we're here today—to make you listen to us and do something about the factory."

At this point, Mr. Buddle left the speaker's stand and came stalking toward Franklin and Victoria. "If you're not stockholders, you have no business here! This is a private meeting, and you're interrupting it. Get out, or we'll call the police!"

"But Doctor Badger hasn't given his speech!" said Priscilla Possum.

"Do you think I should, under the circumstances?" Doctor Badger asked.

"You may as well," Priscilla said. "We seem to have everyone's attention."

As a matter of fact, the stockholders had become so preoccupied that most of them hadn't finished their dessert. Fenced in by vivid protest signs and besieged by yellow leaflets, they were rising from the tables and milling about among the chairs. Exhibits began to appear along the walls. Hilda Badger and Izzy the Witch held up a blackened bedsheet for everyone to see. Eight other sheets whipped open, and many towels and pillowcases.

Farmer Ben and Elizabeth H., having arrived at the speaker's table, dumped out their basket of knobby brown peaches in front of Mr. Sudge. The blighted fruit bounced along the tablecloth among the dishes, tumbling off the table to roll upon the floor. With great ceremony, Farmer Ben placed his ruined painting face-up in Mr. Sudge's plate. "This," he said, "is the work of the Grover factory."

Three steps away, Thorstein Raccoon and Roscoe Lynx set down four pots of dead geraniums in front of Mr. Snade. The factory manager retreated behind his chair. "What's wrong?" said Roscoe. "Don't you like geraniums?"

"There's many other things we could've brought," said Thorstein.

"The fact is," said Roscoe grimly, "when we heard that you were being honored for your skill as a manager, we thought we'd bring some proof of the factory's efficiency."

Mr. Snade drew himself up and stared at them coldly. "I choose to ignore your insult. You have no proof—none whatsoever—that the factory killed those flowers. The very notion is absurd. Your charge would be laughable—if it wasn't so pitiful and sad. I'm embarrassed for you, Mr. Lynx—oh, I know who you are; I've made it a point to know who's who in Grover—embarrassed, and disappointed in you. I would have thought you to be more intelligent. Now, if you'll excuse me." And he backed away and left the speaker's table.

"Well, Roscoe," said Thorstein with a smile, "you've embarrassed him. Aren't you ashamed? And even worse, you've disappointed him."

"I'm quite content to be embarrassing," said Roscoe. "I'm delighted to be a disappointment." And, as an afterthought, he added: "I'm *sure* he doesn't like geraniums."

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At Priscilla Possum's urging, Doctor Badger decided that he ought to give his speech. He turned and said to Mr. Buddle over Randy Possum's trumpet: "I have a short statement I'd like to read to the stockholders. It will only take a moment, and then you can go on with your business meeting."

"Don't let him read it!" cried Mr. Sudge. "These people are the trouble-makers who started the Grover lawsuit!"

Doctor Badger regarded him calmly and said, "It's something that the stockholders really ought to hear." He turned to the crowd and raised his hand for silence—but finding that the clamor only grew, he at once proceeded with his speech.

"We are pleased to have this opportunity," he proclaimed, "of addressing the stockholders of the Sudge-Buddle Company. As citizens of Grover and the surrounding region, we come before you to protest the actions of the Company in its operation of the Grover factory."

Mr. Buddle snapped: "Get off the platform! You have no right to make a speech!"

"Go on, Bascom!" shouted Oscar Otter.

And Doctor Badger continued: "For over a year we have endured increasingly foul pollution of our air and water, and a growing threat to our very health." Mr. Buddle tried to snatch the notes out of his hand. "Here now!" said Doctor Badger gruffly, "I'm not done yet." He held the notes out of Mr. Buddle's reach and continued reading: "I'm sure that when you, the stockholders, understand the gravity of the problem we've had to face, and the gross insensitivity of the Company's leadership in responding to our earlier complaints—" here he had to break off to place a chair between himself and Mr. Buddle—"then you will be as outraged as we are, and as determined to stop the pollution. I'd like to say—"

"Why don't you shut up!" a stockholder bellowed from the fourth row of tables. "That's *right!*" shouted a fat woman from the third row. "We don't want to hear anything *you* have to say!"

Doctor Badger glanced at them vaguely, while keeping the chair between himself and Mr. Buddle (the two of them circling round and round it like clockwork figures), then adjusted his glasses, and kept on reading: "I'd like to say, that when a river dies, when a child comes close to dying—"

One of the stockholders—a red-faced little man with a close-clipped white mustache—threw his spoon at the doctor. It fell short; but Mr. Buddle, as though taking the act as a signal, leaped over the chair, grabbed Doctor Badger by the shirt front, and pushed him backward off the platform. With a resounding thump, Doctor Badger disappeared behind the table.

"Oho!" cried Farmer Ben. "Foul play!" And reaching up, he gave Mr. Buddle's coat-tails a hearty yank. With a grunt of surprise, Mr. Buddle lurched backward and put his elbow into a cream pitcher.

Still clutching Peabody's petition, Mr. Sudge rushed at Ben Barker shouting "Savages! You can't—" But he never finished, for the hard brown peaches which had scattered on the carpet rolled like marbles underneath his feet. With a squeal, he swooped and skidded and sprawled on the floor, dragging with him the tablecloth and most of the dishes.

Doctor Badger and Mr. Sudge—on their hands and knees among the peaches and broken dishes and puddles of ice cream—came up nose to nose under the edge of the table.

"You'll be sorry for this!" Mr. Sudge yelled. "You're nothing but criminals!" He shook his fist in the doctor's face and knocked off his spectacles.

"Criminals!" cried Doctor Badger. "We aren't the criminals!" And he reached out and tweaked Mr. Sudge's nose.

With a shriek, Mr. Sudge lurched upward and banged the back of his head on the table edge. As he struggled awkwardly to stand up, the peaches once again rolled under his feet, and he sat down heavily on the damp carpet. Doctor Badger, having retrieved his spectacles, crawled out from under the table more carefully, and began collecting the scattered notes for his speech.



The Groverpeople's presentation had seriously bogged down in the noise and confusion. Though bedsheets and pillowcases were still displayed along the walls, very few of the stockholders were looking at the exhibits or asking any questions about them. One man who tried to talk to Thaddeus Higgins was roughly pulled away by his wife, who snapped: "For shame, Herbert! Don't even *speak* to them!" As a matter of fact, many of the stockholders had left their seats and now were crowded at the doorway, trying to leave. The protest signs were scattered about the room, some of them propped forgotten against the walls, others bobbing about among the tables, still others lying trampled on the floor. Randy Possum, standing on a chair, was still trying to sound the cavalry charge; but only random squawks were coming from the trumpet as he ducked and dodged the salt and pepper shakers, water, and globs of ice cream which one group of stockholders was flinging at him. His attempt ended when two men finally stormed his chair, wrenched the trumpet away from him, threw it down, and stamped it flat beneath their feet.

Oscar Otter, grimly calm, was spraying a large red skull and crossbones on the bedsheet held aloft by Izzy the Witch and Hilda Badger. Mr. Buddle, furious when he saw what he was doing, leaped off the speaker's platform shouting "Give me that!" and grabbed at the can of spray paint.

"What for?" said Oscar. "It's mine."

Once again Mr. Buddle snatched at the can, but this time hit the nozzle which happened to be pointed toward him. Whoosh! A broad jet of bright red paint erupted in his hand, spraying all over Mr. Buddle's shirt front, under his chin, up one side of his face, and into his hair. This distracted him; and Oscar returned to



his picture, leaving Mr. Buddle to wipe off the paint as best he could.

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Fergus Fisher and Oliphant Owl, who had been standing against the wall with their exhibits, found themselves very discouraged at the way things were going.

"We *did* get their attention," Oliphant said. "But they don't seem to be interested in what we have to say. Not one person came to talk to us."

"It's terribly disappointing," said Fergus. "I'd hoped they'd be sympathetic. But they didn't even *try* to understand."

"And no wonder!" Cassandra Scissortail sharply remarked. "The whole thing was very badly handled! I was afraid this would happen! It was *so* important that we make a good impression! And now they'll never listen to us!"

"Well, I don't think *they* made a very good impression," said Fergus. "How can there be understanding if one party doesn't *want* to understand?" He stepped aside as Mr. Snade went running past him toward the door.

"We shouldn't have come here!" wailed Cassandra. "I wish we'd just stayed home!"

"And what would *that* have done for us?" Oliphant asked her. She looked at him and had no answer. "No," he said, "we had to come. We had to make the effort."

"And we did the best we could," said Fergus.

"Look!" said Oliphant. "The police are in the hallway!"

"True," said Fergus. "That means it's time to leave."

"We can't let Parker get arrested again!" Cassandra cried; and off she flew to warn him.

"She's right," said Oliphant. "We can't."

"Then we'd better clear the room," said Fergus.

"Operation Rosebud?" Oliphant asked eagerly.

"Yep," said Fergus. "Before we came, we agreed to use it only in case of emergency. I'm afraid that's where it's at." As the police came flooding into the ballroom, Fergus and Oliphant retreated behind a potted palm tree with their little black bag.

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The arrival of the police sent a thrill of panic through the crowd and heightened the confusion. The Sudge-Buddle stockholders who had been jamming the doorway shrank back against the walls, clearing a path for the men in blue uniforms. The room became a swirl of motion, with people leaping and scurrying in all directions. His eyes agleam with excitement, Lafayette Lizard climbed with his camera onto the speaker's platform and began taking pictures for the *Grover Gazette*. Cassandra Scissortail landed on Parker Packrat's shoulder where he stood exhibiting a pillowcase: "Police, Parker! You've got to get out fast!"

Parker dropped the pillowcase and started for the door. Suddenly his eye

caught a gleam of gold beneath the edge of a hanging tablecloth. He stopped and bent down for a better look. It was Randy Possum's trumpet, mashed and flattened on the carpet. He stooped, gently picked it up, and—holding it carefully—stood entranced, turning it this way and that, admiring the way the light reflected from its golden surface. "Hurry, Parker!" Cassandra called behind him. Parker blinked, tucked the trumpet under his arm, started jogging toward the door.

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Throughout the demonstration, Peter and Peggy Groundsquirrel had been standing with their father at the back of the room. Peggy had wanted to help Prosper distribute leaflets, but Richardson had refused to allow it. "Prosper can take care of himself," he'd said. "But I don't trust those stockholders, and I'd never forgive myself if you got hurt." So the Twins had watched from the rear as the presentation progressed. They had cheered encouragement to their mother and Uncle Franklin during their argument with the red-faced man at the head table, and they had clapped loudly while Doctor Badger gave his speech.

When the police began collecting in the hallway, Richardson Groundsquirrel went to the door to see what was happening. As soon as his back was turned, Peggy and Peter scampered away and crossed the room to stand with Thaddeus Higgins and Arabella Raccoon, who were holding protest signs.

"Things aren't going very well," Arabella told them sadly.

"It's exciting though," Peter grinned. "You've got to admit that."

"The stockholders don't seem willing to listen," said Thaddeus Higgins.

"Maybe they don't know how," Peggy suggested.

The Twins saw Fergus Fisher and Oliphant squatting down behind a potted palm. They immediately hurried over to see what was up. They found Fergus kneeling beside the black bag arranging three bottles of chemicals in a straight row, and Oliphant acting as lookout.

"What are you doing?" Peggy asked them.

"Operation Rosebud," Fergus answered.

"Making a stink bomb," said Oliphant.

"Well, actually it's a new plant food I'm developing for the radder melish experiment," Fergus explained, pulling stoppers from two of the bottles. "But it does have a rather strong odor."

"It's awful," said Oliphant.

"An emergency measure," said Fergus, "designed to clear the room." Fergus poured the contents of the two open bottles into the pot holding the palm tree. "Get ready to run for it," he warned the Twins. "When I add this third bottle, there's going to be a frightful stink." He uncorked the third bottle.

"Won't it hurt the tree?" Peter asked.

"No," said Fergus. "If anything, it should help it. Don't you think the tree looks kind of sickly? This'll perk it up." He poured the contents of the third bottle over the liquids already in the pot. At once, a steaming blue vapor shimmered about the base of the tree.

The stink *was* awful. Holding their noses, the four of them headed for the door.

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While Fergus was starting Operation Rosebud, twenty policemen waded into the crowd shouting, "All right, break it up! break it up!" The hotel manager trotted nervously beside them yelling "Remove them! Eject them! Throw them out!" while fingering his white carnation.

The police were willing to oblige, but were uncertain who it was he meant by "them": except for those carrying signs and bedsheets, it wasn't at all clear to the police which were the stockholders and which were the protestors. Therefore, the easiest and most logical solution was to throw them all out. Which the police proceeded to do.

One policeman, seeing the red-spattered face and shirt of Mr. Buddle, shouted: "Hey! This one's wounded!"

"That's paint, you fool!" snapped Mr. Buddle.

"Well, whatever it is, you'll have to leave," the policeman said, grabbing his arm.

"No, no!" cried the hotel manager. "That's Mr. Buddle! *He* doesn't have to leave! But *there's* one! and there's another!"

The policeman followed his pointing finger and dashed to the speaker's table, where Miss Proudie Fairblossom was arguing with Mr. Sudge. "Come on, you!" growled the policeman, taking Mr. Sudge by the upper arm and pulling him toward the door.

"Let go of me, you idiot!" snarled Mr. Sudge. "*She's* the one!"

"Resisting an officer, huh?" the policeman said.

"I'll have your job for this!" shrieked Mr. Sudge, struggling to pull away from him.

"If you want my job," the policeman said, marching him toward the door, "you're welcome to it. Then you'd see what it's like having to deal with people like you."

Since the effects of Operation Rosebud were becoming everywhere apparent, Miss Proudie followed them out—at a discreet and respectful distance.

As Fergus had predicted, Operation Rosebud cleared the room. One whiff was all that *anybody* needed. There began a frantic scramble for the door. At another time, and in some other place, it would have been wonderful to find so many different people sharing a common goal. But now, in these circumstances, such togetherness of purpose had some marked disadvantages. At least a hundred people—police, protestors, stockholders—jumbled together and jammed the exit, pushing and hopping, scrabbling and squeezing through as best they could, tumbling and spilling into the hallway outside. But the stink was everywhere; and since there was no escaping it, the jumbling, scrambling, squealing, pushing, thumping, hauling, shrieking, shoving, bellowing, and chattering continued down two flights of stairs into the hotel lobby.

There, more police had stationed themselves beside the revolving doors. As the churning crowd spread through the lobby like water from a broken dam, the hotel manager climbed onto a chair to be able to see above people's heads. A police officer tugged at his elbow. "Do you want 'em arrested?" he shouted. "What do you want to charge 'em with? Criminal trespass? Destruction of property? Disorderly conduct? Disturbing the peace?"

Before the manager could answer, Mr. Buddle tugged at his other elbow with a red-spattered hand. "The Sudge-Buddle Company doesn't want you to press charges!" he whispered urgently. "We don't want these people arrested. That's what they're hoping for—to get their names in the papers and cause us bad publicity. Just throw them out! The Company will pay you for whatever damage they did."

"Well?" said the policeman, ready to swing into action. "Shall we arrest 'em?"

"There'll be no charges," the hotel manager said quickly. "Don't arrest them. Just throw them out!"

From behind him, Doctor Badger shouted: "We won't leave till we get a promise from the Company that the pollution in Grover will be stopped!"

"Now!" said the manager. The police charged. With much scuffling and a symphony of grunts and shouts, the crowd was herded toward the revolving doors. As the doors began spinning round and round, stockholders, protestors, hotel guests, and police got funneled into them—most of them spilling out onto the porch, but others making the entire circuit and coming back into the hotel. Priscilla Possum, determined to stand her ground, made seven full circles and had to be ejected from the lobby eight times.

On the porch, the policemen formed a line and, with their night-sticks held across their chests, moved forward like a wall to force the crowd down the steps. Jostling together, stockholders, protestors, and guests retreated before the advancing line. Most of them made it to the sidewalk. A few, sitting down in protest, had to be forcibly removed; these people found themselves seized by the police and heaved down the steps. Down came Randy Possum and Izzy the Witch, Franklin Groundsquirrel and Elizabeth H. After them, a white-haired stockholder sputtering with rage. Then Thorstein Raccoon, Mr. Sudge shouting threats, Priscilla Possum, Mayor Higgins, three plump stockholders fuming and shrieking, Lafayette Lizard clutching his camera, Miss Proudie Fairblossom waving her broken parasol, Tonia Turtle, M. Lucius Ferret, and Simon Skunk, still holding his protest sign. Oliphant and the Swallows circled overhead shouting encouragement as Fergus Fisher came bouncing down the steps, and Roscoe Lynx, Peabody and Doctor Badger, Parker Packrat cradling the flattened trumpet, and Prosper the Cat, who landed with a thump on his injured dignity.

As they sat amidst the litter recovering their breaths and feeling cautiously for bruises, Matthew Muddie came running up the sidewalk. "Hey!" he called. "I finally found a parking place!"

"Wonderful!" said Mayor Higgins. "We knew you would if you kept looking."

"I wish you'd brought the bus with you," said Tonia Turtle. "I think we're all ready to go home."



Getting slowly to her feet, Hilda Badger said, "This is the last and final straw!"

Mr. Sudge, rumpled and dusty, his coat sleeve partly torn away, hobbled over to Mayor Higgins and shook his finger in her face. "You people will pay for this outrage! We'll make you sorry for what you've done today!"

"Well, we did the best we could," said Mayor Higgins.

Miss Proudie Fairblossom stared him in the eye. "The whole thing makes me very sad," she said. "And most of all, I guess, I'm sorry for you."

"For me?" cried Mr. Sudge. "You sorry for me?" He snorted contemptuously, turned on his heel, and stomped away.

"The Company didn't even have us arrested!" Lafayette grumbled, as he jotted notes for his forthcoming *Gazette* article. "Oh oh," he muttered, as he noticed a reporter for the city newspaper talking to Mr. Sudge and Mr. Buddle, and a photographer taking pictures of the Groverpeople. "There's the press. We'd better talk to them and get our side of it reported, too."

Izzy the Witch was drawing strange figures in blue and yellow chalk on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. "That'll fix 'em," she said.

"Yes," nodded Prosper, with his eyes half-closed. "It certainly will."

"Well, what's to be done now?" said Oscar Otter, dusting off the seat of his pants. "This means the pollution will continue."

"There's something else you should know," M. Lucius Ferret said tiredly. "Mr. Renwick was inside having lunch with the stockholders. And so were Gitch, Gooch, and Pinkie. I don't think we can expect any help at all from the Pollution Control Agency."

"Then what's there left to do?" asked Peggy and Peter together.

"There's only one thing left," said Doctor Badger.

"Direct action!" said Roscoe Lynx.

"I don't see any other choice," said Elizabeth H.

"Then let's get to it," said Franklin.

Chapter 17

IF THERE HAD BEEN any doubt in their minds regarding direct action, the story of their demonstration which was reported in the city newspaper would have settled the matter. The photographer had taken very good pictures of them sitting on the sidewalk after being ejected from the hotel (even Lafayette Lizard was impressed); and the reporter had quoted Mayor Higgins and Doctor Badger at length, giving the Groverpeople's side of the dispute. But he had also interviewed the officers of the Sudge-Buddle Company and given *their* side of it. Mr. Snade was quoted as saying: "Their charges are ridiculous! The Grover Factory has the very best pollution control devices that money can buy." When asked what changes the Company planned to make in the factory's operations because of the protest, Mr. Sudge had responded: "None whatsoever! We're very pleased with last year's performance, and this next year we expect to do even better!" And Mr. Buddle had declared: "We're not going to let a bunch of crackpots and troublemakers tell us how to run our business! They have no right to interfere in things that don't concern them."

The newspaper account caused a great stir among the Groverpeople who had gathered at the Old Hex Inn to read it. "*Crackpots!*" cried Priscilla Possum. "Troublemakers!" said Tim Turtle. The newspaper went round from hand to hand. With tight lips Roscoe Lynx remarked, "It seems that the Sudge-Buddle Company has declared war on us."

"Then war it will be," said Doctor Badger. "I suggest we start with the river."

They immediately began to make plans. After much talk, they decided that plugging the pipes would be the best way to stop the chemical waste from pouring into Little River. But how to do it? The plugs would have to be made of some material that could withstand the pressure of rushing liquid and wouldn't be dissolved or eaten through by the acids and other chemicals.

Arabella Raccoon suggested they bolt sheet metal caps over the ends of the pipes. "Not good enough," said Fergus Fisher. "The metal would corrode. And besides, they might be able to get 'em off."

Parker Packrat suggested stuffing the pipes with wet cement. "Nope," said Thorstein Raccoon. "The waste would push it out before it could harden."

They finally decided to use long wooden plugs shaped to fit tightly into the pipes. They would cap the plugs with metal at both ends and force them in, like jamming corks into bottlenecks.

Late one moonless night toward the end of October, Oliphant Owl and Randy Possum sneaked onto the Sudge-Buddle property and measured, for each of the pipes, the size of the hole to be plugged. Simon Skunk used their measurements to fashion three long cylinders from sections of a fat oak log. With Fergus' help,

he bolted thick steel plates over both ends of each plug.

"Troublemakers, indeed!" snapped M. Lucius Ferret, as he and several others stood in Simon's workshop watching him smooth the surface of the last plug. "And Mr. Renwick leading us on, making us think that the Pollution Control Agency would help us!" He began pacing rapidly about, drumming his fingers on tabletops, becoming ever more excited as he brooded on the outrage. Miss Proudie Fairblossom, feeling that he was becoming too agitated for his own good, sat him down in a cherrywood chair and handed him a cup of tea.

"If the measurements are correct, the plugs should just fit," Simon remarked, scrubbing with his sandpaper. "But it will take some hammering. Once they're in, they won't come out. Whatever moisture they soak up will make the wood swell and wedge them even tighter."

"And with steel plates over the ends," M. Lucius said, with a smile of satisfaction, "they can't be whittled away or pried out with a giant corkscrew."

"I'm wondering how we'll hammer them in without being heard," Simon mused. "I'm afraid it's going to make a lot of noise—and we don't want the night watchmen coming to investigate."

"We birds could be look-outs to warn you if someone is coming," said Scooper Singebottom, who had taken a great interest in the making of the plugs.

"That's a good idea," said Simon thoughtfully. "But we need some sort of cover-up. Something that will make a lot of noise down by the river."

They all thought for a moment. Then: "A Hallowe'en Party!" cried Mayor Higgins. "With lights, and music, and lots and lots of people!"

"In costumes!" said Priscilla Possum, clapping her hands. "Everyone disguised!"

"Oho!" M. Lucius grinned, "—as ghoulies, and ghosties, and long-legged beasties, and things that go bump in the night!"

Five days before Hallowe'en, the *Grover Gazette* announced the big celebration in a full-page spread:

The BIGGEST HALLOWE'EN PARTY EVER!

BRING THE FAMILY

FREE ENTERTAINMENT! STREET DANCE! TWO BANDS!

SPOOK HOUSE! FORTUNE TELLING! TAFFY PULL!

REFRESHMENTS!

Prizes

Prizes

Prizes

FOR THE BEST COSTUMES

Prizes

Prizes

Prizes

COME IN DISGUISE!

SEE IF YOU CAN RECOGNIZE YOUR FRIENDS!

On the day of the party, Mayor Higgins trotted about supervising the preparations. Though the sunlight was warm, the breeze, when it came, had a hint of chill; and she knew that the nighttime would be crisp and cool. Smoke from the factory thickly fogged the air with a dirty gray haze and tiny particles of soot, and the biting fumes made every breath an irritation. On tall ladders, a group of volunteers were stringing colored lights and black-and-orange crepe paper streamers above Main Street—decorations which by midmorning had already become spotted with greasy fallout. Another group was decorating the bandstand in Grover Park, on the west bank of Little River. A committee of six were carving jack-o-lanterns to be set on gateposts, windowsills, and picnic tables; and still other groups were setting up refreshment stands and hooking up microphones and loudspeakers for the band music.

By sundown, everything was ready, and Mayor Higgins—though tired after running around all day—was very well pleased. As she helped her husband hang black and orange balloons in the window of their coffee shop, she said with a sigh, "It's going to be a night to remember."

Thaddeus looked at her gravely over the white gauze mask he had begun wearing on "bad" days to protect his asthmatic lungs from the factory smoke. "Well, I hope so," he said. "We don't want it to be a night we'd like to forget."

By the time the party began, a huge crowd had gathered. Folks had come to Grover from all the countryside around, and even as far as Rawlinsville. Most had come in costumes. Main Street and Grover Park were mobbed with creeping skeletons, ghosts in bedsheets, monsters dragging chains, witches, warlocks, ghouls, and grinning gargoyles. There were pale fluttering phantoms, goblins on stilts, red devils, vampires, and hooded zombies.

Mayor Higgins, wearing a false nose and long vampire teeth, busily popped up everywhere keeping an eye on things, making a game of trying to guess the identities of the folks she met. Some were easy. Some she never guessed. Franklin Groundsquirrel and Randy Possum—huddled together beneath a purple cloth (Randy in front, Franklin at the rear)—made an amazing Welsh dragon with batwings and bulgey green eyes. Izzy came disguised as a witch, and Prosper came as himself. Priscilla Possum was magnificent as a pumpkin, with vine leaves trailing. Tim Turtle came as a Jelly Blob from Outer Space, but halfway through the evening got out of his costume because he kept sticking to things—such as crepe paper streamers, bushes, and other people's bedsheets. The greatest mystery of all were two mummies who shuffled about in a vague way, wrapped in tattered bandages. No one ever succeeded in guessing who they were.

In the park were tents and booths where folks could have their fortunes told, play Bingo, bob for apples, or purchase cotton candy, popcorn balls, licorice whips, and taffy apples. There was also a spook house designed by M. Lucius Ferret, who had leaped at the chance of creating a "chamber of horrors" (as he called it).

Thorstein Raccoon, following his instructions, had spent several days converting the park maintenance building into a haunted castle—throwing up

walls, and building narrow passageways and sloping floors (all of which could easily be torn out again). To get really horrifying effects, M. Lucius had searched his memory and his books for all he could find regarding moldy dungeons and ghostly pranks. The result was a dark twisted maze of shocks and thrills so frightening that no one dared go through it twice. Several folks, after getting out, told M. Lucius that he had missed his calling; that instead of a bookshop, he should be operating a chamber of horrors. "I've thought about it," he told them, delighted at their reaction. "But when would I find time to read?" He, too, had gone through the spook house only once, and was far too frightened to try it again.

On the steps of Town Hall, a band played for people dancing in the street. In the park, another band played for dancers there—its music blaring loudly toward the Sudge-Buddle factory from loudspeakers attached to trees at the northern boundary, which was just a short distance down-river from the Otters' abandoned house.

At nine o'clock, when the noise of the party was at its loudest, Simon Skunk and Matthew Muddie—both of them wearing masks and dressed in tight-fitting black coveralls—began hunting for Farmer Ben, who was to be in a similar costume. It was high time to start for the river.

But try as they might, they could nowhere find Ben Barker. For fifteen minutes they wandered through the crowd on Main Street searching fruitlessly among the costumed figures. Finally, in desperation, Simon approached a bedsheet wearing a pumpkin head. "Is that you, Parker?" he asked. The carved pumpkin face turned toward him, and a muffled voice said, "No, it's me—see?" And Hilda Badger lifted the pumpkin and winked at him. "Isn't it about time you fellows started for the river?"

"It's *past* time, and we *would* have," said Matthew Muddie, "but we can't find Ben Barker. Have you seen him?"

"No, but you might try the bandstand."

They thanked her and started for the park. In the darkness, a mummy shuffled past them, eating a taffy apple.

"It's getting very late," Simon said, his voice edged with irritation. "Oliphant and the Swallows will be waiting for us at Otters' old house. We should've set a definite time and place for Ben to meet us. I don't know how long the plugging will take, but we can't afford to have it run very late, or people will start leaving the party."

"Ben knows it's time to start," Matthew said. "He's probably hunting for *us*." He peered closely at three masked figures gliding past in the shadows—but none of them was Ben Barker. As they approached the bandstand and the colored lights, the carved jack-o-lantern faces gleamed and flickered on the tables among the trees.

Many people were at the bandstand, but Ben Barker was not among them. As Matthew and Simon stood wondering what to do next, a purple dragon came sidling up with an awkward shambling gallop, rolling its eyes.

"It's getting late," the dragon said. "Shall we go along to protect you?"

"That won't be necessary," Matthew Muddie replied. "If we get caught, we'll make a run for it. Have you seen Ben Barker?"

"Not tonight," the dragon said. "Have we, Franklin?"

"I certainly haven't," came Franklin's muffled voice from the rear.

"Elizabeth H. is over by the spook house," the dragon said, lolling out its tongue. "Maybe she knows where he is."

They nodded and started through the crowd while the dragon lurched and stumbled on its way. They found Elizabeth H., dressed as a skeleton, talking with Izzy and Prosper. "Where's Ben?" they asked urgently. "We've got to get started." She pointed a bony finger toward the refreshment stands. "He's over there, making cotton candy."

"Well, fiddle-de-dee!" said Simon, greatly irritated. "That's a fine thing to be at when we've got *work* to do! We've been hunting all over for him."

"Don't be too hard on him," said Elizabeth H. "He's always wanted to make cotton candy, and he saw this as his big chance."

Izzy touched Matthew Muddie's arm. "I want you to know that I've put a charm on the oak plugs so they'll fit tight in the pipes and not come out. It was my very strongest charm, wasn't it, Prosper?"

"That it was, Izzy," said Prosper. "Your very strongest."

They thanked her for her concern and hurried to the cotton candy booth. There, sure enough, Ben Barker was happily winding great pink swaths of spun sugar onto cardboard cones. The two of them leaned against the serving window, and Matthew said, "Sorry to bother you—but we're ready to go to the river."

"Oh hi, fellows," Ben Barker said. "It is getting kinda late, isn't it? I was just coming to find you. Would you like some cotton candy?"

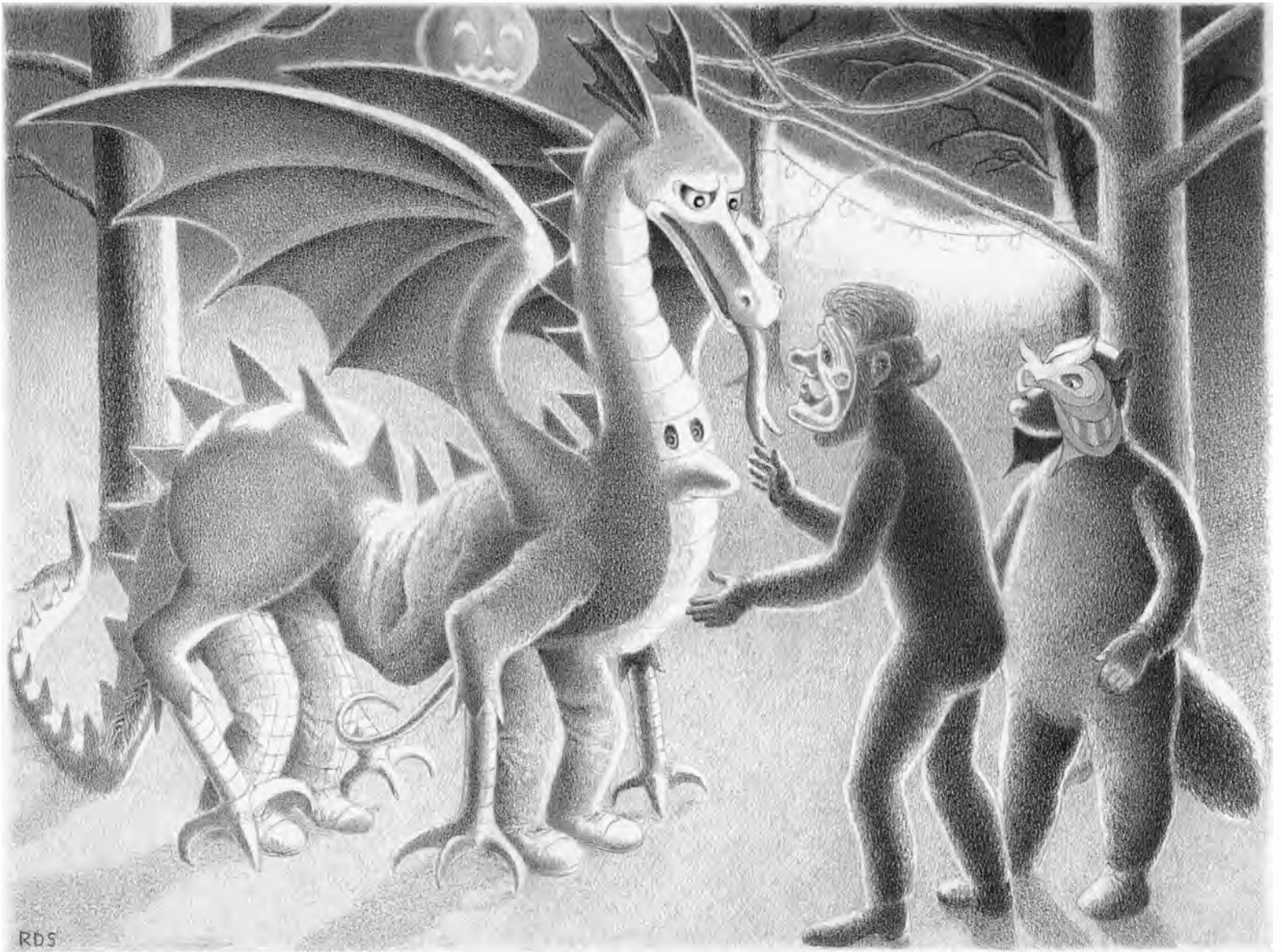
"Not now," they said. Ben Barker nodded, quickly took off his apron, and handed it to the operator of the booth. "I've got to go now. Thanks for letting me try my hand at it."

"Any time you like," said the operator. "You got pretty good at it for thirty minutes' practice. You wanta come work for me in Rawlinsville?"

Simon and Matthew pulled him out of the booth. "I guess not," Farmer Ben called back as they hustled him away. "But thanks for the offer."

In silence, they went upriver to Otters' abandoned house. There, Oliphant, Cassandra Scissortail, and Scooper Singebottom were waiting for them, nervously keeping guard over the three oak plugs and the bag of tools which had been brought to the house the night before. While the birds flew overhead to act as lookouts, Matthew Muddie slung the bag of tools over his shoulder, and each of them began rolling a plug up the riverbank toward the barbed wire fence that marked the Sudge-Buddle property line.

They worked quickly, talking in whispers, three black figures blending with the night. Behind them, the music from the park thundered in great waves of sound. They had no trouble getting themselves and the plugs through the fence. Once on the other side, Ben Barker whispered, "I'm afraid we'll have to go into the water. I don't see any other way. Fortunately, the river's low." Taking one plug at a time, they waded out into the river, where the water came up to their knees.



RDS

When they reached the mouths of the three pipes emptying their black and green and yellow waste into the river with a fuming gush and a froth of bubbles, a foul, gagging stink rose up to meet them. "Ugh!" said Matthew Muddie.

They checked the code number which Simon had painted on the side of Matthew's plug and hoisted the log to the opening of the pipe it was intended for. This pipe was gushing a thick stream of green sludge into the river. As the steel-capped end slid past the lip of the opening, they saw that this plug would be a very tight fit.

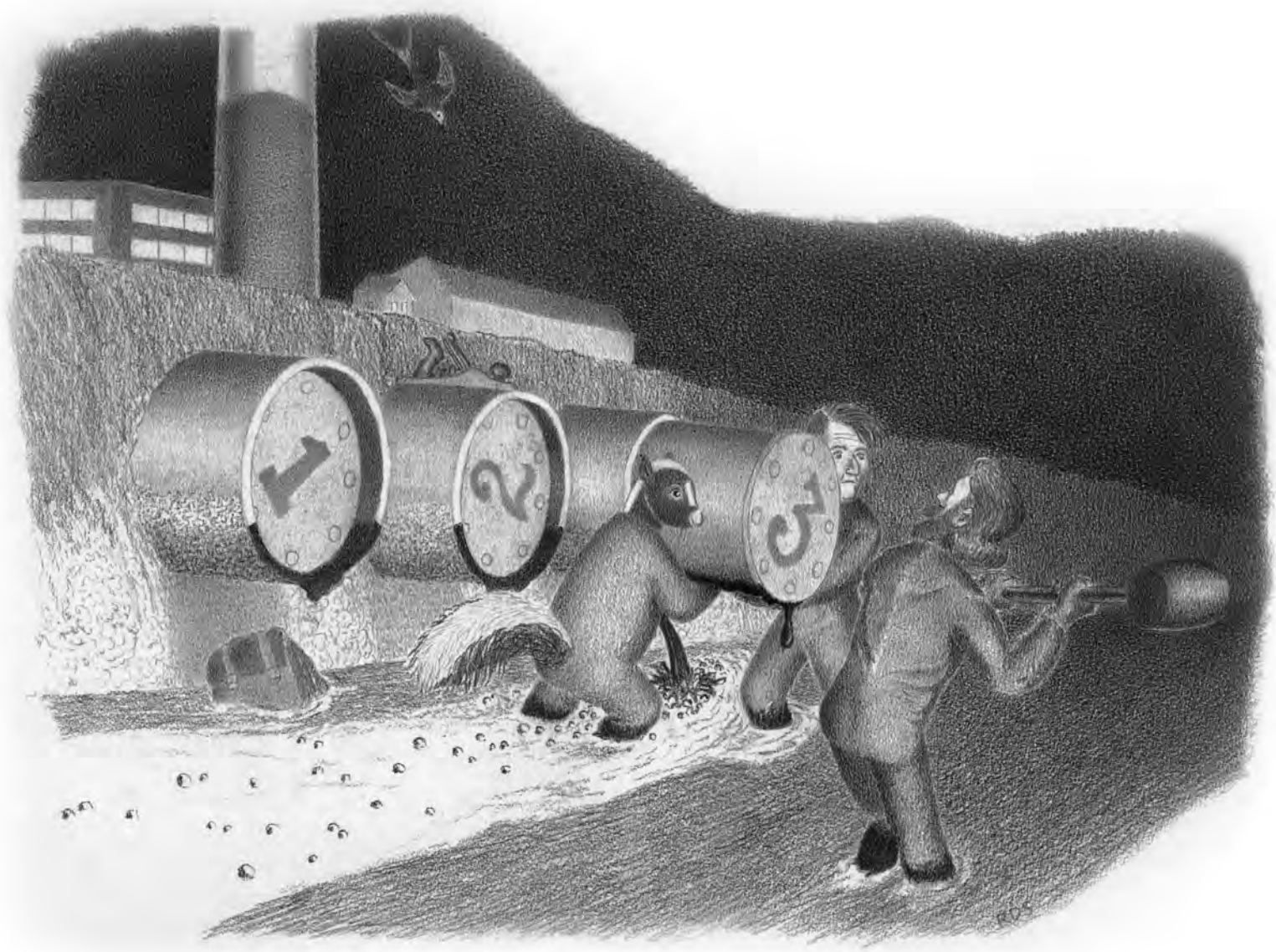
Farmer Ben took a heavy rubber-headed mallet from the tool bag, and, standing firmly in the foaming water, swung hard against the end of the plug. It entered the pipe, and the green gush dwindled to a trickle around the log. He swung the hammer again and yet again: it made a dull clang against the steel plate. Slowly the cylinder of oak disappeared into the pipe. "It fits!" cried Simon joyfully; then, remembering where they were, he glanced around nervously and lowered his voice: "But it's a very tight squeeze." Part of the plug still projected from the pipe. The hammering made less noise than they'd expected, and they began to feel more confident. Cassandra Scissortail swooped down to report that, so far, the night watchmen had heard nothing and were still up at the factory making their rounds.

Finally the plug was well inside the pipe—Ben Barker had forced it a hand's length beyond the lip—and the green liquid no longer came out. "Next!" said Matthew Muddie. Quickly they started hammering the second plug into *its* pipe. When it was about halfway in, it stuck.

"Stop," Simon said, shining his flashlight onto the end of the log. "We're not making any headway. There seems to be a high spot. We'll have to shave it off." With all three of them tugging mightily, they managed to pull the plug a little way out. Simon took his wood plane from the tool bag and shaved off a few curls of wood. "Now try it," he said weakly, giddy and nauseated from the stench. He had a headache; and where the water had soaked through his coveralls, his skin stung with a sharp, burning itch. Farmer Ben began hammering once more, and this time the plug went all the way in. The yellowish liquid that had been spewing from the pipe stopped abruptly. "Izzy's charm seems to be working," Matthew Muddie whispered. "Ben, I'll hammer in the last one; you're tired."

But the third plug gave them trouble. It stuck, it balked, it seemed altogether too large for the pipe. They struggled with it, pulling, hauling, and twisting. Simon shaved it with the plane, and the plug slid a little further in. Just when they were making progress, and Matthew Muddie had worked up a steady rhythm with the mallet, Scooper Singebottom suddenly flew down to give warning: "Stop hammering! One of the watchmen is coming along the fence!"

Breathlessly, they crouched down out of sight behind the riverbank, bent double, their faces just above the scummy water. Two or three minutes later (it seemed like two hours), the dark figure of a man appeared overhead against the sky. He swept the bright beam of his flashlight back and forth just over their heads, far out across the water. He was standing so close that Matthew could have reached up and grabbed his ankle if he'd so desired. Slice! went the beam of



light—slice!—barely missing the end of the third pipe which had the oak plug still protruding from it. Then the watchman turned and went back toward the factory, whistling along with the tune that the band was playing in Grover Park.

When the whistling had grown faint, Ben Barker whispered, "Now!" and they all leaped up and began to work on the plug. It took two more shaving operations, and greasing the log as well, before Matthew Muddie was able to hammer it all the way in. They felt like cheering when the trickle of tarry black ooze finally stopped.

They stood back and looked at their work. Deep inside each of the three pipes was a sturdy oak plug, capped at either end by a thick steel plate—a long cork, so to speak, pushed far in, well beyond the mouth of the pipe, cut to fit and tightly jammed. And best of all, no waste was flowing into Little River.

"We did it!" said Matthew Muddie. "Now let's get out of here and get these costumes off! My skin itches like fire."

They scrambled up onto the bank, crawled through the barbed wire fence, and ran as fast as they could to Otters' house. The flesh of their legs ached and burned as though seared by the flame of a blowtorch. By flashlight in Otters' empty living room, they saw that their black costumes were falling away in damp tatters.

"We'd better get showers as quick as we can!" said Simon. The tool bag, too, had begun to fall apart. They left the tools in Otters' basement and ran cross-country to Simon's house in Grover. To the birds who were following them overhead, Simon called out: "Tell Mayor Higgins and Doctor Badger we're back at my workshop!" Oliphant and the Swallows veered off toward the park.

Frantic with itch, they dashed through the side door of Simon's workshop. "The shower's in there!" Simon cried, pointing, as they stripped off what remained of their costumes. Outside, they heard the Hallowe'en party going full blast; through the window they could see the band on the Town Hall steps and the shadowy forms of people dancing beneath the bobbing strands of colored lights.

All three of them crowded into the shower stall and drenched themselves with fresh warm water. As he soaped himself, Simon was horrified to see that the fur on his legs was coming off in patches. He gave a shriek and wailed, "My hair is falling out!" They all stared in dismay at his naked pink legs. "It'll probably grow back," Farmer Ben said reassuringly. "But look! Matthew and I are covered with little blisters!" Sure enough, their legs were pebbled with tiny white bumps, and the skin was a scorched, angry red.

Roscoe Lynx hurried into the workshop through the side door and, hearing the water running, came anxiously to the shower. "Did you get the job done?" he asked.

"All done," said Matthew. "But we had to go into the river to do it. And look what that did to us!"

Roscoe looked at their legs, then staggered back in shock. "The river water did that?" he asked weakly. "Is it—is it awfully painful?"

"Terrible!" said Farmer Ben. "Like a very bad sunburn—but worse. A deeper

burn, somehow. Simon, do you have any lotion or skin cream?"

Simon went to his medicine chest and to the kitchen, and came back with his arms filled. Not knowing what would be best, he brought a variety of things: sunburn lotion, petroleum jelly, poison ivy ointment, baking soda, toothpaste, olive oil, cream cheese, and butter. "You can try these," he said, and they all began experimenting. Matthew and Farmer Ben found that baking soda and butter gave them the most relief; Simon found that toothpaste and olive oil worked best for him. "I do hope the hair grows back," Simon said sadly, as he greased his pink legs.

Roscoe Lynx leaned silently against the doorframe, overwhelmed by what had happened to them. As he watched them trying to soothe their burns, his eyes filled with tears; then, while they put on their everyday clothes which had been left in Simon's workshop during the afternoon, Roscoe began pacing rapidly up and down the room, restlessly touching the polished surfaces of Simon's furniture and aimlessly fiddling with the tools on the workbench. They knew what he was going through, even though he struggled to keep his face from showing his emotion.

Matthew Muddie broke the silence. "At least we didn't get caught," he said with a rueful smile. "When the watchman came with his flashlight, I thought he had us for sure."

"His beam parted my hair," said Farmer Ben.

"I hope plugging those pipes does some real good!" Roscoe cried violently. "I hope they can't just open 'em up again." He turned to face them, clutching a screwdriver. "Even if the pollution stopped for good, do you realize how long it would take for Little River to get back the way it was before the factory came?"

"A long time," answered Matthew Muddie, easing himself down—with extreme care—to sit on the edge of the workbench. "Years, probably. But I'm curious about something else. Now that the waste can't get into the river, where will it go? Will it back up into the factory? What will they do if it does?"

Mayor Higgins entered through the side door, puffing heavily as though she had run all the way. Right behind her was Doctor Badger with his medical bag.

"Scooper and Oliphant said you'd be here," the Mayor said, removing her false nose and vampire teeth. "They said you'd accomplished your mission, but that the chemicals had burned your skin."

"Let me see your legs," Doctor Badger ordered, opening his bag. While Mayor Higgins discreetly looked the other way, they took down their pants, and the doctor closely examined their skin. "What's this stuff you've got on here?" he asked. "Grease of some sort?"

"Butter and baking soda," said Matthew Muddie.

"It helps," said Farmer Ben.

"It's toothpaste and olive oil on me," said Simon.

Doctor Badger grunted and wrinkled his nose. "Did you wash with soap?"

"As soon as we got here," said Ben Barker.

"It's a good thing," said the doctor. "I don't want to frighten you, but you know how dangerous that water is—what it just about did to Jamie Otter. You

seem to be doing all right for the moment. But I want to check you tomorrow, and the next day—and next week sometime. And if you start feeling sick, come see me at once.” He paused thoughtfully. “As for your skin,” he said, “I’m not sure I have anything to give you that would be better than what you’re using already. It’s not the surface burns I’m worried about, of course; it’s what might have gotten into your systems.” He closed his bag. “And to know whether anything did, we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“We’ll keep our fingers crossed,” said Matthew Muddie, pulling up his pants.

“Another thing,” said the doctor. “If your little jaunt tonight was as successful as it appears to be, my cousin the sheriff may be asked to investigate the situation. Now, since we purposely didn’t let him in on the plans, and since he’s smart enough not to listen to town gossip, he doesn’t know anything about what happened tonight. If the Sudge-Buddle people make him ask questions around town, you just lay low. Say you were at the Hallowe’en party.”

“We *were* at the party,” said Simon.

“Precisely,” said Doctor Badger. “Ben, you make good cotton candy.” He put on his hat, said “See you tomorrow,” and left by the side door.

“If you feel strong enough,” the Mayor said, “it might be wise for you to come back to the party so people can see you there.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Roscoe. “Can you do it?”

The three of them looked at one another and nodded agreement. “Let’s go.”

“Good,” said Mayor Higgins. “We’ll be just in time to hear M. Lucius Ferret read his favorite ghost story.”

Chapter 18

JUST BEFORE DAWN the next morning, Groverpeople were rudely jolted from their sleep by the frantic bleating of the factory steam whistle—shrill, panicky squawks and squeals that echoed up and down the river. All over town, people sat bolt upright in their beds, wide-eyed and listening. The whistle shrieks, though raucous, were not unpleasant to their awakened ears. After listening for a few minutes, some folks smiled and snuggled deeper into their beds. Others went out to stand on their front porches, gazing toward the factory and nodding pleasant good mornings to their neighbors. In more than one home, breakfast was early; and husbands and wives leaned across their tables to click their coffee cups together in a silent toast.

No smoke was rising from the red and white stack. And, as the sun climbed higher in the clear blue sky, folks went about their usual business, watching closely all morning long as Sudge-Buddle people scurried about the factory and among the pipes on the riverbank. The large trucks which normally came loaded with supplies either unloaded their crates in the factory parking lot or were turned away at the gate. At ten o'clock, huge pumping trucks arrived and ran long flexible hoses into the factory.

It was exciting to watch the bustling activity. Many Groverpeople found reasons to visit the schoolhouse across the road from the factory gate, or to walk along the barbed wire fence that marked the Sudge-Buddle property line. Arabella Raccoon closed the shoestore for the day and took her binoculars into the attic of the schoolhouse, where—sitting among the unused desks and broken blackboards—she spent several hours peering at the factory through the window slats. Fergus Fisher spent the entire day in his observatory on the roof of the Old Hex Inn, his telescope trained on the riverbank above Otter Point. From time to time he would scribble reports on what was happening, which Oliphant Owl took downstairs to the crowd drinking honey brew in the public rooms.

Just before noon, as Rebecca Raccoon sat at her typewriter in the office of the Grover *Gazette*, a long black car oozed up Main Street and stopped at Sheriff Badger's door. She left her desk and went to the front window; the car doors opened, and out came Mr. Snade, the factory manager, with four strange men in dark gray suits. As they marched into Sheriff Badger's office, Rebecca decided that it was time to take a break from the news story she was writing; and a moment later, crouched on her hands and knees, she was busy weeding a flower garden outside the Sheriff's window.

Inside, Mr. Snade was shouting so loudly that Rebecca couldn't help overhearing everything he said. It seemed that Someone (he didn't know who) had trespassed on Private Property, sabotaged the waste pipes beyond repair,

and caused a great deal of damage to the inside of the factory. She even heard Mr. Snade's fist pounding on the desk as he demanded that Sheriff Badger conduct an investigation and bring the Guilty Ones to *Justice*. The Sheriff promised to look into it.

When the black car had roared away, Rebecca hurried across the street to Higgins' Coffee Shop where, sure enough, she found a group of Groverpeople sitting at the lunch counter. She ordered a plate of cinnamon toast and began telling the others what she had heard. "And the waste backed up into the factory!" she said. "It blew out much of their electrical equipment and flooded knee-deep into the administration building. Mr. Snade's had to leave his office and make himself a new one—in a tool shed in the factory parking lot!"

"Do they know how the pipes got plugged?" Simon Skunk asked, as he nibbled a cracker and sipped his soup.

"No, but they think *we* did it," she answered. "And they want Sheriff Badger to conduct an investigation. But they're also going to bring in their own investigators."

"Don't they trust Sheriff Badger to do a good job?" Farmer Ben asked indignantly.

"I don't expect they'll find out much," commented Priscilla Possum, as she embroidered blue forget-me-nots on a piece of fine linen.

"They also told the Sheriff they couldn't get the plugs out of the pipes," Rebecca continued.

"Well, they *were* a pretty tight fit," said Simon Skunk.

"Mr. Snade was quite upset," Rebecca went on, after sampling her cinnamon toast. "They're going to have to dig them all up and lay new pipes."

"That should take awhile," said Matthew Muddie.

"Yes, but when they're laid, the new pipes will be guarded—day and night."

"Then it's quite clear," said M. Lucius Ferret, "there won't be any repetition of the Hallowe'ener."

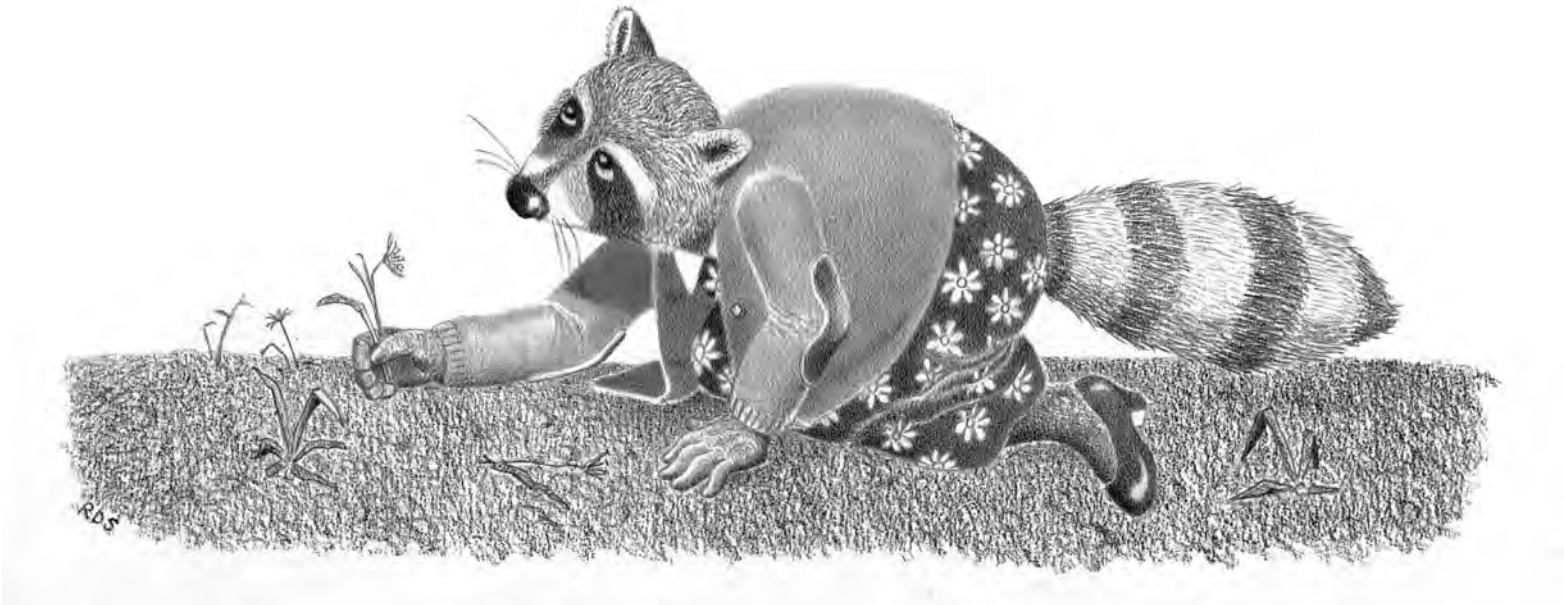
"Which means we'll have to go on to Phase Two," said Hilda Badger.

"The smokestack?" said Farmer Ben.

"The smokestack," said Hilda Badger.

During the week following the Hallowe'ener, the Sheriff did conduct an investigation to discover who had plugged the pipes. He went to the riverbank to search for clues, such as footprints in the mud. But there weren't any footprints; or rather, there were too many—for the mud unfortunately had been thoroughly trampled by Sudge-Buddle feet on the morning after. He studied the uprooted pipes and the plugs jammed into them (but to him, one oak log looked much like another, and there was no way to tell whose woodlot they might have come from). As for the steel plates bolted to them, they offered no clues either; for they could have been made in any machine shop. Sheriff Badger was forced to admit that he was completely baffled.

"Nothing I've seen," he told Mr. Snade, "indicates that some of your own workers might not have done it. It would've been easy for someone in your factory to have made those plates and bolted them onto the plugs. Are you sure



that some of your workers didn't do it?"

Mr. Snade snorted contemptuously. "There *are* no workers. *Machines* do all the work."

"You have night watchmen, don't you?" the Sheriff asked.

This question silenced Mr. Snade and later caused him much worry and biting of fingernails. That night there'd been four watchmen on duty. Was it possible, he wondered, that one of them might want to hinder the factory's operations? Could it be that one of them—or even *more* than one—didn't consider themselves part of the Sudge-Buddle team? It was simply unthinkable! But he lay awake all night thinking about it.

And all the next week, as he sat cramped in the tool shed in the parking lot waiting for the Company investigators to arrive, he *kept* thinking about it while guzzling coffee, staring at the wall, and straightening hundreds of shiny paper clips. By the time the Company's investigators appeared, grim and roly-poly in their identical gray overcoats, Mr. Snade had become convinced that one of the watchmen had done it. "Check *them* out first," he told the investigators, "*then* the townspeople."

"Yes, it's quite possible that you have a rotten apple among your workers," the chief investigator said. "The Company has found this to be the case elsewhere. Sometimes they're spies, hired by other Companies to destroy us. Sometimes they aren't spies—just crazy. Either way, the result's the same. Sabotage. Delays in production. Destruction of Company property. Causing trouble with the *good* workers." He pulled out a small notebook and referred to it briefly. "It's happened at our factories in Sweden, France, Nicaragua, Brazil, England, Germany, Mexico, Japan, Honduras, Australia, Italy, and South Africa—not to mention the forty to fifty cases a year we know about in this country."

Mr. Snade was horrified. "Check out the watchmen!" he cried hoarsely. "And file a complete report on each one of them!"

The investigators did so. But they found no rotten apples among them, though they tried. "Sorry," they told Mr. Snade. The manager nodded, trying hard to conceal his disappointment. "Then it *must* be the townspeople," he said angrily. "See what you can find out."

The investigators drifted into town and snooped about for clues. Like gray ghosts they prowled and flitted about, buttonholing people in doorways, lurking in dark corners, following folks along the streets. They listened to conversations at the barbershop, chatted with children in Grover Park, spent many long hours in Higgins' Coffee Shop, and drank honey brew at the Old Hex Inn. There was even talk of a reward for anyone coming forth with information. No one came forth. In fact, no one seemed willing to talk to them at all—except Lafayette Lizard, who tried to interview them for the *Gazette*—and after three days, they departed.

For over a month, the factory stayed shut down while cleanup and electrical work was done, and the old pipes were dug up and new ones laid. As the work progressed, it became apparent that *four* pipes were being installed to replace the

three that had previously fouled the river. The Groverpeople reacted to this with shock and dismay; Lafayette Lizard wrote a scorching editorial for the *Gazette*, and Doctor Badger became so angry and depressed that he stayed in bed for two days.

Yet the month of the factory shutdown was a glorious time. The air was clean, the sky was clear. Several people painted their houses, and Simon Skunk (though he didn't paint) made some progress in cleaning his workshop wall. Fergus Fisher did a lot of star-gazing. On warmish November days, Matthew Muddie opened the schoolhouse windows for cool fresh air. And Thaddeus Higgins' asthma improved.

But as they lived the joys of late November, everyone knew that the good time was only temporary, that all too soon the choking fumes and gummy soot would descend upon them once again. And thus their happiness was tempered with a nagging sense of dread. The only thing to brighten Doctor Badger's growing despair was his relief at seeing that Thaddeus' breathing had improved, and that none of the three who had plugged the pipes had shown any signs of illness. The burns received by Matthew Muddie and Farmer Ben had healed quickly, and the hair on Simon Skunk's legs was rapidly growing back (much to *Simon's* relief).

The first snow came in early December. Though it was not a heavy snowfall, the Groverpeople decided to have their Winter Carnival early—unspotted—rather than wait for a heavier fall and risk having the carnival black. Farmer Ben's pond was not sufficiently frozen for ice-skating, but there was enough snow for making statues and for sledding. Two days after the Winter Carnival, the factory started up again. And within a week, things were even worse than they'd been before the Hallowe'ener.

On the evening of January 10, a small group had gathered at the Old Hex Inn to plan Phase Two. Outside, thickly falling snow was swirling into steep drifts before a sharp, cutting wind. Inside was soft yellow lamplight, fresh popcorn, and a log fire crackling on the hearth.

In a rare moment of relaxation during his working hours, Roscoe Lynx was playing his harp—beautifully, with intense feeling—to the soft piano accompaniment of Arabella Raccoon. It had been over a month since Roscoe had written any poetry; and to lessen the melancholy he always felt when no poems came, he had spent a great deal of time with his harp. His playing was quite good, and he took much pleasure in it. So did his listeners.

Franklin Groundsquirrel and Elizabeth H. were throwing darts at a cork target. Priscilla Possum and M. Lucius Ferret were playing chess. Lafayette Lizard, with papers spread before him on a table, was writing an editorial for the *Gazette* and trying to ignore the helpful suggestions which Parker Packrat and Rebecca Raccoon kept making over his shoulder. At the serving counter, Ambrose and Grandfather Fieldmouse were munching popcorn; and in a deep easy chair near the side door, Thorstein Raccoon had fallen asleep while reading a



RDS

magazine. Before the fireplace, Doctor and Hilda Badger were talking quietly with Matthew Muddie and Peabody the Postman.

While engaged in these different activities, each of them (except Thorstein) was pondering what action should be taken against the smokestack. It was clear that the river would have to wait. A guardhouse had been built beside the mouths of the four new pipes, and a watchman was always on duty. So it would have to be the smokestack. But how to get at it? That was the puzzler.

Thunk went Franklin's dart: *thunk . . . thunk*. A bull's eye! "Good throw," said Elizabeth H.

"Check," said Priscilla Possum, moving her Queen's Bishop to M. Lucius Ferret's King's Bishop 4. "Oh, fiddlesticks!" snorted M. Lucius. "I walked right into that one!"

Down the stairs came Fergus Fisher, his arms filled with large glass bottles, empty and glistening. "Basement door!" he shouted, and Parker Packrat hurried over to open it for him. "Thanks," said Fergus, whipping out of sight down the basement stairs. Parker had just turned to go back to Lafayette's table when a rumbling thumpbumpbumping came from the basement stairs, immediately followed by a string of explosive popping crashes, a shattering and tinkling of glass on stone which continued for what seemed a very long time. Then there was a long silence, while everyone sat frozen like statues, staring at the basement doorway. Thorstein Raccoon had leaped halfway out of his chair; Roscoe's hands were poised motionless above the harpstrings; Grandfather Fieldmouse held a piece of popcorn halfway to his open mouth.

Parker Packrat raced back to the doorway as slow, heavy footsteps came clumping up the stairs. Fergus Fisher staggered into view, his white laboratory coat rumpled and streaked with dust, and leaned stiffly against the doorframe. They stared at him anxiously.

"Nothing broken," he assured them. "Nothing of *mine*, at least. No bones, that is. The bottles didn't come off so well, I'm sorry to say. But at least they were empty."

"You're sure you're all right?" Parker asked him.

"Oh, perfectly, perfectly," said Fergus, examining his spectacles. "The bottles went off one side, and I went off the other."

"You frightened us," said Priscilla Possum. And she added under her breath: "You frequently do."

"But not half so much as you did when you had the first flight with the *Albatross*," Hilda Badger said, with a smile.

"Well, that was a lot farther to fall," said Fergus. "I was almost as high as Parker's junk sculpture, and quite a lot higher than the Sudge-Buddle smokestack."

A lengthy silence immediately followed his words, as though everyone had suddenly been plunged into deep thought. Then, with a sharp intake of breath, they all began talking at once: The smokestack! The *Albatross*!

"Fergus," said Doctor Badger, placing a hand on his shoulder, "I think you've just suggested a plan for accomplishing Phase Two."

"I think you're right," said Fergus, who for several days had been pondering the puzzle of the smokestack along with the others.

"But surely you don't expect the *Albatross* to drop a bomb!" said M. Lucius Ferret. "That would be taking direct action a bit too far!"

"Not a bomb," said Doctor Badger. "No, someone might get hurt. But let's think: what other uses could the *Albatross* be put to?"

"The problem isn't the smokestack," said Parker Packrat. "It's what comes out of the smokestack. That's what needs to be shut off."

"Is there a way we could plug up the smokestack?" asked Priscilla Possum. "It worked beautifully with the pipes."

Fergus shook his head. "I don't see how. It's a huge opening, and we can't get up there to measure it in order to make a plug that would fit."

"Wet cement," said Parker.

"Too heavy," said Fergus. "The *Albatross* could never get that much wet cement up that high."

"What about a little at a time?" asked Rebecca Raccoon.

"Too many trips," said Fergus. "The night watchmen would see us and know what was happening."

"In other words," said Doctor Badger, "we need something that will take only one trip, and which is light enough for the *Albatross* to carry."

"Jamaica Delight!" cried Franklin Groundsquirrel.

"What?" They looked at him blankly.

"Well, it isn't really," said Franklin. "Jamaica Delight, that is. It's really an old voodoo recipe. Not the one that turns you into a zombie—that one uses goat's milk—but the one that keeps your hair from falling out."

Doctor Badger came to him and felt his head. "You don't seem feverish," he said. "Would you kindly tell us what you're talking about?"

"Izzy knows more about it than I do," Franklin said.

"That's fine," said Ambrose Fieldmouse, "but why don't you tell us what you know?"

He told them about Izzy's giving him the recipe for Jamaica Delight, and the mistake she had made in doing so. "And it hardened like concrete as soon as it began to get cool," he added. "It wouldn't give back Simon's spoon. What Izzy actually gave me was a voodoo recipe to keep your hair from falling out. I think it would stop the smokestack."

Doctor Badger turned back to the fireplace with a skeptical frown. "Voodoo recipes," he muttered. "Fuddlesome hanky-panky."

"I think it sounds like a real possibility," said Hilda Badger. "But wouldn't it take a large amount of the—uh—Jamaica Mistake to do the job?"

"Probably," said Franklin. "But not as much as you might think. A little of it goes a long way."

Chapter 19

IT WAS STILL snowing early the next morning when Franklin, Fergus, Hilda Badger, and Elizabeth H. went to Maple Crossing to get Izzy's opinion of the plan. On their way, they stopped at Parker Packrat's house, and were surprised to find his doorway freshly drifted shut with black-speckled snow. In answer to their knocking, Parker opened the door—slowly and very cautiously to keep the snow from blowing in. He was dressed in his bathrobe and looked as though he hadn't slept well. All of them were quite disturbed, for it wasn't like Parker to let snow drift around his door. They wondered if he was ill.

"We're going to Izzy's to ask about the Jamaica Mistake," said Franklin. "Do you want to come along?"

Parker looked at him with dull eyes for a long moment, then slowly shook his head. "I'm really not dressed for it," he said, "and I think I'd rather just stay in today." Then, as though sensing some further explanation was needed, he added, "I'm reading a book that M. Lucius loaned me."

Elizabeth H. leaned closer, frowning with concern. "Aren't you feeling well, Parker? Last night you seemed all right and quite excited about the plan."

Parker said quickly, "I feel all right. And I'm *very* excited about the plan. Why don't you go on to Izzy's? I'll be satisfied with whatever you decide."

They left him and continued along the road. The Grover snowplow hadn't yet been along to cut through last night's drifts, and they found much of the going deep and difficult. Every now and then, Franklin and Elizabeth H. exchanged worried glances; and when they were about halfway from Parker's to Maple Crossing, Hilda Badger remarked: "Parker seemed really down, didn't he? I wonder what's wrong?"

"I'd like to stop by again on our way back," said Elizabeth H. "Maybe there's something bothering him that he'd be willing to talk about."

They trudged on through the deep snow. With a magnifying glass, Fergus was studying the snowflakes that settled on the sleeve of his coat.

The front porch of Izzy's General Store was covered with snow. No footprints led from the road to the door. "People seem to be staying in today," Hilda Badger observed. "Except us," said Fergus Fisher.

Inside the store was warmth and shelter from the wind. Prosper the Cat sat cross-legged on his velvet cushion near the pot-bellied stove. As they entered the salesroom, he called out loudly without opening his eyes: "Customers, Izzy."

"Coming," Izzy answered from the back room.

"Good morning, Prosper," they all said.

"Good morning," Prosper replied, nodding gravely with his eyes closed. "The snow is deep."



"Why, yes it is," said Elizabeth H. But somehow that didn't really seem to be the response called for by Prosper's comment. Thinking about it, she wasn't sure *what* response was called for, if any.

Izzy appeared behind the counter, wiping her hands on her apron. "Good to see you," she smiled. "What can I do for you this morning? I have a new shipment of galoshes and some fresh salt water taffy, if you're interested."

Very much interested, Fergus Fisher said, "I'll take some taffy. Surprise Oliphant with it." Izzy weighed out a bagful of taffy, and Fergus paid her.

"We came on another kind of business," Franklin said. "Do you recall the recipe you gave me for Jamaica Delight, only it wasn't?"

"Oh, yes," said Izzy. "It was a voodoo recipe for removing warts. One of my more embarrassing slip-ups."

"I thought it was to keep your hair from falling out," Franklin said nervously.

Izzy laughed. "It might do that, too. I just go by the book."

Franklin coughed and gathered his thoughts. "Well, anyway," he hurried on, "about that recipe—"

"Have you tried it yet?" Izzy asked. "The one for Jamaica Delight, I mean. The right one."

"No, I haven't gotten around to it yet," Franklin replied. "But today we want to talk to you about the wrong one. The one for the voodoo medicine."

Izzy gave a little cluck of sympathy. "Have you got warts?" she asked.

"No," said Franklin, somewhat taken aback.

"Glad to hear it," said Izzy. "But you really should try the other one, Franklin. It's quite good. Now, what is it you want to know about the wrong one?" She pulled her moldy green book from beneath the counter.

"It hardened like concrete when it got cool," said Franklin.

"If it had been *real* Jamaica Delight, it wouldn't have," said Izzy.

The jangle of the brass bell above the door announced the arrival of Priscilla Possum. "I saw you folks coming here, and I thought I'd drop over to hear what Izzy has to say. Have you told her about the plan?"

"Just getting ready to," said Franklin; and turning to Izzy, he went through it quickly: "Last night we were wondering what would happen if Fergus Fisher flew the *Albatross* over the smokestack and dropped in a pile of the voodoo recipe. What do you think, Izzy?"

Her eyes widened with interest, and she began paging rapidly through her book. "Let's see—ah, yes! here it is!" She read thoughtfully for a moment and answered, "It would make the smokestack very, very sick."

"That's what I thought," said Franklin, recalling his own experience with it.

"How much of it would we need?" asked Hilda Badger. "It's a huge smokestack."

Fergus did some rapid calculations with pencil and paper. "The *Albatross* can carry a considerable weight," he announced, "and I can make certain adjustments to increase this even more. But something as heavy as concrete is simply out of the question."

"Jamaica Mistake is much lighter than concrete," said Franklin. "But when it

cools, you could pave a highway with it."

"How will the *Albatross* get it there?" Priscilla Possum asked. "That's the biggest problem."

"I've been thinking about that," said Fergus. "I think a large bag suspended from the underbody would be best. This voodoo stuff will be wet, won't it?"

"Yes," said Franklin. "And hot. It has to be hot to be liquidy."

"I honestly don't see how we can keep it hot while we're getting it to the factory," said Fergus, chewing the end of his pencil.

"I could sew together a large bag," Priscilla said, "insulated on the inside to keep the heat in, and waterproofed outside to keep the stuff from oozing through."

"Hah!" said Izzy suddenly. "Here's the card you wrote the wrong recipe on, Franklin. Twelve ripe bananas, one and a half cups ginger, three limes—"

"Well, what do you think of the plan?" Hilda Badger asked her.

"On the surface it looks all right to me," Izzy replied. "What do you think, Prosper?"

"It should work," said Prosper, without opening his eyes.

"That settles it, then," said Izzy. "All right, we'll need twenty washtubs for kettles, each with a fire under it—"

"And remember," said Franklin, "when I made it, I forgot to stir it while it was coming to a boil for the last time. That might be important."

"Right," said Izzy, making a note of it on Franklin's recipe card. "And we'll need a truckload of bananas, and three crates of limes, and eight bags of coffee beans—"

On their way back to Parker Packrat's house, they met the Grover snowplow coming along the Old Cherrystone Road. They stood aside in the drifts as the plow grumbled toward them spewing snow into deep ridges beside the cleared road. Peabody the Postman was driving the plow. He waved a greeting and halted the machine just before reaching them. "I see you've been to Maple Crossing," he said. "I've been following your tracks. Anything happening there?"

"Izzy's in favor of the plan," said Elizabeth H., "and Prosper thinks it should work."

"Glad to hear it," said Peabody.

"Izzy also has some salt water taffy," said Fergus, handing him up a piece.

Peabody's eyes sparkled as he popped the candy into his mouth. "I'll be sure to drop in and see her," he grinned. Then, more soberly, he said, "You know, I just ran into something odd up at Parker's house. When I was going by clearing the road, I noticed that his front walk was drifted shut with snow. I saw your footprints, of course, but I figured Parker was gone, and I got down and shoveled his walk clear. Just when I got to the door, Parker came out, dressed in his bathrobe, to thank me. It's not like him to let his walk drift shut when he's at home. Do you suppose something's wrong? I didn't say much, 'cause he looked as though he didn't want to talk."

"We're going back to find out," said Elizabeth H. "When we stopped on the

way out, we had exactly the same feeling.”

“I hope it’s nothing serious,” said Peabody. He started the snowplow and continued down the road toward Maple Crossing.

Fergus and Hilda Badger returned to Grover while Franklin and Elizabeth H. stopped off at Parker’s house. “Let us know what you find out,” said Hilda, as they parted ways.

As Elizabeth H. and Franklin followed the freshly cleared path to Parker’s door, they gazed up at the towering junk sculpture in the center of the field. High, high it rose, the upper levels vague and dim through the gray curtain of falling snow. Lower down, where they could see more clearly, its irregular surfaces were crusted with black-spotted ice, and its dark inner recesses thickly blanketed with swirled drifts. Around its base, smooth humps of snow concealed the cement mixer, the sawhorses, and the heaps of scattered junk. “It’s simply beautiful,” said Elizabeth H., looking up. “He’d gotten to the Fifteenth Level before the snow came,” Franklin commented.

Elizabeth H. knocked on the door; and almost immediately Parker opened it and looked out, still dressed in his bathrobe. “Hi,” he said with a faint smile. “What did Izzy say?”

“She thought it was a good idea,” Franklin answered. “And so did Prosper.”

“Then I guess we’d better go ahead with it,” said Parker. There followed an awkward pause, while Parker held the door. They stood hugging themselves in the cold, stamping their feet, till Parker got the hint and invited them in. They took off their coats and overshoes by the front door and went to warm themselves at the stove.

“Izzy will make the Jamaica Mistake,” said Elizabeth H. “Priscilla will sew a large insulated bag to carry it, and Fergus will fly the *Albatross* to the smokestack.”

Parker cried out “I hope it works!”—so loudly and angrily they were startled. Then, shaking his head and staring at the floor, he turned to the stove and said quietly, “I’ve got some fresh tea brewed. Would you like some?”

They each took a cup and settled down in the warmth. Parker sank into a chair beneath the reading lamp and listlessly stirred sugar into his tea. His face was tired and expressionless, as though he had gone a long time without sleep.

While Elizabeth H. and Franklin sipped their tea, they watched Parker with growing concern—exchanging glances from time to time—and tried to start a few threads of conversation, which quickly led nowhere, since Parker didn’t take them up. Finally they lapsed into an awkward silence, during which the clock on the wall loudly ticked away the minutes. Slumped unmoving in his chair, Parker stared at the wall and let his tea get cool.

At last, unable to stand it any longer, Elizabeth H. cleared her throat and gently ventured: “Parker, we can tell that something’s troubling you. Would it help to talk about it? Do you want to share it with us?”

“If there’s something wrong, maybe we can help,” Franklin said hopefully.

Parker shook his head. “There’s nothing anyone can do.” His eyes were dull and defeated. “And talking about it won’t make one bit of difference.” He closed

his eyes and gave a long sigh.

"But I guess I do want to talk about it," he said. "I haven't wanted to. I didn't even want to admit it to myself." His hand began to tremble uncontrollably, and the tea sloshed from the cup into the saucer. He quickly set it down. Then he stood up and began pacing aimlessly about the room, nervously clasping and unclasping his hands, his words coming slowly at first, then more and more quickly—drumming at them like hammer-blows.

"Month by month I watched it getting worse: the tarnishing and pitting. The crumbling. The black spots clinging! Oh, I *tried* to wash them off, but it didn't do any good. They kept coming back, and always worse and worse! I spent whole days polishing and scrubbing. But no matter what I did, day by day—right before my eyes!—I watched the gleam and luster dim, the sparkle fade. The shiny surfaces that mirrored sky and clouds—all dark and ruined!"

He gripped the back of his chair and leaned toward them. As they looked into his anguished eyes, they felt his pain. It was as though a dam had broken; the words, too long held back, came tumbling out in a raging torrent: "Three whole years building the sculpture! Working and re-working it. Adding this, and moving that. Re-arranging, struggling to get just the right combinations of shapes and textures! By the end of summer, I'd reached the Fifteenth Level—even with all the time I'd had to spend repairing the damage to the other fourteen. I felt that I was finally making real progress. Then, when the factory shut down after the Hallowe'ener, I was able to make real headway with the *cleaning*. I worked from the top down, scraping and polishing. But I saw how permanent the damage is, just how much of the pitting and corrosion will never scrub away. I'd worked from the Fourteenth Level all the way down to the Ninth by the time the factory started up again. And then, within three days, I saw all my cleaning undone! Gone for *nothing*! It's back, as bad as before. And day by day it's getting worse!" His voice broke: "And what's ruined is ruined forever!"

Parker fell into his chair and buried his face in his hands. "Then, when the snow came, I had to stop work altogether. In the past, I've always looked forward to the spring, anxious for the snow to melt so I could get back to work. To see what repairs were needed after the winter. To get back on the scaffold, up above the trees, and face the sky, and stretch for the clouds. But this year I don't care if spring never comes! I know what I'll find when the snows melt—and the destruction will just go on. I'm through. There's no reason to continue with the sculpture. And I have no desire to."

He stopped; and in the silence that followed, the hissing of the teakettle was very loud.

Franklin sat gripping the arms of his chair, shaken to the roots of his whiskers. Elizabeth H. slowly stood up, crossed to Parker, and laid her hand gently on his shoulder. She could not bring herself to speak.

Parker raised his head, attempted a lopsided smile, then gave up. "I'm sorry to give way like this," he said in a trembling voice. "But you asked me to talk about it. I'm glad you did. I couldn't have brought myself to do it on my own—and I had to tell *somebody*." He gave a deep sigh and reached for his teacup.



Elizabeth H. found her voice. "Maybe Fergus and Priscilla and Izzy can do it, Parker. Can stop the smokestack once and for all. Maybe there will be a reason to go on with the sculpture. We've got to hope."

"I don't have any hope left," said Parker.

"They'll do what they can," said Franklin. "It's got to be tried. Here, Parker, let me warm your tea."

Chapter 20

DURING THE next two weeks, life continued pretty much as usual—on the surface. Anyone who didn't know would never have guessed that a major plan was afoot. As a matter of fact, a great deal was happening; but it was taking place behind closed doors and over the telephone. Fergus Fisher spent several hours a day in his workshed at the Old Hex Inn preparing the *Albatross* for its flight to the factory. Priscilla Possum stayed at her sewing machine piecing together a huge insulated bag. Izzy the Witch was collecting ingredients for the monstrous batch of Jamaica Mistake. Izzy's main worry had been getting the truckload of bananas, but they were delivered only a week after she'd ordered them. Her biggest problem proved to be the powdered fennis root. She had ordered twenty tins of it from The Pentagram, a mail order house in the East where she always bought her more unusual supplies. She knew that fennis root was hard to obtain, but she was surprised (and a little irritated) to immediately get back a telegram which said rather snippishly:

WHY DO YOU NEED TWENTY TINS? IT'S BEEN A BAD YEAR FOR FENNIS ROOT. YOU'RE ASKING FOR MORE THAN YOUR SHARE.

She'd telephoned back her reasons for wanting it, reminding them what a good customer she'd been over the years; and after considerable haggling with them, she'd agreed to settle for sixteen tins, which—still grumbling about it—they'd agreed to send her.

While the preparations were underway, the other Groverpeople went about their normal activities, waiting patiently (though with growing excitement) and not talking much about the coming action. Parker Packrat, very melancholy and subdued, took long lonely walks in the snow, slept a lot, and spent many hours at the Old Hex Inn silently drinking honey brew, leafing aimlessly through magazines, and listening to Roscoe play the harp.

At the end of the two weeks, both Izzy and Fergus were ready. The cloth bag wasn't finished, however. It had proved to be a much bigger job than Priscilla had expected. The sewing machine couldn't do it all, and every night she and Randy Possum and Rebecca Raccoon had to work late hand-stitching the waterproofed pieces together. Because of his great skill at making buttonholes, Randy was given the job of setting the grommets round the edges which would fasten the bag to hooks beneath the *Albatross*. While they were finishing up, Roscoe Lynx prepared the pasture behind the Old Hex Inn for cooking the Jamaica Mistake. With Farmer Ben's help, he plotted sites for twenty bonfires and began laying in wood for them. When the bag was finally

ready, Priscilla and Randy folded it into a large bundle which Farmer Ben took to the pasture in his pickup truck.

On the morning of January 26, Izzy began preparing the voodoo recipe. Everyone who could pitched in to help.

Twenty new washtubs were perched above the ground on rocks. Under each, a woodfire was built on a piece of sheet metal, which could be pulled from under the tub as necessary. Ben Barker and Randy Possum were responsible for building the fires and keeping them fueled. In the workshed, Hilda Badger, Peabody the Postman, Mayor Higgins, Simon Skunk, and Prosper peeled bananas. Parker Packrat and Miss Proudie Fairblossom chopped the peels into small pieces. Thorstein Raccoon and Arabella juiced the limes. Lafayette Lizard and Franklin Groundsquirrel took turns grinding coffee beans. Doctor Badger cracked coconuts and drained their milk into saucepans, all the while muttering to himself: "Bananas and coconuts, ginger and limes! You can't stop a factory with a fruit salad! Voodoo hoodoo mumbo jumbo balderdash!"

"Into the tubs!" called Izzy. And from wheelbarrows, the peeled bananas were dumped into the washtubs while Roscoe Lynx wandered about adding water with his garden hose. Instead of the wooden spoons the recipe called for, they used canoe paddles to mash the bananas and water into paste. "Ginger!" cried Izzy. "Lime juice!" And again Roscoe went the rounds with his garden hose. Then the tubs were covered, and most of the workers went to lunch. Parker, Simon, and Elizabeth H. stayed behind to mix the chopped banana peels with allspice and coconut milk, and to spread the mixture on sheets of canvas to get brown and bubbly in the sunlight.

At two o'clock, Peabody added the ground coffee beans to each of the tubs with a large scoop shovel, and Ben Barker and Randy relit the fires. Nervous and preoccupied, Izzy moved about methodically from tub to tub watching the progress, giving orders, keeping tabs on every pot. At last she cried, "They're boiling! Red peppers next! and yams!"

Within minutes, as thick steam rose from the twenty tubs, the pasture was enveloped in a smell so obnoxious and horrible that Miss Proudie excused herself and retreated into the Old Hex Inn. There she found Franklin Groundsquirrel, who, knowing full well from his earlier experience what the smell would be, had retreated from the field some time before. Doctor Badger, scowling through his spectacles, stayed outside with a handkerchief to his nose, ready with his medical bag should someone need reviving. But almost as quickly as it came, the smell went away; and there remained only a thin sweetish odor above the bubbling tubs.

Ten minutes into the boiling, Izzy cried "Pull out the fires!" The sheet metal squares were pulled from under the tubs, and the mixture of coconut milk, allspice, and chopped banana peel was shoveled in. Twenty canoe paddles began to stir rhythmically, round and round. Watching closely, Izzy at last broke into a broad smile and shouted: "It's turning gray! We're right on target!"

As the afternoon sun sank lower, they let the tubs cool for about an hour.



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Then Izzy called: "Light the fires!" While this was done, more coconut milk was added to the tubs. "Don't forget!" Franklin told Izzy. "We're not supposed to stir it while it's coming to a boil for the last time!" The canoe paddles were removed and stacked in Fergus' workshed. As the mixtures came bubbling to a slow boil, Izzy said, "Cover the tubs! Put out the fires! We have a two-hour wait."

It was getting dark when they lit the fires for the last time. While the Jamaica Mistake was heating, Priscilla's cloth bag was spread out in the bottom of a small gully that curved through the pasture, and the *Albatross* was rolled from its shed. One by one the hot washtubs were lifted onto Parker Packrat's red wagon and rolled to the edge of the gully, where the contents were poured into the mouth of the bag. Down in the gully, Priscilla, Randy, and M. Lucius Ferret crept about with flashlights, inspecting the bag for leaks. Whenever they found one, they sealed it with gooey tar.

After all twenty of the tubs had been emptied into the bag, Fergus securely fastened the grommets at the bag's mouth to the metal catches he had bolted to the underside of the *Albatross*. The catches were designed to open simultaneously and release the bag to fall into the smokestack when Fergus flipped a single switch in the cockpit. He had tested them many times.

"I don't know how fast this stuff will cool," Priscilla said, as Fergus put on his helmet and flight jacket. "You'd better not waste any time getting there."

Fergus nodded, and said that he would hurry. But inwardly he was wondering if he'd be *able* to get there—and if he did, if he'd be able to drop the bag. For though he said nothing about it (not wanting to frighten the others), Fergus was quite worried. As he saw the bag spread out and filling the gully, he knew that it was going to be much heavier than he'd expected. He wasn't at all sure that the *Albatross* could even get it off the ground. And he knew that if he did get it into the air, there would be other problems. Could the *Albatross* gain the proper altitude? Would it steer properly? Would the catches hold till he was ready to release them? If they did, would they all work smoothly as they should when the time came to drop the bag? Would he be able to make the bag fall into the smokestack? What if he missed the opening altogether? He didn't even want to think about that possibility. He shook his head: no, too much could go wrong. He felt there was only a fifty-fifty chance that he would be able to accomplish his mission.

Oliphant Owl perched on the edge of the cockpit at Fergus' elbow. "You'll be careful, won't you, Fergus?" he asked.

"Of course," Fergus replied. "It's just a hop out and a hop back. Should take twenty minutes at the most."

Oliphant edged closer. "I'm a little worried," he confessed.

"Pooh," said Fergus with a smile. "What's there to worry about? It's not as though the Sudge-Buddles were expecting us. They won't have anti-aircraft guns."

"I'm worried about *you*," said Oliphant. "That bag's awfully heavy. It's going to be a dangerous trip, and you know it."

Fergus sighed, took off his glasses and slipped them into a snap-cover pocket case. "You're right," he said, "it *will* be a hard trip. Lots of things could go wrong. I'm worried too."

"I want to come with you," said Oliphant.

Fergus slowly pulled on his gloves before answering, then said carefully, "No, you'd better not."

"I want to," said Oliphant. "Maybe I could help."

Fergus shook his head firmly. "I'd like to have you along," he said. "There's nothing I'd like better. But I can't let you come, Oliphant. Not this time. It's something I'd better do alone." He stopped, not wishing to say more.

For a long moment Oliphant regarded him somberly with his round yellow eyes; then he nodded: "Please be careful."

Fergus patted Oliphant's nearest wing; then he quickly pulled down his goggles and climbed into the cockpit. Miss Proudie Fairblossom reached up and squeezed his hand. "Good luck, Fergus."

Parker Packrat called out loudly, "We're counting on you, Fergus!"

Fergus patted the side of the *Albatross*. "We'll do our best," he smiled. "Now! everybody stand back! I'm going to start the engine and lift off—straight up!" He flipped a switch, and the engine roared. They all moved back to stand in a semi-circle about the *Albatross*. The sky was quite dark now, densely overcast with heavy snow clouds. Far across the river to the northwest a dim red glow marked the location of the smokestack.

Over the noise of the engine, Fergus yelled: "If all goes well, I'll be back in twenty minutes. Keep the fires burning to guide me back. Roscoe, I'd like to have a mug of hot brew waiting."

"There'll be two mugs!" Roscoe shouted back.

"Do be careful!" cried Arabella Raccoon. Fergus waved and flipped a second switch. With a heaving jolt and a thunderous clankety-bang, the jointed wings began beating up and down, fanning out stiff gusts of icy wind. The watchers fell back to a safer distance. Fergus flipped a third switch, and the *Albatross*, with agonized creaks and groans, slowly shuddered itself straight up into the air. As the *Albatross* rose, the bag of Jamaica Mistake bulged and stretched and lifted out of the gully. After a long moment while the crowd watched breathlessly, it swung clear of the ground, settled into itself, and hung swaying, like a huge turnip.

The crowd sent up a cheer. Fergus felt like giving one himself. He hadn't expected it to be so easy. Through his goggles, he watched the ground drop away beneath him—a field of luminous gray-white dotted with clustered black figures and the bright orange disks of the smoldering woodfires.

As the *Albatross* climbed, Fergus felt the tug and sway of the suspended weight; he listened with alarm as the engine whined and metal plates rasped and grated with the strain. He had visions of the *Albatross* falling to pieces in the air. He held his breath. Only a little higher now—good, good—a little bit more—there! The proper altitude! Fergus pushed the controls into forward flight and started for the factory. Overhead was blackness, pressing down

upon him like a lid; far below, the gray snowblanket, tufted darkly here and there with clumps of trees. Behind him, very faint, gleamed the orange flames of the cooking fires; ahead, the red glow of the smokestack, growing brighter by the minute.

He found that the weight of the bag made steering difficult; for as it swung its slow movement from side to side, it caused the *Albatross* to fishtail back and forth. He had not foreseen this problem. It took all his strength to keep the *Albatross* on course. It was as though the bag had a will of its own and a destination different from his. But somehow he managed, and at last the river was below him—a black gash against the gray. Then the factory grounds: the railroad track, the parking lot. And dead ahead, the smokestack.

He was approaching on a level with the stack's gaping mouth. As he climbed higher to come in above it, Fergus stared at the stack with a mixture of scientific curiosity and disbelief. Seeing it from the top, at close range, he was astonished at its size. Striped in fat horizontal bands of red and white, it was a huge cannon pointing upward, beside which the *Albatross* was dwarfed to the size of a mosquito.

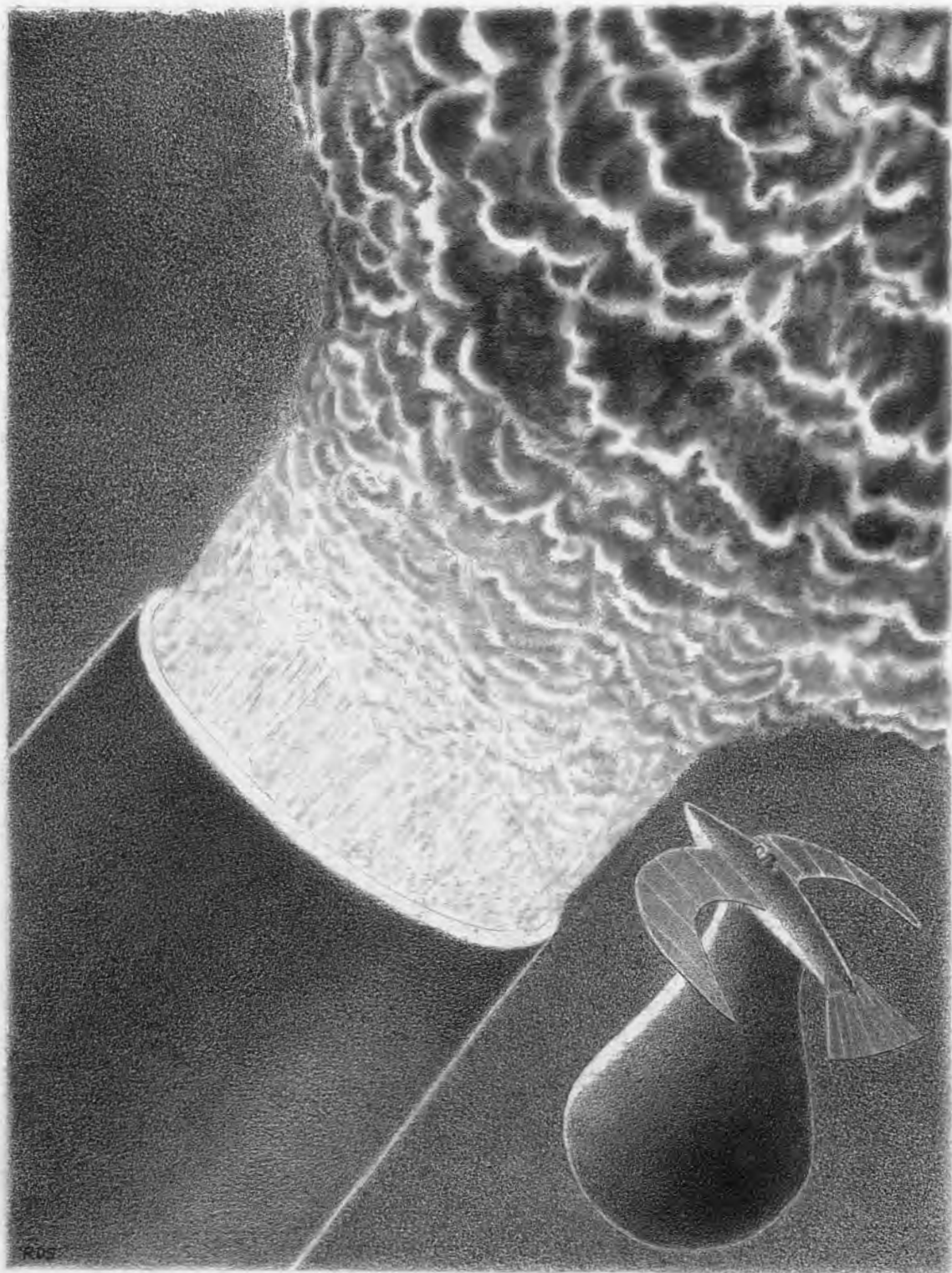
As from a volcano, a dense churning column of gray and black smoke shot upward, wattled and billowing, great mushroom and cauliflower clouds dull red on the undersides. Above the noise of the engine, Fergus could hear the whoosh of hot gases plunging up the throat of the stack. Bright red sparks flashed out and showered past him into the smoke like tracer bullets.

He had reached the proper altitude. Gritting his teeth, Fergus stiffened the wing-plates and banked the *Albatross* to steer a course directly across the center of the opening.

A scorching blast like the *slap!* of a giant hand flung the *Albatross* upward, out of control. Pitched and tossed about in the churning clouds and rocketing sparks, choked by the sulfur fumes, enclosed by billowing walls, Fergus fought blind. The controls were wrenched from his hands, and he was slammed and battered against the sides of the cockpit.

Then suddenly they burst out of it, into the cold night air. Through his soot-grimed goggles, Fergus saw that the *Albatross* was plummeting toward the ground. He seized the controls; and by flapping the wings, stopped the downward plunge. Then, sucking in deeps breaths of cold air, he wiped the soot off his goggles and looked at the smokestack. The cannon mouth was belching its smoke behind and slightly above him. The *Albatross* still carried its load of Jamaica Mistake. In the shock of the blast, he had not been able to release the catches to drop the bag. With a sigh, he climbed higher, stiffened the wings, and banked the *Albatross* for another approach. He had no choice but to go over the opening again.

"Perhaps higher up," he said to himself, "where the updraft isn't so strong." But no, that would put him into the middle of the smoke, where he wouldn't be able to see the opening to know when to release the bag. "All right then," he said grimly, "right down at the mouth!" He banked a tighter circle and moved in on the lip of the opening.



As he neared it, the sulfur fumes gagged him. The heat seared his nose and cheeks. "Now," he thought. And maintaining an altitude that just allowed the hanging bag to clear the lip of the stack, he took a deep breath and steered straight across the center of the opening.

Once again the blast! the freight-train roar! Once more the *Albatross* was slapped high into the blinding scorch, the sparks, the suffocating fumes. But this time Fergus gripped the controls and flipped the switch that opened the catches; and the *Albatross*—suddenly freed of its burden—shot upward as if by a tightly coiled spring. His stomach dropped; it was like a roller-coaster in reverse. With a strength he didn't know he had, Fergus managed to keep the *Albatross* level. And when at last it came lurching out into the open air, his only concern was whether the bag had gone down the throat of the stack, or had missed the opening altogether.

He wiped his goggles and circled anxiously, waiting for a sign. It wasn't long in coming. The color of the smoke changed from gray and black to white. It took him a minute to realize what he was seeing. "Steam!" he cried. And then, as he continued to circle, the steam subsided, and smoke appeared again—but not as a spewing column. As hiccups, rather, belching out in separate puffs which he could count. Chuff, chuff, chuff . . . chuff . . . chuff chuff chuff. More and more slowly they came, each puff smaller than the one before. Then they stopped, and the mouth of the smokestack was an empty black hole. Fergus smiled, and set his course for the Old Hex Inn.

When he reached the pasture, his friends were still standing where he had left them, huddled together in the cold around the embers of the cooking fires. Long before they could see it, they'd heard the *Albatross* coming, and had crowded closer together in excitement, nervously straining their eyes against the dark clouds. As the *Albatross* came into view and angled in to land, they began a joyous cheering to welcome Fergus back.

The landing went smoothly, and the crowd swarmed around Fergus as he climbed from the cockpit. Both he and the *Albatross* were covered with black soot, and stank of sulfur.

Parker Packrat shouted eagerly, "Did you get it done?"

"I think so," Fergus answered, "though we'll have to wait till morning to be sure."

But as he spoke, they heard in the distance the factory steam whistle begin bleating its alarm. "Well, I guess we *won't* have to wait," Fergus corrected himself. "It sounds like they've discovered something's wrong." He searched among the surrounding faces. "Where's Oliphant?"

They all began looking about and calling for him. But Oliphant was nowhere to be seen. As they talked among themselves, it became apparent that none of them had seen him for quite some time. Just as they were beginning to feel worried, a dark shape came winging down from the sky to perch with a flutter on the tail of the *Albatross*. "There he is!" cried Farmer Ben.

"Hello, Fergus," Oliphant said. "Congratulations on a good job."

"Where have you been?" Fergus asked.

"Following you back from the factory," Oliphant answered. "The *Albatross* was flying too high and too fast for me to keep up."

"I see," said Fergus. "Were you there the whole time?"

"Yes," said Oliphant. "I had to know what was happening to you. You understand that."

"Yes," said Fergus.

"Anyway," said Oliphant, flying over to perch on Fergus' shoulder, "I'm glad you made it back safely."

"Well, that makes two of us," said Fergus, as Roscoe Lynx took his arm and began heading him toward the Old Hex and the hot honey brew. "As you know, things got pretty thick for a bit." Fergus paused, then said slowly, "Oliphant, your going with me out there—I—well, it means a lot to me. I don't know what to say—"

"Then don't say anything," said Oliphant. "Let's celebrate."

"And after celebrating," said Roscoe Lynx, "let's put the *Albatross* into its shed and get the pasture clean before morning. We may have some Sudge-Buddle people dropping in, as they did after the Hallowe'ener."

"A hot bath would be nice," said Fergus, "and a mug of brew. I thought about *that* all the way back. As for cleaning the pasture, if we all pitch in, we should be through by midnight." The crowd moved into the Old Hex. Far in the distance over the snowsmooth fields the Sudge-Buddle whistle kept up its frantic shrieking. As they reached the cheery warmth of the public room, Fergus was saying to Oliphant, "There are some other things I'd like to do later tonight, after we clean the pasture. Up at the smokestack I got this idea for building a model volcano. It shouldn't be too hard to make, and I think it might be useful in the schools . . ."

Chapter 21

EARLY THE NEXT afternoon, Mr. Snade drove into town to demand that Sheriff Badger investigate the disaster at the factory. With the manager were four Company officials—grim sour-looking men in dark overcoats—who had flown in that morning in a blue and white Sudge-Buddle helicopter.

Sheriff Badger was not glad to see them. Pushy and loud, they crowded too close around his desk; and one man kept fidgeting with a small black camera.

"I'm going to ask you to fill out a complaint form," the Sheriff said, handing Mr. Snade a sheet of paper. "You say that the smokestack has been sabotaged. Well, in what way?" For the Sheriff hadn't been told about the plans for Phase Two, and he had been careful not to learn about them.

"The inside of the stack at the base is filled with something like concrete. Only it isn't," said one of the officials.

"Isn't like concrete?" asked the Sheriff.

"No, it *is* like concrete, but it's *not* concrete. We can't identify it. But it's as hard as rock."

"How did it get into the smokestack?" asked Sheriff Badger.

"We don't know," said Mr. Snade impatiently. "That's why we want you to conduct an investigation. We're sure that it was done by people from Grover. But we don't see how they could've got onto the factory grounds. We've had the property heavily guarded since that business with the pipes."

"Well, I can look at the damage," said the Sheriff. "Quit pointing that thing at me!" he growled at the man with the camera.

"You'll find the damage is extensive," Mr. Snade said bitterly. "Many delicate machines have been kiboshed. The blower system won't operate. And a very expensive McGillicuddy-Fanshawe furnace is completely ruined!"

"Are you sure it wasn't some kind of accident?" Sheriff Badger inquired, eyeing the man with the camera.

"Impossible! How do you explain the concrete?" said Mr. Snade.

"I don't," said the Sheriff, "and I wouldn't try, without having seen it."

"It'll cost the Company a great deal of money to reactivate the factory," said Mr. Snade, chewing at one of his fingernails and glancing nervously at the men with him. ("A *great deal* of money," one of them echoed.) "We won't be able to resume operations inside two months at the very least," Mr. Snade went on. "And with the earlier delay caused by the plugged pipes, our production this year will be only *half* what it was last year!"

"Oh, that *is* a blow," the Sheriff said.

"The Board of Directors is losing patience," said Mr. Snade. "You may as well

know, the Grover Factory is a vital part of our worldwide production scheme. If this plant breaks down, our whole network suffers.”

(“Well, *that’s* worth knowing,” said Rebecca Raccoon, as she knelt outside, weeding the flower bed beneath the Sheriff’s window.)

Sheriff Badger went to the factory and observed the damage. He climbed about among the silent machines, examined the gray substance at the base of the smokestack (it *was* like concrete), and hunted in vain for any clues that might explain what had happened. As they returned to the parking lot, he said to Mr. Snade and the other officials, “It’s very strange, I grant you. I don’t see how anyone could have gotten that stuff into the stack from the ground. It seems it would’ve had to drop from the air! Could it be that a meteor fell into the smokestack?”

“Not likely!” snapped Mr. Snade.

“We do agree,” said one of the officials, “that the stuff seems to have dropped out of the sky. But, as I’m sure you noticed, it didn’t drop anywhere else: just into our smokestack!”

“A freak of nature?” said the Sheriff.

“If nature caused it,” said Mr. Snade, “it most certainly was a freak. There’s some sort of cloth mixed up with the concrete. No, Sheriff Badger, we think *people* did it. The question is, How?”

“Helicopters?” said the Sheriff, seeing theirs across the parking lot. “Airplanes? A balloon?”

“None of our guards saw anything last night,” said Mr. Snade. “One claims to have heard a roaring sound like an engine high in the air—and a peculiar clanking noise he couldn’t identify.”

“That doesn’t sound like a balloon,” said the Sheriff. “A helicopter, maybe.”

“When we get the factory operating again, we’re going to make sure it won’t happen a second time—*whatever* it was,” said Mr. Snade. “We’ll have spotlights trained on the stack—all the way to the top—from sundown to sunrise. And we’ll have our helicopter patrolling the air above the factory. With *weapons*, Sheriff Badger!”

“Weapons?” said the Sheriff. “Then I advise you to be very careful with them.”

“We have a right to defend ourselves and protect our property!” said Mr. Snade.

And the man with the camera added: “If law-abiding citizens can’t go about their business without their property being destroyed by outside forces, then things have come to a very sorry pass!”

“I agree with you completely,” said Sheriff Badger.

“We want to make it entirely clear to you,” another official said, in a flat, cold voice, “that the Sudge-Buddle Company is tired of these vicious attempts to sabotage its operations. It will do whatever is necessary to stop them.”

Mr. Snade looked at him quickly and nodded vigorously. “That’s *right!*” he



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said. "Did you hear that, Sheriff Badger? The Board of Directors is very much aware of what's happening in Grover, and they're very displeased! They demand that the criminals be brought to justice!"

"Criminals *should* be brought to justice," said the Sheriff.

"I'm glad we see eye to eye on that, Sheriff," said Mr. Snade, nervously running a hand through his hair. "Frankly, I was disappointed in the way you handled the investigation of the plugged pipes. I was beginning to wonder if you really *do* have a strong desire to see justice done."

"Oh, I have a very strong desire," said Sheriff Badger. "You might almost call it a passion."

"I'm delighted to hear it," said Mr. Snade. And as the Sheriff left, the manager poured a glass of water and swallowed two headache pills.

The walk from Grover had been pleasant in the warm afternoon sunlight. As he entered Maple Crossing on his way to Ferret's Bookshop, Lafayette Lizard waved to Prosper the Cat who sat in a rocking chair on the porch of Izzy's General Store.

"Unseasonably warm, Prosper," Lafayette greeted him.

"Spring will be early this year," said Prosper, without opening his eyes.

Lafayette passed the bookshop and went on to the Raccoons' house to leave Rebecca some information regarding a story she was writing for the *Grover Gazette*. Thorstein was hoeing his garden in preparation for the spring planting. As Lafayette passed along the fence, Thorstein leaned on his hoe handle and asked, "Do you want me to supply you with tomatoes again this year?"

"Well, since you have the best tomatoes in the district," answered Lafayette, "I'd be a fool to say no."

"They aren't as good as they used to be," said Thorstein, "but what you say is still true. On both counts. Now, which will it be? Yes, or no?"

"Why, *yes!*" said Lafayette. "Of course."

"I just wanted it in plain simple English," said Thorstein.

Ignoring the twinkle in his eye, Lafayette quickly asked: "Is Rebecca in?"

"Last time I saw her, she was. Try the living room." And he went back to his hoeing.

Rebecca was in the living room putting new electrical wires into a table lamp. "Well, you're working hard," he said. "I've brought you some facts and figures about the new school that's being built at Barren Hill. You should be able to use 'em in your story." He tore two pages out of his pocket notebook and laid them on the table among the wires, pliers, and screwdrivers.

"Oh thanks," she said. "I couldn't have gotten over there till day after tomorrow. This'll be a great help. Say, do you want to hear some interesting news? I picked it up this afternoon outside Sheriff Badger's office."

He leaned forward eagerly. "About the factory?"

"That's right." And she told him about the conversation she had overheard.

"Mr. Snade is *very* disturbed," she concluded with a smile. "All this trouble is making him look very bad to the Company."

"I had no idea the Grover factory was so important to the worldwide scheme of the Sudge-Buddle Company!" said Lafayette. "Why, to hear him tell it, this factory might well prove to be the weak link in their chain! I wish we could find out more. It would make a good editorial."

He left her to her repair work and went to Priscilla Possum's house. There he found Priscilla and Randy Possum intently at work in the sewing room. Randy was seated at the table making a hat, while Priscilla supervised the work from behind his chair. "Come see Randy's hat," Priscilla said as Lafayette entered. "It's his very first, and he's doing a good job." Lafayette came to look at it. "It's very nice," he commented.

"It's not as easy as you might think," said Randy. "But it's more fun than you might imagine."

"Like writing a good editorial," said Lafayette, "or baking a good pie." He stood for a moment admiring the hat, then said thoughtfully, "It looks as though you've found your calling, Randy. We don't see you down at the *Gazette* as much as we used to. I guess I was hoping you'd like to be a printer."

"I would," said Randy, looking up from the hat. "Why can't I do both?"

To which Lafayette could only reply, "Well, I guess you *can*."

"That's the way I figure it," said Randy, turning back to his work.

"Lafayette, what brings you to Maple Crossing?" Priscilla asked.

"Errands," he answered. "I had to drop off some information at Rebecca's, I want to order some new bow ties from you, and I want to talk to M. Lucius about getting Roscoe to publish his poems."

"I'll say one thing for you," Priscilla smiled. "You never give up. You've tried for years to get Roscoe to publish those poems. Are you finally making some progress?"

"No," said Lafayette. "I mentioned it to him yesterday, and he just laughed and said he hadn't been writing much lately." He changed the subject abruptly: "I wonder if you could find the time to make me a couple of new bow ties? This one's getting a little frayed at the edges."

"No problem," Priscilla answered. "What kind of fabric do you want?"

"Can you match the one I'm wearing? It's my favorite tie."

She nodded. "They'll be ready day after tomorrow."

"Fine," said Lafayette, delighted. "Oh, say, I heard some interesting news about the Sudge-Buddle Company! Rebecca was outside the Sheriff's office—"

"We know about it," said Randy. "She came over as soon as she got back from Grover, and told us everything."

"Oh," said Lafayette, somewhat deflated. "Well, one thing's sure: if the factory's as important to the Company's worldwide operations as Mr. Snade seems to think, they'll get it going again just as soon as possible."

"But this time it will be heavily guarded," said Priscilla.

"It's kind of interesting, isn't it," said Lafayette, "that this factory might be the weak link in their chain?"

"There has to be a weakest link in every chain," said Priscilla.

Lafayette said goodbye and went on to Ferret's Bookshop. M. Lucius was reading at the back of The Boundary when Lafayette entered. "Come on back, have a seat," M. Lucius called. "Do you want some tea?"

"One cup would be fine," said Lafayette, settling into one of the easy chairs facing the desk. "No sugar, please. But you know that."

"Did you see the early daffodils while you were passing Pheasant Run?" M. Lucius asked, as he busied himself with the teakettle. "I was out this morning admiring the crocuses—"

"Prosper says it will be an early spring," said Lafayette.

"—and Thorstein Raccoon nearly ran me down with his wheelbarrow. He just can't wait to get started on his garden. Every year it's the same. The first warm day, and out he goes!"

"I just heard some interesting news," said Lafayette. "It seems that Rebecca was outside the Sheriff's office—"

"Oh, I heard about it," said M. Lucius. "She told me just after she got back from town. It's about Mr. Snade? and how worried the Company is about the Grover factory?"

"Yes, that's it," said Lafayette. "It looks to me that Grover might well be the weak link in their chain. I wonder if they're feeling they should have located their factory somewhere else?"

"They might be," said M. Lucius. "But if they had, they might have run into the same problems there." He adjusted his spectacles and rummaged about through the litter on his desk. "I have a new book you might find interesting. It's about some of the courageous newspaper editors of the last two hundred years. The issues they were concerned with, the struggles they had, the things they accomplished. Would you like to borrow it?"

"Might be useful," said Lafayette, quite interested. He had always fancied himself a courageous editor. It might be good to see what the others had done. M. Lucius handed him the book and began brewing the tea. Lafayette browsed through the pages with interest and said, "My goodness, there's a lot in here. When do you want it back?"

"You can keep it as long as you need to. I've read it already."

Lafayette held the book in his lap, leaned back in the chair, half-closed his eyes, and dimly sensed the thousands of books stacked and shelved about him. He felt himself surrounded by—what? three million pages? eight hundred million words? He thought of those thousands of writers: their great effort, the millions of patient hours they'd spent putting down their thoughts for future readers. Working by torch, candlelight, kerosene, electric lamps, and the light of the sun. Making their marks with stylus, brush, featherquill, typewriter, pencil, and pen, hoping to be read, expecting to be understood. On clay, wax, papyrus, parchment, paper. An ocean of words, growing, swelling, gathering force, flooding finally from printing presses to fill M. Lucius' Boundary. And what of himself? Where did *he* fit in, with his simple editorials in the *Grover Gazette*? Lafayette saw himself as a tiny cork bobbing on the surface of the waves. But his

words, too, were part of the ocean—though a very small part. And he, too, was a part of the effort. Even he.

He opened his eyes. M. Lucius was pouring him a cup of tea.

"Yesterday," he said, "I talked to Roscoe again about publishing his poems. It's no use; he won't budge. You know how he begs off: says they aren't good enough; that he wrote 'em only for himself; that he's just an old hockey player who dabbles in verse for the fun of it; that no one would be interested in what he has to say."

M. Lucius handed him the tea. "When I've talked to him about it, he always gets nervous and wants to change the subject. I've only seen five or six of his poems, but all of 'em were excellent. He must have hundreds!"

"A whole desk full," said Lafayette. "He's only shown me eight; but I've seen those he's copied out for Miss Proudie over the years. She has about nine. They're all very good."

"His attitude puzzles me," said M. Lucius. "I know he's not ashamed of having written them. Or at least he's not ashamed of the poems themselves. He's never made a secret of his writing, and he lets people know it gives him great enjoyment. I've tried to figure it out. For awhile I thought it was simply that he'd be embarrassed for the public to know he was a poet—that he'd rather be thought of as a hockey player."

"Oh, but that was *years* ago," said Lafayette. "And besides, that would be a silly attitude. Why shouldn't he be *both* a poet and a hockey player?"

"Well, I used to think that might be the reason," said M. Lucius. "But I've changed my mind on it. Now I just think that he's bashful. He really *doesn't* think people would be interested in what he has to say. And, as you well know, he's not one to force himself on people's attention."

"Oh, for goodness' sakes!" cried Lafayette. "People wouldn't have to read them unless they wanted to!"

"I've mentioned that to him," said M. Lucius. "He won't even answer that. Just laughs and goes off to do his work."

They sipped their tea in silence. Then Lafayette said, "I've told him again and again that the *Gazette* press will do a beautiful job printing his poems. I see it as a thickish book on fine paper, with a red cover and gold lettering: THE COLLECTED POEMS OF ROSCOE LYNX."

"A *blue* cover," said M. Lucius.

"No, a *red* cover," said Lafayette. "I've suggested this to him at least six times. He won't budge. It's enough to drive a person crazy!"

"I think he's just shy about putting himself before the public," M. Lucius said. "He does have a retiring nature. He likes to see other people get credit for doing things." He sighed and set down his teacup. "It would be a beautiful book!"

"So how can we convince him?"

M. Lucius pondered a moment. "Miss Proudie has seen more of his poetry than anyone else. Maybe she could talk him into it. Or else, she might have some idea how it might be done."

"I'll speak to her," said Lafayette. "Do you plan to be at the Old Hex later?"

"Not tonight," said M. Lucius. "I've got some reading I want to do."

"Then I'll come by tomorrow and let you know what Miss Proudie thinks. Thanks for the book on courageous editors." And with that he left.

On his way back to Grover, Lafayette Lizard stopped at Fairblossom Farm. In the garden behind the large white house, Miss Proudie was painting her potting shed. "It's needed it for a long time," she explained, brush in hand, while he seated himself in a lawn chair and propped his feet on the edge of a small wheelbarrow. "I figured now was the time to do it, while the smokestack is being repaired."

"Have you talked to Rebecca Raccoon today?" he asked her.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Then you've heard the news," he said despondently.

"About Mr. Snade coming to see Sheriff Badger? Yes, she told me at the *Gazette* office just before she went home for the day."

"I seem to be the last one to get the news around here," said Lafayette.

"I wonder," Miss Proudie said thoughtfully, "if it's true that the Grover factory is so important to the worldwide operations of the Sudge-Buddle Company. Or if that's just something the Company told Mr. Snade to make him work harder."

"Or something that Mr. Snade told the Sheriff to make *him* work harder," said Lafayette.

"One would like to think it's true," she said, beginning to paint the window-frame.

"On another matter," he said, "I was talking to M. Lucius this afternoon about getting Roscoe to publish his poems. We've tried and tried, but we can't get Roscoe to think it would be a good idea—even though the *Gazette* press would make them into a handsome book. Do you have any suggestions?"

Miss Proudie painted thoughtfully for a moment before answering. "Roscoe hasn't told *me* why he doesn't want to publish his poems. I suspect it's because he doesn't think they're as good as they really are."

"How can we *show* him how good they are?" asked Lafayette.

"Well, I guess by publishing some of them and letting him see how people respond. But we can't publish them without his permission. It wouldn't be fair to him. He does have a right to keep them private if he chooses."

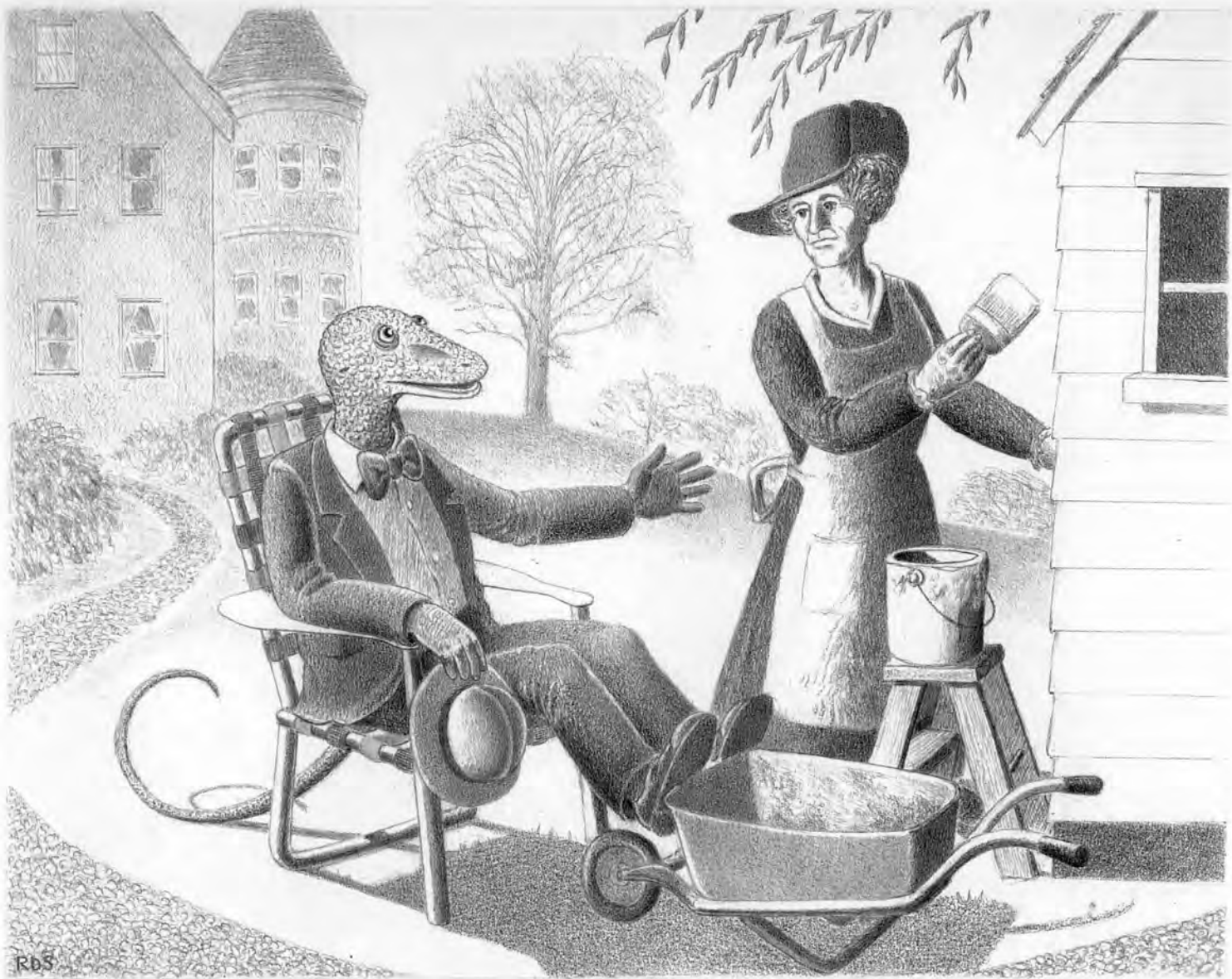
"That's true," said Lafayette glumly.

"I have an idea," she said. "Why don't you start running a poetry feature in the *Gazette*? Invite a lot of people to send poems in for publication. Then ask readers to write letters to the *Gazette* saying what they think of them."

"That has possibilities," Lafayette said thoughtfully. "But how do we get *Roscoe's* poems into the paper?"

"Come with me," said Miss Proudie. She placed her brush on the edge of the paint bucket and led him into the house by the back door. In her parlor at the front of the house was a small writing-desk; in one of its drawers was a brown envelope.

"Roscoe's given me copies of several poems," she said, taking several sheets of



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paper from the envelope. "Not many. Usually he just reads them to me. But these are ones I asked to have copies of. They're very fine. Now, you'll notice he didn't sign his name to any of them. What if one of these appeared in the *Gazette* poetry feature signed 'ANONYMOUS', along with others written by other people?"

"But 'ANONYMOUS' means that no one knows who the author is," said Lafayette, "—or else that the author doesn't want to be named."

"That's true," said Miss Proudie. "If I hadn't told you that Roscoe wrote them, you wouldn't know it, would you?"

"No," said Lafayette. Then, after a pause: "But won't Roscoe be upset when he sees his poems in the newspaper labeled 'ANONYMOUS'? I would be."

"That's because you like seeing your name in print," said Miss Proudie. "Also, you enjoy getting credit for things. Oh, I agree: there's a possibility that Roscoe might be upset. That's a risk I'm willing to take. But from what I know of him, I'd bet that if people wrote in to say they like his poems—even under the name 'ANONYMOUS'—Roscoe won't care if he doesn't get credit at first. And besides, he can announce at any time that he's the author—if he wants to. If he doesn't want to, no one will ever know."

She handed Lafayette the brown envelope. "Now let's go back to the shed so I can finish my painting. We can make further plans there."

Chapter 22

LAFAYETTE LIZARD worked late that night preparing the next issue of the *Grover Gazette*. He replaced the editorial he had been planning to print with a new one announcing a regular poetry feature. In his plainest and simplest English, he urged poets to send in their poems for possible publication, and encouraged other readers to write letters giving their reactions to the poems published.

Within three days after the paper appeared, Peabody the Postman was noticing a large increase in the amount of mail he delivered to the *Gazette* office. "You're either gettin' awful popular," he told Lafayette Lizard, "or awful unpopular. They can't *all* be poems!"

"They're all poems, Peabody," Lafayette replied, watching glassy-eyed as the fresh envelopes spilled onto his desk from the mailbag.

"Well, that's amazing," said Peabody. "Who'd've thought there were so many poets around?" Then, with a shy grin, he added: "I even turned one in myself. Maybe you've seen it already. It's called 'On Weary Feet'. I never wrote one before, but I had it in me, and it wanted out, and I said to myself, why not go ahead and turn it in?"

"Why not," said Lafayette with a resigned sigh.

When Miss Proudie Fairblossom and M. Lucius Ferret met with Lafayette and Rebecca Raccoon to choose which poems would appear in the *Gazette*, they too were amazed at the number that had come in. "Good gracious!" cried Miss Proudie, when she saw the stacks of envelopes heaped on the pressroom table. "We can't possibly publish all of those!"

"I'm not sure we can even get them all read," said Rebecca Raccoon. "I counted 'em as they came in. There's a hundred and six."

They worked far into the night, nibbling sandwiches and drinking down two pots of coffee. At three minutes after midnight, M. Lucius Ferret pushed aside his last stack of papers, leaned back in his chair, and rubbed his eyes. "Well," he said, "there are some here that are very good."

"And some that are pretty awful," said Miss Proudie.

"And a great many that are somewhere in between," said Rebecca Raccoon.

"But we've got to decide which ones get printed," said Lafayette. "So let's begin." They all turned to the pile which contained the best of what they'd found.

The first one was by Grandfather Fieldmouse, of all people. They'd never known that *he* wrote poetry. It was called "Thoughts on Dunking" and went like this:



Some people dunk doughnuts in coffee or soup,
 Some people dunk pretzels in tea,
 And some dunk their cookies in orange juice or milk
 (A practice with which I agree).

Some people dunk crackers in water or wine,
 Some people dunk biscuits in beer,
 And some dunk their sandwiches (most of the time)
 In cold lemonade (so I hear).

Now dunking, though common, remains quite an art;
 There are things to remember and take to your heart—
 I'll list them to help you avoid the mistakes,
 For an artist is known by the pains that he takes.

Hold the doughnut, pretzel, sandwich tight.
 Don't drop it in your coffee, milk, or beer.
 It's very sad to watch it sink from sight,
 And know that it's beyond your reach, but near.

The dunking done, don't waste a second's time,
 But get that cookie, cracker, biscuit in!
 And whether soup, or lemonade, or wine,
 Be careful not to dribble on your chin!

"In that poem," said Miss Proudie, "I sense the fruits of bitter experience!"

"But at least he's perfected the technique," said M. Lucius. "He's an expert dunker. When *I* try to dunk, even after all these years, I always lose half my doughnut or manage to stain the tablecloth."

They all agreed that it should be printed. The next one they looked at had been written by Anne Peacham, who lived downriver in Rawlinsville. It was a sonnet called "A Favor to my Friends":

My friends have told me many times the ways
 That I should change my life to meet their needs;
 And, like a mirror, I have spent my days
 Reflecting their desires with all my deeds.
 But somehow this has ceased to satisfy:
 They're not content with what I say and do,
 And I no longer feel that I can try
 To act a part I cannot feel is true.
 So, rather than a mirror, let me be
 A person, living true to my desires;
 And, freely giving what I can of me,
 Ignite in all of us our sleeping fires.
 This is the way that I can be a friend;
 These are the fires that I desire to tend.

"I like that one," said Lafayette. "It's in plain simple English and makes a lot of sense."

"I think I'd like to *meet* Anne Peacham," said Miss Proudie. They voted to print it.

The next poem was by Peabody the Postman, and it caused them problems.

On Weary Feet

A postman's life is full of care,
 And yet it's happy too—
 To walk about in the open air
 The entire village through.
 But weary get my postman's feet
 Before the day is o'er,
 From walking up and down the street
 And going door to door
 (On weary feet).

And yet I bring such happiness
 To friends who wait for me—
 I bring them letters, cards, and packages
 Which they are glad to see.
 And so, although my feet get tired,
 I start my rounds each morn
 Knowing that whatever I bring's desired,
 And glad that I was born
 (On weary feet).

My friends are glad to see me come,
 And always ope the door—
 I feel as useful as a Thumb,
 Although my feet are sore.
 It's good to have joy in my work;
 I hope it never stops—
 You can be sure I'll never shirk,
 Though my worn shoes go flop
 (On weary feet).

When Miss Proudie had finished reading it aloud, they all sat uncomfortably in embarrassed silence and just looked at each other. Rebecca Raccoon was the first to speak. "I think I'll put on a fresh pot of coffee." And she escaped to the sink.

"Well," said Lafayette slowly, "it's an *honest* poem. No question about that."

"But—uh—it's not really very good, is it?" M. Lucius said hesitantly. "As a poem, I mean."

"It certainly doesn't compare very well with some of the others we've seen," Miss Proudie said cautiously.

"It was in the pile of the very best we got," said Lafayette. "Who put it in?"

"I did," said Rebecca Raccoon. "It was in my stack, and I didn't want to deal with it all by myself. I thought it ought to be a group decision."

They stared at the poem lying on the table. Across the bottom of the sheet, Peabody—with elegant lettering—had carefully penned his name in bold black ink. "He told me that he'd turned one in," said Lafayette. "He said he'd never written a poem before, and I think he's quite proud of it as a first effort."

M. Lucius fidgeted uncomfortably. "But is it good enough to print?" he asked. "That's what we've got to decide."

"The ideas in it are fine," said Miss Proudie. "But as a poem expressing those ideas, it's no better than some of those we've already decided *not* to print. We have others that are much better."

"Then I vote we not print it," said Lafayette. He looked around the table, and one by one they nodded their agreement in the decision. M. Lucius looked very unhappy; he quickly got up to get himself another sandwich. Lafayette set Peabody's poem aside, and went on to the next in the pile. It was by Millicent Muskrat, who lived in The Marsh, and was called "Nonsense Rhyme":

Riddle-cum-raddle-cum-ree!

The Wren is in the tree.

Don't tell me that's wrong—

She's singing a song:

Riddle-cum-raddle-cum-ree!

Raddle-cum-roddle-cum-roe!

The Sloth is very slow.

Don't tell me that's silly—

He finds the night chilly:

Raddle-cum-roddle-cum-roe!

Roddle-cum-ruddle-cum-roo!

The Tapir's in the slough.

Don't tell me that's funny—

They swim when it's sunny:

Roddle-cum-ruddle-cum-roo!

Riddle-cum-raddle-cum-

roddle-cum-ruddle-cum-

Ree-roe-roo!

"That's a strange one," said M. Lucius Ferret.

"But kind of nice," said Lafayette, "in its own peculiar way."

"Let's print it," said Miss Proudie.

"Wait a minute," said Rebecca Raccoon, with a slight frown. "I like the poem, too. Very much. It's fun, and smoothly handled, and all of that. But I don't feel right about voting to print it after we just turned Peabody's down."

"Why is that, Rebecca?" Miss Proudie asked.

Frowning a little, Rebecca said, "Well, the way I see it, Peabody was trying to show his feelings about something important to him. It wasn't what he said that bothered us, but the way he said it." She paused a moment, shaping her thoughts. "'Nonsense Rhyme' is a different kind of poem: it's a *game*, really—and nicely done—but not much more than that. Now, if we publish it, and throw out Peabody's, aren't we saying that 'Nonsense Rhyme' is a better poem? That doesn't seem right somehow."

They sat silent, looking at her.

M. Lucius began polishing his spectacles. "I think you're right, Rebecca. Look, we're amazed at the way people responded. We never dreamed so many folks would send us poems—"

"They seem excited by the possibility of being published," said Miss Proudie.

"That's right," said M. Lucius. "And it's not as though we're running a contest for prizes. We urged those people to send us poems. I guess I'm wondering what the poetry feature should be trying to *do*—besides giving us a way to publish Roscoe's poems, of course." He leaned forward and put on his spectacles. "Maybe it should serve to spotlight whatever talent there is, and be an encouragement to everybody!"

"I like that!" said Rebecca.

"But we can't print every poem that comes in!" cried Lafayette. "We don't have enough space!"

"No," said M. Lucius, "and we shouldn't. But maybe the *Gazette* should give everyone a chance to publish the best work they can do. Poems are as different as the people who write 'em—"

"And," said Rebecca, "Peabody's has a lot that's very good."

"We've all agreed on that," said Miss Proudie.

"Very well," said Lafayette, "let's print both Peabody's poem and Millicent Muskrat's. What you've both said makes a lot of sense."

They agreed to print both poems, and went on to the next in the pile. It was entitled "Snowscene" and was signed in tiny letters by Oliphant Owl.

starlight sparkles

fresh white snow

spun sugarcystals

drifts deepswirl

stiff whipped eggwhites

lemonpie meringue

trees with gumdrop hats

"I don't understand it," said Lafayette. "I can't figure out what goes with what. And all that stuff about lemon pie and gumdrops!"

"He could have called it 'Nature's Candy Shop,'" said Rebecca. "A snowscene good enough to eat!"

"I think Oliphant was just trying to paint a picture with words," said Miss Proudie. "I'm not sure that I'd describe a snowscene that way, but I think I see what he's trying to do."

"The poem *sounds* good," said M. Lucius. They read it through again, argued it back and forth a bit, and voted three to one to print it.

"And here," said Miss Proudie, spreading out the poems remaining in the pile, "are nine by 'Anonymous'—that is, nine by Roscoe Lynx."

They looked them over carefully. It was a difficult choice, for they each had favorites in the batch. However, after much discussion, they agreed to print "We Race the Sun":

I race my shadow on the ice
and find he matches every move;
on smooth steel runners as we glide
we leave behind a single track:

Starbursts and figure-eights!

We've run a thousand races, he and I,
which neither of us won.
Too evenly matched,
we've raced our friends,
we've raced the sun.

We've led the moon on a silver thread
and netted stars in loops of line,
turned our backs upon the shore,
and carved new trails with streaks of shine.

We map our journeys as we go,
leaving our marks on the smooth white sheet,
dark specks gliding twixt ice and sky,
mirror-image twins who can't compete.

Creatures of light, we race the sun—
its bright glare with us
at every turn:
with a glitter in the morning,
white shine at noon,
and red flame at evening,
we've watched ice burn.

Their long job over, they all sat back and relaxed.

"It's a good group of poems," said Rebecca. "Lots of variety."

"I had no idea the task would be so difficult," Miss Proudie said. "I'm pleased with the poems we chose—though I'd still prefer Roscoe's 'Marigold Harp' over the one we're printing."

"We'll print 'Marigold Harp' in the *second* feature," said Lafayette, getting up to unplug the coffeepot. "Let's call it quits for tonight. I'm not used to being up so late. Are you aware that it's three in the morning?"

The poetry feature was a great success. As soon as it appeared, letters from enthusiastic readers began pouring into the *Gazette* office, and the stream continued for a full week. "It's about time we had something like this," one person wrote from Rawlinsville. "Keep the poems coming! We need 'em." Eighteen letters singled out "Thoughts on Dunking" as their favorite poem. When he heard this, Grandfather Fieldmouse fairly beamed with pleasure; and afterwards he began going about with a pencil tucked behind his ear. He also bought a small advertisement in the *Gazette* announcing that he'd be happy to give dunking lessons, free of charge, to anyone who might be interested.

Oliphant was surprised to see his "Snowscene" published. He was even more surprised when six readers said they liked it best. "I just wrote down what I felt," he said to Arabella Raccoon. "And now," she smiled, "you're a published poet!" Oliphant chuckled: "Well, *published* at least." One letter grumbled about the gumdrop hats: "A silly line. Snow-covered trees are *tents!*" When he read this, Oliphant shrugged—"Well, maybe so. But mine were wearing hats. I know a gumdrop when I see one."

Peabody was amazed to see his poem among the others. Sitting with Roscoe Lynx at the Old Hex Inn with the newspaper spread before him, he kept shaking his head in disbelief. "Who'd have thought it?" he whispered. "Me—a published poet!" Roscoe nodded gravely: "I very much like your poem, Peabody. It says a lot." "Thanks," said Peabody. "But you know, Roscoe, as I read all these others on the page, mine seems to have a few rough spots in it, here and there. I think I'll have to do some more work on it—and smooth it up a bit."

If Oliphant was surprised to see his poem in print, and Peabody amazed, Roscoe was dumfounded to see "We Race the Sun." He had eagerly opened the *Gazette* to the poetry feature, then had almost fallen out of his chair when he found it in the center of the page. That night, completely baffled, he had sat at the desk in his bedroom staring into the candle flame as though it might hold the answers to his questions. How had the *Gazette* gotten a copy of it to print? Why was the authorship "ANONYMOUS"? Who had even known of the poem's existence? He had written it several years ago, and he didn't recall having shown it to anyone. Nor did he remember giving anyone a copy. Deeply puzzled, he kept silent and waited anxiously for the next issue of the *Gazette*.

The second poetry feature printed a new batch of poems (including the anonymous "Marigold Harp") and a selection of readers' letters responding to the first feature. Many letters praised "We Race the Sun"; Lafayette printed six of these and saved the rest to give to Roscoe at a future time. He also wrote his own editorial comment: "We're happy that our readers enjoy the poetry feature. So far we've received over two hundred poems from our subscribers. We're sorry that we simply don't have space to print them all; but keep them coming, and we'll print as many as we can of the very best we get. And do keep sending letters telling us—and the poets—what you think."

When Roscoe, with trembling hands, opened his *Gazette*, he was shocked to see "Marigold Harp"—it, too, signed "ANONYMOUS." He sat down heavily at his desk and began tugging thoughtfully at his ear. This time he knew where the poem had come from. He had made one copy and given it to Miss Proudie Fairblossom at her request.

"But why is Miss Proudie leaking my poems to the *Gazette*?" he muttered. "And why is the authorship anonymous?" He noticed the letters at the bottom of the poetry page and quickly read what people had said about "We Race the Sun." Then he re-read them, more slowly. "They liked it," he said. "They really did." He stood up and paced rapidly about the room, went to the window, returned to his chair. But what was Miss Proudie up to? He blew out the candle and climbed into bed. In the morning he would call on her and find out.

He arrived at her house while the dew still sparkled on the grass. Miss Proudie, always early to rise, was just sitting down to breakfast in the sunny kitchen when he knocked at the back door.

"Why, good morning, Roscoe," she greeted him. "Come in. You're up and about early. Would you like a cup of coffee? Or some hot buttered toast with orange marmalade?"

"Some coffee would be fine," he said, seating himself at the table.

She poured him a cup and began buttering her toast. Roscoe got right to the point: "The *Gazette* has published two of my poems. Did you have anything to do with it?"

She spread the butter with quick, sure strokes. "Yes, I did," she answered. "I gave both of them to Lafayette."

"May I ask why you did it?"

She took a deep breath and set down the butterknife. Her hand was trembling slightly. "I was afraid if I asked your permission, you'd say no." She looked him straight in the eye. "And I knew you wouldn't send them in yourself. But I thought they should be submitted."

"I was surprised to see them in the *Gazette*," said Roscoe quietly. "Or maybe 'shocked' is a better word for it."

She nodded. "I figured you would be. The copies weren't signed, so Lafayette published them as anonymous. I thought that would be best—for if you didn't

wish to claim them, you wouldn't have to. On the other hand, if you *did* want people to know, you could always come forth and say you wrote them."

"That was thoughtful of you," Roscoe said drily.

Her voice became very serious. "I hope you don't feel I betrayed your confidence by letting them be published."

"When I gave you the copies I never thought you'd print them," Roscoe replied.

"But you never told me that no one else was to see them. I *did* conceal your name. If you feel I betrayed your trust, I'm truly sorry. But, Roscoe—" and here she set down her coffee—"I felt people *ought* to have the chance to see those poems. Sending them in seemed the best way."

She watched him anxiously as he sat silent, his elbows on the table, staring out the window. "And the readers *did* say they liked 'We Race the Sun,'" she went on quickly. "That makes me very happy." She paused as he turned and slowly helped himself to a piece of buttered toast. "Are you angry with me, Roscoe?"

"No, not angry," he said.

"Doesn't it please you that people liked your poem?"

"I suppose it does," he said cautiously, nibbling the toast. "I had no idea that anyone else would find it enjoyable." He nodded. "Yes, of course it does."

"I hoped you'd feel that," said Miss Proudie with a relieved smile.

"How many more did you give Lafayette? You had several, I recall."

"He has seven more."

"Which ones?"

"'Hockey,' 'By Lake Superior's Northern Shore,' 'A Song of Seed and Soil,' 'Running the Show,'—and—I don't recall the names of the others."

"Does he plan to print 'em?"

"Yes, one in each issue of the *Gazette*."

"As anonymous?"

"Yes. None of them are signed."

Roscoe stared out the window for a very long time. "I want 'em back," he said.

Miss Proudie sighed, closed her eyes, and nodded. "I'll have him return them to me at once."

"I've done some hard thinking about it," Roscoe continued. "If folks would truly enjoy my poems, then I'm just being selfish keepin' 'em in a drawer. But: *I* should be the one who sends 'em in to the *Gazette*. Not you. I'll throw 'em into the pot and let 'em take their chances with everybody else's poems. And they *won't* be anonymous. I'll sign my name to 'em."

Miss Proudie burst into a smile and brought her hands together with a clap. "Oh, Roscoe," she cried, "that's wonderful! Lafayette will be so happy!"

"I'll only send in a few, though," Roscoe said gruffly. "The ones that *I* like best."

They were interrupted by an urgent knocking on the back door. It was Elizabeth H., rosy-cheeked and out of breath. "My goodness!" Miss Proudie said. "You look excited. What's up?" She sat her down at the table and offered her toast and coffee.



"I've got some news," said Elizabeth H. "Ben was in Higgins' Coffee Shop this morning, and a strange little man was there wearing dark glasses. He said his name was Amos Tinker. He's renting the Moffitt House on Main Street to open a gift shop—candles and bric-a-brac and greeting cards." She paused to catch her breath. "Ben didn't like his looks."

"Nobody new has moved to Grover in the last two years," said Roscoe. "And for good reason," he added sourly.

"It's odd that he'd want to open a gift shop," said Miss Proudie. "We already have two of them—and greeting cards are sold at the *Gazette* office. Doesn't this Mr. Tinker know about the Sudge-Buddle factory and what it's doing to the town?"

"When Mayor Higgins tried to warn him about it," Elizabeth H. replied, "he said he'd heard about it already and wasn't worried."

"That's *very* odd," said Roscoe.

"Ben thinks we ought to be on guard when Mr. Tinker's around," she continued. "He might be another Sudge-Buddle investigator."

"If he is," said Roscoe, "he's acting more like a *spy* to be opening a gift shop."

"There's more yet," said Elizabeth H., helping herself to some toast and marmalade. "The Sudge-Buddle Company has started patrolling the smokestack with a helicopter. And all night long they'll have spotlights trained on the smokestack, all the way to the top."

"I have something, too," said Miss Proudie. "Yesterday Sheriff Badger told me that when the factory starts up again, they'll be working doubletime to make up for the delays they've had this year."

"I heard that, too," said Elizabeth H. "But did you know they're putting in a second furnace?"

"Two furnaces!" cried Roscoe. "Does that mean even more pollution?"

"That's what Ben thinks," said Elizabeth H. "And Fergus too."

"What are we going to *do*?" Miss Proudie cried.

"One thing's clear," said Roscoe. "We'd better start working doubletime ourselves."

Chapter 23

MR. TINKER quickly made himself known to everyone on Main Street. He was a plump doughy little man who always wore a black business suit and dark sunglasses—even at night. “Very spooky,” Randy Possum reported to his Aunt Priscilla: “When you talk to him, you can’t see his eyes. Just your own face looking back at you in those shiny black lenses.”

Mr. Tinker was a jolly, booming, friendly fellow who liked to be with other people. “Got to meet my new neighbors!” he would say, as he approached with his plump hand extended. He spent a lot of time in Higgins’ Coffee Shop chatting with whoever came in. He dropped in at the *Gazette* office and talked to Lafayette Lizard about the cost of running advertisements in the newspaper. He spent one whole morning walking along with Peabody the Postman as he delivered mail to homes in Grover (it was a good way, he said, to learn something about the town and about the folks who would be his customers when he opened the gift shop). On the evening of his second day in town, he appeared at the Old Hex Inn, where a group was talking about the coming re-activation of the Sudge-Buddle factory.

Now Groverpeople had always been friendly to newcomers. And though they had some doubts about Mr. Tinker’s reasons for coming to Grover, they didn’t want to judge him unfairly on the basis of suspicion alone. So, when he came into the Old Hex, the group already there stopped talking about the factory and invited him to sit with them at a large table.

Mr. Tinker bought a mug of honey brew and joined them. Randy Possum and Simon Skunk made room for his chair at the table, and Ambrose Fieldmouse offered him a dish of pretzels. Cassandra Scissortail had just been on the point of going upstairs to bed when he arrived. Her curiosity decided her to stay.

“I must say, Grover is a very pleasant town,” Mr. Tinker remarked by way of opening.

“We’d like to think so,” said Arabella Raccoon.

“We’ve tried to keep it that way,” said Ambrose Fieldmouse. “Folks here have been very concerned about their houses and gardens.”

“I can understand that,” said Mr. Tinker, his dark glasses gleaming. “A very commendable attitude.”

Cassandra Scissortail pegged him as a man who liked to use big words. “I hear you’re going to open a gift shop,” she said.

“Yes, that’s right,” Mr. Tinker smiled, turning his dark glasses toward her. “I’m renting the Moffitt House; the shop will be on the lower floor, and I’ll live upstairs. My motto will be, ‘Thinkers Try Tinker’s.’”

“When will you be open for business?” Mayor Higgins asked.

"Well, I'm not sure," said Mr. Tinker with a smile. "My stock isn't here yet. And when it comes, I'll have to sort it out and get it priced and set up for display. Right now I'm just getting to know the town and waiting for things to arrive. I don't even have any furniture yet—except for a card table and a cot for sleeping." He laughed, took a drink of brew, and turned to Simon Skunk. "I understand you folks have been having some trouble with that factory across from the school. Is that right?"

"Yes, we have," said Simon. "It's killed the river, and ruined the crops, and made our lives miserable. Right now there isn't any smoke because they're repairing the smokestack. But you'll see what I mean when they get it going again."

"Dear, dear," said Mr. Tinker. "Something's wrong with the smokestack?"

Choosing his words carefully, Simon answered, "Well, about a month ago, it got clogged up."

"An accident?" said Mr. Tinker.

Randy Possum laughed. "They think there's concrete at the bottom of the stack! But it's really Ja—" He stopped abruptly as Arabella gave his leg a swift kick under the table.

"It's really jammed up," Simon finished for him. "But the Company folks don't talk to us, so we don't know whether they think it's an accident or not."

Mr. Tinker nodded and turned his dark glasses toward Randy Possum. "You say they think there's concrete in the bottom of the smokestack. Isn't that rather odd? How would it have gotten there?"

Randy glanced quickly at Arabella, shifted in his chair so that his legs were out of kicking range, and said carefully, "As Simon says, they don't tell us anything. So we don't know how the Sudge-Buddles explain it. But it's nice not to have the smoke."

"We'd almost forgotten what it was like to breathe clean air," said Elizabeth H. pointedly.

Cassandra Scissortail asked, "What kinds of gifts do you plan to sell in your shop?"

"Oh, an extensive line," Mr. Tinker replied. "Candles, teacups, ornamental toothpicks, wicker baskets, artificial flowers, candy. The usual sorts of things." He smiled at her and turned back to Randy Possum, opening his mouth to speak.

But Cassandra wasn't finished with him. "Will you be selling those little toy birds that bob up and down and dip their beaks in water?" she asked.

He glanced briefly at her. "Oh, yes, certainly. To be sure. A very popular item. I'll have lots of those."

"I'm sorry to hear it!" Cassandra said icily, drawing herself up. "They're an insult to all birds everywhere!"

Mr. Tinker's face went blank, and he stared at her in confusion. It almost seemed that his dark glasses blinked. "They're a very popular item," he repeated in bewilderment.

"Then we're living in a degenerate age!" Cassandra snapped. "Whoever invented those little—no, I can't call 'em birds!—those—those *atrocities* should

be locked in a rocket and sent to the moon! I don't understand why people can't just leave us birds alone! The stupid inventors are always picking on us! Tinkering and meddling, trying to make simulations of the real thing! Why, right here in Grover we have one person—"

Simon Skunk coughed violently and knocked over his mug of honey brew. The liquid splashed into a large puddle which spread over the tabletop. There was a hasty scramble to avoid the puddle, a flurry of movement, leaping up and a shifting of chairs.

Roscoe Lynx arrived with a cloth to wipe up the mess, and Simon stood apologizing to everyone. When the tabletop was clean and everyone had settled down, Arabella Raccoon resumed the conversation by asking Mr. Tinker: "Will you be selling party napkins in your gift shop? And greeting cards?"

Mr. Tinker hesitated, not knowing what reaction to expect from her. "Yes," he said cautiously. "That's all right, isn't it?"

"Oh, that's fine!" Arabella said. "I just love to look at napkins and greeting cards!"

Mr. Tinker was relieved. "I hope you like to *buy* them, too," he said with a little chuckle. Then, turning back to Randy Possum, he said, "I understand the people of Grover have entered a lawsuit against the owners of the factory. Is that true? How's it going?"

Still watching Arabella closely, Randy answered, "It's true there's a lawsuit. I guess it's going all right."

"The lawyers don't tell us much about it," said Mayor Higgins.

"So we don't know how it's going," added Elizabeth H. "They said it would take a long time."

At this point, Matthew Muddie came down the stairs. He went straight to the serving counter; and while Roscoe Lynx poured him a mug of honey brew, he whispered, "Is that chap in dark glasses the gift shop man in the Moffitt House?" Roscoe nodded and whispered back: "Be careful what you say. We're not sure he isn't a Sudge-Buddle spy."

"Ah," said Matthew Muddie with a wink. He joined the group at the table, holding out his hand to the newcomer, who rose and shook it with great ceremony. "Hello. I'm Matthew Muddie. I teach school in Grover."

"Amos Tinker," said the man in dark glasses. "Very pleased to meet you. I must say, you've got a fine schoolhouse to teach in!"

"We had to put up a fence," said Matthew. "To protect the children from the trucks that go in and out the factory gates."

"I've just been hearing about the factory," said Mr. Tinker. "It sounds as though it's caused the town a lot of grief. I hear about smoke, and ruined crops, and a lawsuit against the owners."

"All true," said Matthew. "The smoke is so bad that my students cough all winter long."

"That's terrible!" said Mr. Tinker, clicking his tongue and shaking his head. "But I understand the smokestack isn't working now."

"That's true, too," said Matthew Muddie, drinking deep of his honey brew.



"And *this* fellow," said Mr. Tinker, indicating Randy Possum, "says that the factory people think there's concrete in the bottom of the stack. That sounds very strange to me. How do you suppose it could have gotten there?"

"If I had to guess," Matthew Muddie replied, "I'd say it was *carelessness*. I don't know much about smokestacks, but I'll bet that if the Company folks had kept their eyes and ears open, and shown a little concern for what they were about, it wouldn't have happened."

With a whisk and a flurry, Summerfield Scissortail swooped downstairs and came to the table. "My dear," he said to Cassandra with a little yawn, "are you planning to stay up all night? It's very late."

"Are the children asleep?" she asked.

"Every one of them," he answered, "and I'm just about there myself."

"I'll be coming up soon," she said. "But right now we're having an interesting talk with Mr. Tinker, the man who'll be opening the gift shop on Main Street."

Mr. Tinker nodded to Summerfield. "I've not had the pleasure of your acquaintance. I've very much enjoyed meeting your charming wife."

"We live here in the Old Hex Inn," Summerfield said.

"It's an excellent place to live, I'm sure!" said Mr. Tinker with a smile, loudly enough for Roscoe Lynx to hear him as he tidied tables nearby.

"Well, it has its good points," said Summerfield sleepily. "The food's good." Summerfield, too, found it spooky to see his own face staring back at him from Mr. Tinker's glasses.

Cassandra leaned close to her husband and said sharply, "He's going to sell those horrible toy birds in his shop that bob their heads up and down and dip their beaks in water!"

Summerfield looked at the ceiling. "Some people *do* buy them," he said.

"He says they're a very popular item!" Cassandra snapped, her voice stern with outrage and indignation. Mr. Tinker choked on his honey brew.

"Well, they *are* clever," said her husband, smiling nervously at Mr. Tinker.

"Clever!" she cried. "How can you say such a thing? They're an insult to all birds everywhere!"

"Now, now, my dear," said Summerfield, "some people *like* them. Even some of the *birds* we know. Why, even Scooper Singebottom has one!"

"I'm aware of that," Cassandra said darkly.

Mr. Tinker raised his hand in a gesture of peacemaking. "If you find them offensive, Mrs. Scissortail, I'll be happy not to stock them in my shop."

Her face brightened. "Really? That would be very helpful."

"No trouble at all," said Mr. Tinker. "I'll just cancel my order for them."

"Come on to bed, Cassandra," Summerfield whispered, "while he still has something left to sell in his shop."

Beaming, she got up from the table. "I can tell you're a good businessman, Mr. Tinker. I'll certainly recommend your shop to my friends."

Mr. Tinker rose and bowed to her. "Just remember: Thinkers Try Tinker's."

The Swallows went upstairs, and Mr. Tinker immediately turned back to Randy Possum. "I understand that the factory has been plagued with bad luck,"

he said. "On Hallowe'en, for example, the waste pipes to the river were plugged. Do you suppose it was just a Hallowe'en prank? Or was it, perhaps, part of a campaign to destroy the factory?"

Randy Possum thought for a moment. "At the time there was talk that some of the factory workers might have done it."

"That's very interesting," said Mr. Tinker. "But what do you think?"

Randy answered, "If the factory workers did it, they certainly went to a lot of trouble, if it was just a prank." While Mr. Tinker was puzzling through Randy's answer, Arabella asked: "What do you think, Mr. Tinker?"

"Oh, I wouldn't pretend to know what might have happened," he replied, turning his dark glasses toward her. "These are just rumors I've picked up since coming to town. The factory seems to be on everybody's mind much of the time."

"When the smokestack's repaired, you'll see why," said Arabella.

"Why did you decide to open your gift shop in Grover?" Simon Skunk asked.

The dark glasses swiveled toward Simon. "I'd heard that Grover was a fine little town—right on the highway to the city—with a great many very friendly people. And I'm happy to say I've seen nothing yet to make me think I was misled." Mr. Tinker paused, frowning, and sniffed the air. He looked about searchingly, and then said with embarrassment: "What *is* that peculiar odor? I've been smelling it for quite awhile, but it's getting stronger."

They had all been smelling it for quite awhile. It was impossible to ignore. But, knowing quite well where it was coming from, they'd thought it best not to mention it. Now, though, in response to Mr. Tinker's question, they all dutifully sniffed the air—more for Mr. Tinker's benefit than for their own. For the odor was such that *no* benefit came from smelling it. It was an odor that defied classification. (Except "bad": they could all agree on that.) It brought to mind decaying tree stumps, old sour dishrags, burnt matches, and garbage rotting under the moon. And it was getting stronger every minute.

Holding his nose, Mr. Tinker lurched out of his chair. "It's just awful!" he cried. "Mr. Lynx, do you know what it is?"

"Can't say that I do," said Roscoe, wiping down the counter. "Strange smells seem to be the rule around here. They come and go. But I haven't smelled that one before."

"It's really no worse than some of the others we've had," said Simon Skunk.

"Better than some," said Mayor Higgins.

"You get used to 'em," Elizabeth H. said to Mr. Tinker.

"—if you smell 'em long enough," added Ambrose Fieldmouse.

"—and if you don't let 'em get on your nerves," said Matthew Muddie, rising to get more honey brew.

Mr. Tinker held his handkerchief against his nose. "I don't think I could ever get used to that odor!" he cried in a muffled voice. "I've got to have fresh air! Goodbye! It was nice talking to you." And he hurried to the door, running against tables and chairs in his haste. When he was gone, they all looked at each other.

"This is one of the most interesting stinks we've had," Ambrose observed.

"And one of the worst," said Randy Possum. "What do you suppose Fergus is making up there?"

Roscoe Lynx was putting in his nose plugs which he kept in a little box under the counter. "I don't know for sure," he said, "but I think it's the new plant food he's been working on for his radish-and-watermelon experiment. He told me this afternoon that he'd be working on the fourth formula tonight." Roscoe pointed to his potted geraniums and said mournfully, "He tried the third formula on one of my prize plants. The bloom fell off—though the rest of the plant seems to be getting stronger every day. The formula wasn't supposed to knock the blossom off. Fergus was terribly disappointed. He said, 'There won't be any raddermelishes if the blooms fall off.' I was sorry too."

"Evening, folks!" It was Peabody the Postman, out of uniform and somewhat out of breath. "What did you do to Mr. Tinker? As I was coming up the path, he stumbled out the front door and almost knocked me down in his hurry to get away." Then Peabody caught the odor. "Oh, that's a weird one," he commented, pinching his nose.

"Mr. Tinker needed some fresh air," Simon said. "It was getting pretty thick in here."

Peabody got himself a mug of honey brew. "Mr. Tinker's a strange fellow," he said. "He went with me on my rounds today, and was always askin' questions: who lives there? what do they do for a livin'? what do *they* think about the factory? I thought it was kinda odd, so I didn't tell him much."

"Just now he was asking us a lot of questions about the factory," said Ambrose Fieldmouse. "And from the way he asked them, he seemed to know more than he was letting on."

"Yes, I had that feeling, too," said Mayor Higgins.

"I think he's a Sudge-Buddle spy," declared Matthew Muddie.

"He seemed to think *I* had all the answers," Randy Possum said ruefully.

"You *do*," said Arabella. "But you handled it pretty well. Sorry I had to kick you."

"Oh, that's all right," said Randy. "Anytime."

"I think he won Cassandra over," Elizabeth H. smiled, "with his promise to cancel the order for those bird-gadgets."

"Did you notice how he didn't want to talk about his gift shop?" Roscoe inquired. "He always got back to the factory."

"And as quick as he could," said Simon.

They heard a truck stop outside. A moment later, Farmer Ben came in, followed closely by Hilda Badger. Hilda went straight to Mayor Higgins. "Estella," she said gently, "Bascom's still at your house. He thinks that Thaddeus' pneumonia has gotten much worse. He wants you to know that he's calling an ambulance to send him to the hospital in the city."

Mayor Higgins leaped to her feet. "I *knew* I should have stayed at home! I could tell that Thaddeus was getting worse. But he insisted I get out of the house and come to this meeting to help with the planning." She fumbled in her purse for her car keys. "I'll be going along with him to the hospital—Arabella, would you

do me a favor and put a sign on the door of the coffeeshop in the morning to let folks know why it's not open?" "Of course," said Arabella, and Mayor Higgins was gone. A moment later they heard her car roar away in a scatter of gravel.

"Is Thaddeus that serious, then?" asked Elizabeth H. "I thought bedrest was making him better."

"No, he got much worse this afternoon," said Hilda Badger. "He never really got over that bad cold he had last December—just kept getting weaker and weaker. Bascom says it's because the smoke aggravated his asthma all winter." She took a seat at the table and said tiredly, "Roscoe, could you please make me a toasted cheese sandwich? Supper for us was pretty sketchy tonight."

"One toasted cheese sandwich coming up," said Roscoe, heading quickly for the kitchen.

Subdued, they sat thinking about Thaddeus Higgins. Hilda broke the silence by asking the group: "Well, what plans have you made?"

"No plans yet," said Simon Skunk. "We had some distractions along the way."

"What's that strange odor?" Hilda asked. "Is Fergus trying to gas everybody?"

"It's not as bad now as it was a few minutes ago," said Ambrose Fieldmouse. "We think it's Fergus' new plant food."

"Then I guess we should be thankful we're not Fergus' plants," said Farmer Ben.

Peabody tapped the tabletop to get their attention. "We'd better get on with the meeting and get some plans made about what to do next. They'll have the factory going again very soon."

"And they'll be working doubletime to make up for lost production," said Elizabeth H. "If only there were a way to stop them once and for all."

"Yes," said Peabody, "but how? If they were a ship we could sink 'em. But the factory isn't a ship."

"We've gone at them from the water and the air," said Simon Skunk. "But with their guards, we can't do either of those again."

"Then maybe we ought to go at 'em from the ground," said Ben Barker.

"Do you mean invade the factory?" asked Randy Possum. "They've got guards all over the place, day and night. Helicopter patrol. Searchlights. Alarm systems. We'd never get in."

"You make it sound hopeless," said Matthew Muddie.

"Remember, the guards are armed," said Randy. "To get in, we'd have to burrow underground like moles."

"Do we *have* to get in?" Simon asked. "Isn't there something we could do from the outside?"

Roscoe returned from the kitchen with Hilda Badger's sandwich and pulled up a chair to join the discussion.

"What about cutting off their water supply from Cherrystone Lake?" Ben Barker suggested.

"No," said Ambrose Fieldmouse, "they've kept the pumphouse guarded ever since Izzy planted the night-creeping arbutus. We couldn't get near it."

"But," said Randy, "the pipeline from the lake to the factory is long and unguarded all the way to the valley. And it's all aboveground, too, till it gets to the factory. If we could somehow stop that lakewater from getting to the factory, they'd have to shut down again."

"But we can't plug *that* pipe," said Arabella. "There's no opening, no way for us to get into it."

That stopped Randy—but not for long. "What if we cut the pipe?" he said brightly. "I'm sure Parker could do it with his cutting torch."

"And drain Cherrystone Lake into the meadows?" cried Simon. "Make another lake down in the valley? You can't be serious!"

"Well, no," said Randy, "we wouldn't just let it drain out. We'd plug it up like we did the waste pipes."

"With the water flowing?" smiled Ambrose Fieldmouse. "Besides, it wouldn't do us much good if we could. They'd just shut off the lakewater up at the pump-house, take out the plug, and replace the cut section of pipe. We'd only gain a week at the most."

"And then they'd start guarding the whole pipeline," said Arabella, "and we'd never get to do *that* again, either."

They fell silent, and Hilda Badger ate her sandwich. Elizabeth H. finally spoke: "What was it Randy said a minute ago? Something about burrowing underground like moles."

"To get into the factory," said Randy.

"Yes. Well, what if we burrowed underground," she said slowly, "not to get *into* the factory, but to get *under* it?"

"Under it?" they asked. "What for?"

"To build tunnels—a honeycomb of tunnels—which will undermine the factory. Yes, that's it: under the foundation, a maze of tunnels!"

"But why?" Arabella asked impatiently.

"So we could cut the pipeline from Cherrystone Lake underground, where it enters the factory!" said Elizabeth H.

They all stared at her. "And drain the lakewater—" her husband began.

"—under the factory!" cried Simon Skunk.

"So then," said Hilda Badger, "the factory would be floating over an underground lake!"

"And," said Matthew Muddie, "being as heavy as it is—"

"—it would sink like a ship!" said Peabody.

Stunned, they sat pondering the beauty of the plan: so neat and simple. So final.

"Wait," said Arabella. "What would keep them from simply turning off the lakewater up at the pumphouse? That's what they'll do as soon as they discover the water isn't coming into the factory where it should. And when they've done that, the lake will never get under the foundation."

"Maybe we'll have to keep them from shutting off the water," said Matthew Muddie. "Maybe while some of us are cutting the pipe under the factory, others will have to capture the pumphouse and keep them out."

"But they've always got a guard there!" said Randy.

"Yes, I know; we'll have to work something out. Anyway, I'm sure there'd be a way to make it impossible for them to shut off the water. We ought to talk to Izzy and Prosper; they've seen the machinery close up."

Peabody raised his hand. "There's another problem. How are we going to dig a network of tunnels under the factory? It would take us years!"

The plan sagged and crashed about them like a scaffold of rotten planks. "You *would* bring that up," said Elizabeth H. "You're right, of course. We could never do all that digging. Besides, we don't know what the foundations of the factory are like. We don't even know how and where we should dig."

"We might run into bedrock," said Matthew Muddie.

"And there might be underground streams," added Roscoe Lynx, "which could cause cave-ins."

"What about breathing?" asked Ambrose Fieldmouse. "How would we get air into the tunnels while we worked?"

Without warning, the strange odor was suddenly upon them again, very strong. Fergus Fisher came bounding down the stairs wearing his white laboratory coat and a goggled gas mask. "I think I've got it!" he shouted, his voice muffled and far away.

"Got what?" asked Simon Skunk.

"Formula F-EX-PF-4!" In one hand Fergus held a beaker full of dark brown liquid; in the other, a test tube of what might have passed for water.

He headed straight for Roscoe's potted geraniums. Roscoe rushed to intercept him.

"Hold on there!" cried Roscoe. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to test it," said Fergus. "Which geranium shall I use?"

"None of 'em!" Roscoe shouted, grabbing his arm. "Your last formula knocked the blossom off my Crimson Glory!"

Struggling to pull free, Fergus mumbled through his gas mask: "That was an unfortunate accident. And I apologized profusely. But I'm sure *this* formula won't do that!"

"That's what you said last time!"

"Well, how was I to know until I'd tested it?" said Fergus, finally breaking loose. "Now, which will it be?"

"None of 'em!" Roscoe repeated firmly, barring his way. "They're all prize varieties!"

"You're standing in the way of science!" cried Fergus, trying to get past him.

"Science won't bring back the blossom of my Glory!"

"The garden, then!"

"Well, that's better," said Roscoe. "There's not much left out there that *can* be hurt. Some early weeds, maybe."

Fergus nodded and trotted out the side door into the garden.

"Hadn't you better follow him to see where he goes?" asked Ambrose.

"Good idea," said Roscoe, and hurried out.

While awaiting their return, the others talked about tunnels and agreed it was



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time to pull Fergus into the planning. After about three minutes, the two came back in together. Fergus, his shoulders slumping dejectedly, was holding the empty containers in one hand and taking off his gas mask with the other. Roscoe was quiet and looked very thoughtful.

“Well, what did you learn?” asked Elizabeth H.

“Nothing!” said Fergus. “I stumbled!—and spilled the formula down the side of Roscoe’s wheelbarrow.”

“I don’t know how it would have been as a plant food,” said Roscoe, looking up from his geraniums. “But we did learn one thing: it makes an excellent paint remover.”

Chapter 24

AS SOON AS he heard the plan, Fergus Fisher's imagination exploded like fireworks—a fuming sputter of pinwheel sparks, skybursts of rocket flame, dandelion puff, spider blast, and golden glitter. He whipped out his pencil and immediately began drawing diagrams on the tablecloth. Roscoe rushed to get him a pad of paper, and inserted it beneath the moving pencil point.

“Air shafts to the surface,” Fergus muttered, jotting and scribbling. “For breathing, and to allow the air in the tunnels to escape when the water fills ’em. We’ll want those tunnels completely filled, right up to the ceilings. We’ve also got to know what kind of footings the foundation has beneath the factory. How far down does bedrock lie? Exactly where does the pipe from Cherrystone Lake go through the foundation wall?”

He turned abruptly to the others, who were watching him in silent wonder. “We’ve got to have more facts. Izzy and Prosper have been to the pumphouse; maybe they can tell us what kind of mechanism regulates the water supply from the Lake. We need to know how deep the soil is where the factory sits, and whether any large boulders might hinder our digging. Maybe M. Lucius Ferret can tell us something about the geology of the river valley.”

Ben Barker volunteered to drive to Maple Crossing. Hilda Badger rode along with him in the truck.

“I think the whole idea sounds crazy,” said Farmer Ben, as they jounced along the Old Cherrystone Road through the Chickalooga Forest.

“I think it sounds pretty good,” said Hilda Badger, “except for digging the tunnels. Why, with only picks and shovels, we’d never get finished!”

“Doesn’t Fergus see that?” asked Farmer Ben.

“I’m sure he sees it,” Hilda replied. “But you know how he is. Each problem is to be solved in turn as he comes to it. He just hasn’t gotten to that one yet.”

They arrived at Izzy’s General Store and found it dark except for one lighted window at the rear. Ben Barker parked the truck in front, and they walked around to the back and knocked at the kitchen door.

Izzy the Witch peered out through the pale green curtains, then quickly let them in. “Surprise, surprise,” she said. “What brings you out tonight?” She was wearing a blue and white checked apron, and held a large wooden spoon in one hand. In the far corner, Prosper the Cat, his eyes closed, was sitting cross-legged on his velvet cushion. A huge pot was bubbling on the stove, puffing out great clouds of steam.

“Well, we need your help,” said Hilda Badger. “But first some bad news: Thaddeus Higgins has gotten so much worse that Bascom has sent him to the hospital in the city.”

"Oh, that is bad news," said Izzy. "I knew he was getting weaker, and I was planning to take him a very strong medicine in the morning. It's too bad the city's so far away, but I'll do what I can from *here*."

"It's boiling over, Izzy," said Prosper.

"Oh! so it is!" she cried, and rushed to the pot. She slid it off the heat and stirred the contents with the spoon. Steam surrounded her.

"It smells good," said Hilda Badger.

"It's the herbs," Izzy replied. "I'm making a batch of love-philter."

"What's love-philter?" asked Farmer Ben.

"If there's somebody you want to fall in love with you," she said, "you put some in their drink. If you're the first one that person sees after drinking it,—wham! you've got a lover on your hands!"

"I never heard of such a thing!" said Farmer Ben, somewhat taken aback. "Do you have many calls for your love-philter?"

"Sure do," said Izzy, stirring the pot. "It's one of my most popular potions. That's why I make up such big batches at a time. You wouldn't believe how many orders I get from the city. That's the biggest market. But I get lots of orders from around here, too—though I'd better not say more than that, for my customers expect me to keep their orders confidential." She pointed to the shelves lining one wall of her kitchen. "See that empty space on the third shelf down? That's where this batch will go when I get it bottled. I'm just about out, the demand has been so heavy this year."

"I hope there's another philter to make people fall *out* of love," said Hilda Badger. "Couldn't it get a little awkward if there wasn't an antidote?"

"I suppose it could," Izzy answered. "But there is an antidote. We call it Antiluv in the trade. It's very easy to make. You just put in one additional herb and add to the bottle five drops of month-old rainwater. If you put *that* in the lover's drink, and you're the first one the lover sees after drinking,—pow! you're free again." She paused, sniffing the pot, then gave a little nod of satisfaction and tossed in another handful of herbs. "I'm going to turn some of this batch into Antiluv," she went on. "But only a little. There isn't nearly as much demand for it."

"We came tonight to ask your help," said Farmer Ben. "There's a group at the Old Hex planning how to stop the factory once and for all. We need to know what you and Prosper can tell us about the machinery in the pumphouse up at the Lake."

Izzy blinked. "What sort of plan?" she asked, stirring the pot more quickly. As they told her about the digging, and the flooding of the tunnels with lakewater from the pipeline, her eyes grew bright with excitement.

"Did you hear that, Prosper?" she called over her shoulder.

"Every word," said Prosper, without opening his eyes.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"Who will do the digging?" Prosper replied.

"That's the big problem," said Hilda Badger. "We don't know where or how far to dig, or what we might find down there, or how long it will take."

Prosper said, "Go to the Moles."

"What?" said Farmer Ben.

"The Moles can find the answers, if they will," said Prosper.

"Of course!" said Hilda. "Why didn't we think of that?"

Without opening his eyes, Prosper merely curved his mouth into a slow, secret smile.

Izzy put a lid on the steaming philter, moved the pot from the stove, and sat down with pencil and paper at the kitchen table. "I can't go back to the Old Hex with you," she said. "I've got to stay with the philter and finish it in one operation. But I'll draw you a sketch of what we saw in the pumphouse." She drew swiftly, talking along: "Here in the center is the intake pipe from the Lake—and the pump—and a large valve wheel which regulates the flow of water to the factory pipeline. Here against the wall is an instrument panel with pressure gauges, dials and buttons, and three more valve wheels—"

"Four," said Prosper, with a flick of his tail.

"Four wheels," said Izzy. "They were of yellow metal, possibly brass, and smaller than the main valve on the intake pipe." She handed Hilda the paper.

"Thanks, Izzy," said Hilda. "This helps a lot."

"Keep us informed," Izzy said. "We'll help however we can."

With that, Ben Barker and Hilda left and crossed the road to The Boundary. The house beside it was dark, but they saw a light in the bookstore. M. Lucius Ferret answered their knocking dressed in a green velvet lounging jacket with bright gold buttons. "Come in!" he said, surprised. "It's late for visitors. I'll bet you've come from the meeting at the Old Hex. Would you like some tea? I've just made a fresh pot."

He led them through the dark corridors of books and sat them down in the lighted nook at the rear. "I'm glad you came when you did," he smiled. "I've been reading about the use of radioactive isotopes in the study of plant metabolism, and I'd just decided it was time for a break."

"I think I can see why," said Farmer Ben.

While M. Lucius poured the tea, Hilda told him about Thaddeus Higgins' turn for the worse. The news badly upset him, even though for several days he'd been expecting it. He had followed Thaddeus' condition very closely and had seen Doctor Badger becoming more discouraged every day. "It's very sad," he said when Hilda was done. "When will the Mayor be back?"

"Nobody knows," said Hilda. "She'll stay as long as necessary."

M. Lucius sighed and sat down at his desk. He opened his diary, wrote one additional sentence at the end of the day's entry, and closed it again.

"Are you ready to hear about the meeting at the Old Hex?" Farmer Ben asked him. M. Lucius nodded and turned his chair to face him.

As Farmer Ben described the plan that was taking shape, M. Lucius listened intently, his eyes bright with interest—nodding his head in quick little jerks and growing more and more excited as he talked. "So you see," Ben Barker concluded, "the biggest problem we face is digging the tunnels. We've got to know about the geology of the river valley. Do you think you can help?"



Hardly able to contain his excitement, M. Lucius leaned back in his chair, then bounced forward rubbing his hands. "It's a marvelous plan!" he chuckled. "So elegant! So very complete!" He snatched off his spectacles and gave them a whirl at the end of their ribbon. "Like storming the Bastille! The conquest of Carthage! The capture of Alzincor! Leave not a single stone standing on another! Plow salt into the furrows!"

Staring, they blankly said, "What?"

"Oh, nothing," he grinned, putting on his spectacles. "I was just seeing similarities. Poetic justice, and all that." He finished his tea in one gulp, set the cup down with great precision in its saucer, and folded his hands behind his head. "Now then: geology. It's fairly simple. Millions of years ago this whole region was a flat sea-bottom. The bedrock beneath the soil is sedimentary limestone—you can see it exposed on the bluffs above Cherrystone Lake, where the fossils are.

"Now, long after the sea was gone, a huge glacier moved down from the north and carved a deep valley between the High Country up by the Lake, and Barren Hill to the west. The glacier brought lots of rich topsoil which was left in the valley when the ice melted. Grover and the Sudge-Buddle factory stand in the middle of that valley."

Hilda Badger asked, "How far beneath the factory is the bedrock?"

"I don't know," said M. Lucius. "Pretty far, I'd guess. Let's see what I can find in the stacks." He took a flashlight from the desk and wandered off into the books.

Hilda and Farmer Ben waited patiently, sipping their tea. "If it's mostly soil under the factory," Hilda said, "and the limestone is buried deep, digging will be much easier."

"I'm worried about underground streams," said Ben Barker. "I don't want us flooded out ahead of schedule."

M. Lucius returned with several books under his arms. "These'll be our best sources," he said, spreading them out on the desk. He adjusted his spectacles and, humming tunelessly, began flipping through the pages, now and then muttering little chirps of discovery.

At last he said, "All right, these books support what I said a minute ago—sea-bottom, glacier, topsoil. But I didn't have the whole story. There was already a valley here when the glacier came. It had formed when the land sank between the High Country and Barren Hill."

"Why would the land sink?" asked Farmer Ben.

"There must have been some fault-lines—or deep cracks—in the limestone of the old sea-bottom," M. Lucius replied. "An earthquake may have caused the settling, or maybe underground water cut caves that collapsed." He shrugged: "Whatever the reason, much later when the glacier came, it widened the valley, deepened it some, and brought the topsoil. When it melted away, it left behind the ancestor of our Little River flowing down the center of the valley. Again and again for thousands of years the river flooded, each time spreading fresh mud deeper and thicker. In addition, normal weathering and erosion washed soil into

the valley from the highlands on either side." He paused and took a deep breath. "So there you have it. I'd say the soil under the factory is very deep, and we'd have to go a long way down to reach bedrock."

"So digging should be fairly easy," said Farmer Ben.

"That's my guess," said M. Lucius. "There might be some boulders down there—but maybe not. We don't find many on the surface, do we?"

"Thanks for your help," said Hilda, standing up excitedly.

"Are you going back to the Old Hex?" M. Lucius asked. "I'd like to come too." He laughed: "I'm hardly in the mood to read any more tonight about radioisotopes and plant metabolism!"

They piled into the truck and returned to the Inn, where everyone still sat talking. Several others had joined the group while they were gone: Franklin Groundsquirrel, Oliphant Owl, Lafayette Lizard, and Lucy Otter. Fergus Fisher had covered seven sheets of paper with his diagrams and jottings.



"Well, you took long enough," said Arabella Raccoon. "What did you learn?"

Hilda laid Izzy's sketch on the table. "That's what the pumphouse looks like. M. Lucius can speak for himself."

As soon as M. Lucius had given a brief report of his findings, everyone began chattering excitedly. "It seems that luck is with us," said Ambrose Fieldmouse. "But what about the other things we need to know? What about the *digging*?"

"Prosper said we should ask the Moles to help us," said Hilda.

"The Moles!" It startled everyone. For although the Moles were members of the community and accepted as such, they were very private, keeping to themselves in their underground world, shy and rarely seen. It wasn't that they

were standoffish or unfriendly; they just preferred to go about their lives underfoot and out of sight.

The notion appealed to Fergus: "Of course! They could scout the factory's foundations and see where the pipeline enters."

"Would the Moles be willing to do that?" Oliphant asked. "It sounds like a lot of work, and there might even be some danger."

"We can *ask* them," said Roscoe Lynx.

"I think they'd do it if we explained what we're up against," said Lucy Otter. "And they may have suffered from the factory, too."

Fergus Fisher looked up from his doodling: "Thanks to Hilda, I think we may have a solution to the digging problem!"

"You don't mean the *Moles!*" cried Peabody.

"No, no, of course not," said Fergus with a laugh. "That *would* be asking a lot! Here: we've all agreed that we can't do it with normal tools. But what if we could build a machine to do the digging *for* us? A large machine that would tunnel through the earth, pushing out the dirt behind it as it goes—like a giant mole!"

"Do you think we could build such a machine?" Matthew Muddie asked him.

"We can try," said Fergus, chewing the end of his pencil. "We'd have to figure out a way to remove the dirt from the tunnels. We can't have exhaust fumes which would kill us underground. It will have to use electric power. Batteries . . . a generator . . ." He continued to chew the pencil in silence.

"Who will go talk to the Moles?" asked Elizabeth H. "Most of us don't know them well at all. I certainly don't."

They looked inquiringly at one another.

"I'm willing to try," Simon Skunk volunteered. "I know the summoning ritual."

"I'll go with you," said Franklin Groundsquirrel. "I know the conversation ritual."

"Then let's go tomorrow night," said Simon.

The next day people went about their usual business as though nothing important had happened the night before. Yet under the surface calm there was an electric excitement, a village tingle, which Mr. Tinker sensed as he wandered casually about town trying to find people to talk to. Something certainly seemed to be doing, but Mr. Tinker couldn't pin it down or even get a hint of what it was. From behind his dark glasses he studied people's faces, trying to fix on something in their expressions that would give him a clue. As he watched from a distance, folks would meet on street corners, talk briefly, then quickly go their separate ways.

Prickling with curiosity, Mr. Tinker spent three hours on the streets trying to listen in on conversations going on about him. He learned nothing. Toward noon, he stopped in at the shoe store hoping to find out something from Arabella Raccoon. She was friendly and businesslike, but told him nothing during the half hour he sat there trying on shoes and attempting to draw her out. He even

bought two pairs of new shoes which he didn't need and didn't want—but still he learned nothing. He approached Lafayette Lizard, who was much too busy to talk. Trapped into conversation at the barbershop, Grandfather Fieldmouse promptly dozed off. Peabody the Postman was nowhere to be found.

Finally, late in the afternoon, desperate to talk to someone, Mr. Tinker wandered into Simon Skunk's furniture store. Simon was in the workshop putting the final polish on a drop-leaf table he had made from rich dark walnut. Mr. Tinker began with a compliment: "I must say you do beautiful work, Mr. Skunk! I've admired your furniture and cabinets ever since I came to town."

"Thank you," said Simon, not stopping his work. "I try to do the best I can. I want each piece to be as perfect as possible."

"I'd like for you to make the cabinets for my gift shop," Mr. Tinker declared.

"If you want my services, I'm sure we can work something out," said Simon. "What sort of cabinets do you have in mind?"

"Oh, you know, the usual kinds: drawers, and shelves, and little doors that open and close, that kind of stuff."

Simon kept polishing the table. "I see," he said.

"But as for the measurements, I haven't worked them out yet," continued Mr. Tinker. "I thought I'd wait till my display cases arrive."

"Whenever you're ready," said Simon.

"I seem to sense some sort of excitement in town today," Mr. Tinker said casually. "Is there something going on I don't know about? Something unusual, I mean."

"Thaddeus Higgins is gravely ill," answered Simon, "and has gone to the hospital in the city. He has many friends."

"Yes, I heard about that earlier today," said Mr. Tinker, "and the coffeeshop's closed. Pneumonia, I think it was. Such a pity."

"Doctor Badger thinks it's because the factory smoke aggravated his asthma," said Simon, studying the table's finish with an expert eye.

"But there hasn't been any smoke for almost a month!" said Mr. Tinker.

"He's been sick for a long time," said Simon, "—just getting worse and worse." He put away his polishing cloth and a few tools which were lying on the workbench. "Now, if you'll excuse me, please," he said with a polite smile, "it's closing time, and I have some things to do tonight. When you want the cabinet work done, just let me know." He ushered Mr. Tinker out and closed the store for the day.

In his little apartment upstairs, Simon had a small supper and then set out to meet Franklin Groundsquirrel for their visit to the Moles. It was already quite dark when he left Grover for Franklin's house; and that is why he didn't see the plump figure dressed in black which followed him from the village.

With blue chalk, in the dim light of two wax candles, Izzy the Witch drew a five-sided figure on her kitchen floor. On the table, a shallow brass pot contained

a mixture of nutmeg and tansy, dried lungwort, snakeroot, and wormwood. To this she added a pinch of speedwell, and over the entire mixture poured a vial of thick cedar oil.

"The Moles will be hard to find," she said quietly to Prosper who stood behind her in the shadows. "Franklin and Simon will need whatever help we can give them. Are you ready?"

Prosper came forward to the table. Izzy moved away quickly to stand in the center of the blue chalk figure. In each hand she held a slim wooden stick. "Begin it," she said.

Prosper set fire to the contents of the pot, then immediately went to sit cross-legged on his cushion in the corner. Thick blue smoke curled upward from the pot. In the wavering shadows thrown by the flickering candle flames, Izzy began rhythmically rubbing the sticks together and chanting in a low, tense voice:

"Who goes to the Moles?
 Simon and Franklin.
 When do they go?
 In the dead of night.
 Where do they seek them?
 Under the meadows.
 How do they find them?
 By dancing the ritual.
 Why do they seek them?
 For knowledge and power.
 What do they say to them?
 'Moles, come forth!'"

She stepped out of the chalk figure, turned on the overhead light, and snuffed the candles. "Well, that should do it," she said. "And if it doesn't, we've done all we can."

"It should do it," said Prosper.

Chapter 25

SIMON AND FRANKLIN crossed the Old Cherrystone Road and went south into the back portion of Ben Barker's farm. Like Miss Proudie Fairblossom, whose farm adjoined it, Farmer Ben had let this section of land return to its natural state. The night was warm, the earth faintly moist, and the trees and shrubs were just beginning to leaf out with spring foliage. As Simon and Franklin hurried through the outermost edges of the Chickalooga Forest to the place where they would summon the Moles, they talked quietly, enjoying each other's company. But increasingly they found themselves speaking in whispers.

The night was still; the moon's broad white face peered blankly through the dark network of branches overhead. Within the forest, the night was very dark, and knobby roots, thick underbrush, and brambles made walking treacherous. They preferred to walk at the very edge of the woods, not wishing the full exposure of the open meadow. They felt uncomfortable somehow to be so entirely visible—as though they were on a secret mission of great importance, and might be watched by unfriendly eyes. It was hard to explain, but they felt it. So they kept to the meadow's and the forest's edge, and walked in moonlight and in shadow.

"When we get to Mole Haven," Franklin whispered, "remember to sit facing away from the door. If Moles come forth, don't look at them; just talk over your shoulder. They're very shy."

"Though friendly," Simon added.

"Yes, and *that's* why—if we can reach 'em—I think they'll be willing to help us in our plan." He stopped suddenly and grabbed Simon's arm. Surprised, Simon halted and stared at Franklin, who had one finger raised to his lips for silence. They listened. From the dark woods behind them came a faint sound which might have been a twig snapping. Then nothing more: just stiff tree branches creaking in the spring nightbreeze.

In a barely audible whisper, Franklin said, "I've been hearing sounds behind us for quite a while. I wonder if someone is following us. Keep your ears open."

They went on, walking as quietly as they could and straining their ears for any suspicious sound. Every now and then they heard a faint rustling of bushes—but that was all.

"Should we head out into the meadow?" Simon whispered. "If someone *is* following us, they'd have to come out into the moonlight, and we could see 'em."

"But they could see *us* better, too," Franklin replied. "Let's go deeper into the woods."

They turned left and made their way cautiously into the undergrowth. Darkness closed around them. "Should we use the flashlight?" Simon whispered.

"No," said Franklin, "let's try to do without it."

They went slowly, feeling their way, while their eyes adjusted to the dark. Then, on signal, they paused and listened. Sure enough: behind them they heard the sound of stealthy footsteps rustling and crunching in the fallen leaves. Then the sounds stopped abruptly.

"What shall we do?" Franklin whispered.

"I want to know who it is," said Simon. "You go on, making enough noise for the two of us. I'll wait here behind this tree and get the jump on whoever's following us. When I turn on the flashlight, get back here in a hurry."

Franklin shuffled off into the dark, scraping his feet on roots and purposely snapping twigs. Simon stood close to the tree and waited. As Franklin's footsteps moved away, the other's footsteps moved closer. Closer. Then they were on the other side of Simon's tree.

A figure passed by, a shape of darker black against the night. Simon pointed the flashlight and switched it on.

The figure, spotlighted in the sudden blinding beam, gave a gasping shriek, half crouched, and turned, one hand before its face.

"Good evening, Mr. Tinker," said Simon. "Are you enjoying your walk?"

Mr. Tinker, half blinded by the glare, giggled nervously. He looked odd without his dark glasses; his eyes were pale brown and watery, with puffy pink lids. "Is that you, Mr. Skunk?" he inquired, still trying to shield his face from the light. "My, you startled me! How lucky we ran into each other! I've been thinking about those cabinets I want you to make for my shop, and I've decided on just what kind I'd like!"

Franklin came bounding through the trees and halted just outside the circle of light. "Oh, is that you, Mr. Groundsquirrel?" said Mr. Tinker. "Are you taking an evening walk too? I had no idea these woods were so popular!"

Franklin stepped farther back into deeper darkness. "It's hard to tell who you'll meet in the woods," he said.

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Tinker, "nothing like an evening walk to clear out the cobwebs, I always say!"

"Well, don't let us keep you," said Simon. "Here, I'll light your way." He swung the beam of the flashlight to make a bright pathway through the trees. "It's awfully dark in here, and it would be too bad if you had an accident."

"Yes, yes, well, thank you," said Mr. Tinker, moving away along the path of light. "Have a pleasant evening. And I'll drop in to see you about those cabinets tomorrow or the next day."

They watched him out of sight, then turned and quickly went deeper into the forest, making a wide circle before returning to their original course. For a long while they listened for sounds that would indicate they were still being followed, but they heard nothing.

"How does it feel to have met a Sudge-Buddle spy?" Franklin asked.

"Since it was we who got the drop on him, and not the other way around, it feels pretty good," said Simon. "You meet them in the strangest places! I wonder if he'll open that gift shop after all?"

"I bet you'll never get to make those cabinets," said Franklin.

They reached Mole Haven, which was marked by a towering maple tree. Nearby, a tributary stream to Little River bubbled fitfully over its pebbled bed. At the base of the tree, a small wooden trapdoor was set in the ground. Radiating from it like spokes from the hub of a wheel, several low, mounded ridges marked the surface tunnels of the Moles.

"Well, here we are," said Simon. "It looks deserted, as though no one has been in or out of the trapdoor for a long, long time. Sit by the tree, Franklin, and I'll start the summoning ritual."

He brushed the leaves and twigs off the trapdoor and knocked upon it loudly three times. Then, standing tall, he stamped his feet upon the ground seven times between two of the tunnels. Next he returned to the trapdoor and did a complicated dance on it, thumping a measured cadence, clicking his heels against the wood and tapping his toes. That finished, he put his mouth down almost to the door and boomed in a deep voice: "Moles, come forth!"—then went to sit with Franklin beside the tree. Facing away from the trapdoor, they looked outward from the forest, across the bubbling creek and far away into the moon-washed meadow.

They waited for a very long time. The moon edged slowly down the sky.

"Maybe you should try it again?" Franklin suggested.

"All right," Simon agreed. "Maybe nobody was close enough to hear the summons." He got up, a little stiff from sitting in the damp, and repeated the ritual. He had barely resumed his seat by the tree, when a soft tapping came from the underside of the trapdoor. Then, with a sharp creak, they heard the door open.

Behind their backs, a small voice said: "Who summons the Moles?"

It was Franklin's turn. He answered, speaking in the measured rhythms of the conversation ritual: "Friends from the fields, and friends from the forest. Friends from the village, and the world beyond."

The small voice responded: "Friends are welcome wherever they come from."

And Franklin replied: "Friends find welcome when they come to you."

Then, in a more conversational manner, the voice said: "My name's Townsend Mole. I was just passing by when I heard the summons. Will I do, or do you want to speak to someone in particular?"

Keeping their backs turned to the trapdoor, Franklin and Simon introduced themselves. "We're happy to meet you, Townsend," said Franklin. "You'll do fine. I hope we're not keeping you from something important."

"I was on my way to a party on the Lower Level," said Townsend. "Most of the others in this sector are there already, so I was late to begin with. Being a little later won't matter much." He waited; and Franklin realized it was his turn to speak again.

"The folks in the upper world are faced with a serious problem," he began. "If possible, we'd like to ask the entire Mole community to help us solve it."

"That would have to be decided by the Council," said Townsend Mole. "But tell me about it, and I'll carry the message."

"I'm afraid it's a long story," said Franklin, looking out across the meadow, his

eyes following the stream until it left the moonlight and entered darkness. "I don't know whether you who live below know of the factory that's been built in Grover—"

"We know about the factory," said Townsend, "and about the trouble it's caused. We know quite well the pollution of Little River—" and here his tone became edged with bitterness—"three of our members have been made very ill. We know about the smoke: the residues have seeped into the soil."

"Then the factory is your problem as well as ours," said Simon.

"Yes. But we don't know what to do about it. We used to have a big network of tunnels on the other side of the Old Cherrystone Road. But they aren't used much now. No one likes to go near the factory. There's still a colony of Moles in Pheasant Run, but they're getting ready to move out, too."

"A possible solution is in the planning stage," said Franklin. "We think your people could help, if they would. We need to know some facts about the factory's foundations, and where the water pipe from Cherrystone Lake enters the factory below ground." He outlined the plan as carefully as he could, with Simon adding details. Townsend listened attentively.

When Franklin had finished, Townsend was quiet for a long moment. They continued to look out across the meadow. "I think I understand everything," Townsend said finally. "It sounds as though it might work. I have only one question: what's this machine that Fergus Fisher will design to do the digging?"

"I don't know the whole principle behind it," said Franklin. "He's paid your people the compliment of calling it a Mole Simulator."

"That's very interesting," said Townsend thoughtfully. "I'll bring all of this to the Council. Can you be here again at this time tomorrow night? We'll give you our answer then."

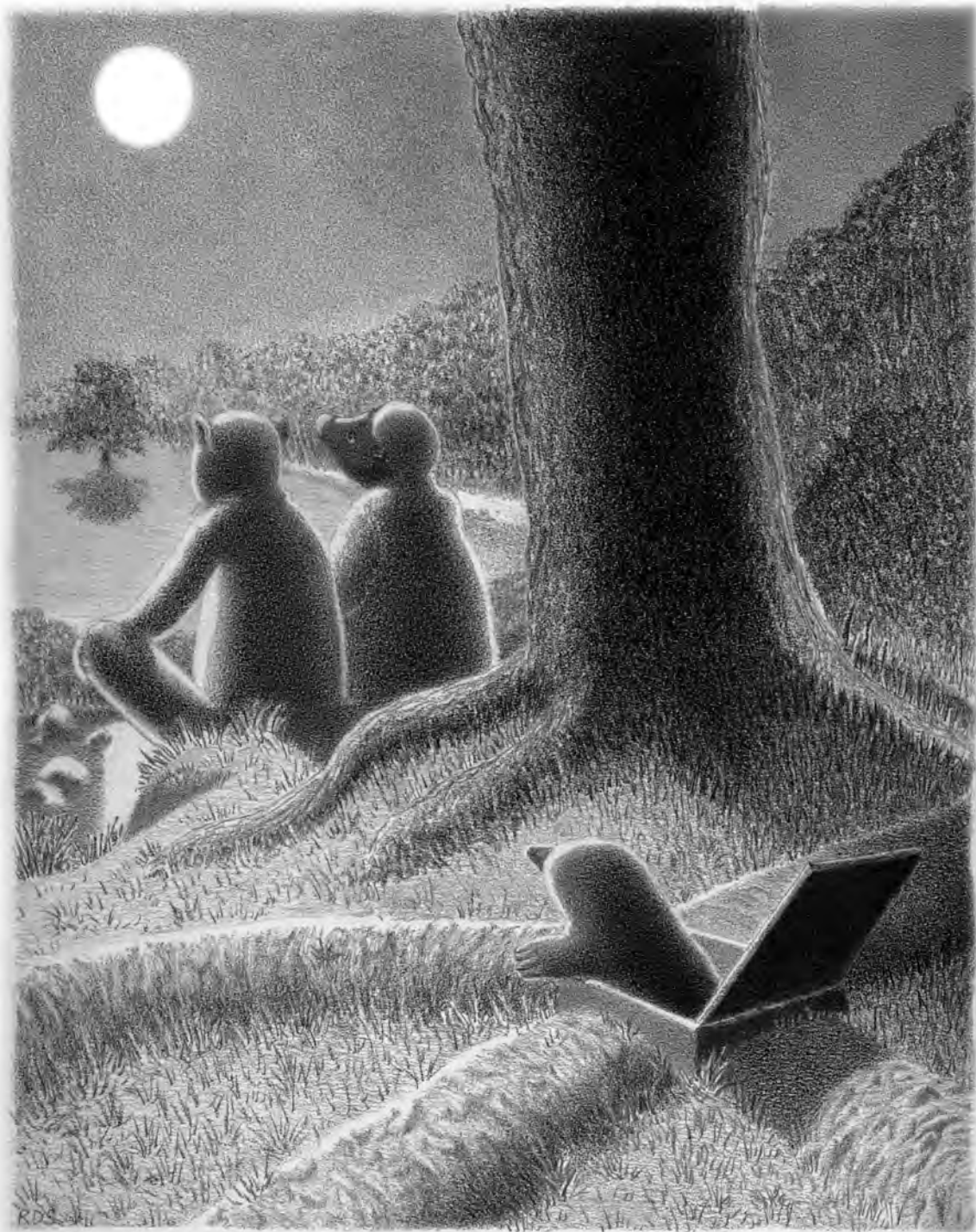
"We'll be here," said Franklin.

"Good night, then," said Townsend. And they heard the trapdoor close.

The Moles agreed to help, saying that they would need one week to explore the factory's foundations. During that time, Fergus Fisher worked on his plans for the digging machine and began to assemble materials for building it.

To no one's surprise, Mr. Tinker disappeared. Not only did he never come to Simon's workshop to order the cabinets, on the day after his walk in the woods, he was gone without trace—the Moffitt House on Main Street standing as empty and silent as if he'd never been there. "And he left no forwarding address," said Peabody the Postman. "Not that it matters. He never received any mail."

Mr. Tinker's disappearance caused very little comment. Most people just nodded knowingly and clicked their tongues. Only Cassandra Scissortail was upset by his leaving—not only because it revealed him to be a Sudge-Buddle spy, but also because it took from Grover so thoughtful a businessman. "He *did* agree not to stock those awful toy birds that dip their beaks in water," she said to Summerfield. "Why did he have to spoil it by being a *spy*? I'm very disappointed



in him." And she never mentioned Mr. Tinker again.

The report on the Moles' explorations was delivered at the Old Hex Inn by Townsend Mole and old Murchison Mole, the Chief of the Council. A large number of Groverpeople turned out to hear it, all of them extremely curious and very much aware of the importance of the visit; for it was rare indeed for the Moles to come to the surface for a meeting with members of the Aboveground Community. Only Grandfather Fieldmouse could recall a similar occasion—when, many years before, representatives of the Underground Community had discussed with surface people the placement of Farmer Green's irrigation ditches.

Simon Skunk and Franklin Groundsquirrel escorted the two Moles to the Old Hex for a late-night work session. Roscoe Lynx had made preparations for their coming: when they arrived, the Inn lights were dimmed, and the Moles were ushered quickly in the side door and taken to a screened area facing a row of tables.

The crowd at once grew quiet; and a moment later, Murchison Mole spoke from behind the screen: "We are pleased to be meeting with you, and to have the opportunity of taking part in this venture. We members of the Underground have just as much at stake in the outcome as those of you who live on the surface. We understand that Fergus Fisher is building a machine that will dig large tunnels at a rapid rate. At this time, I wish to offer our services to him if he needs our help."

Fergus stood up and addressed the screen. "The machine you refer to is presently in the planning stage. I haven't yet begun to build it, and I'd be grateful for any help you could give me. I have classified it as F/EXDM-1/BTSED-MS: Fisher Experimental Digging Machine One: Beneath the Surface Excavation Device—Mole Simulator."

"That's quite a classification," said Murchison drily. "But be that as it may, we have received word of your Mole Simulator, and the Council has voted nine to four to give you whatever help we can."

"The power supply won't cause any problem," said Fergus. "It'll be electrical. But I need some help with the digging arms. And I don't know how we're going to get the dirt out of the tunnels."

"We shall be happy to consult with you on those matters," said Murchison. "Young Townsend Mole will now report on our explorations at the factory."

Fergus sat down; the crowd leaned eagerly toward the screen. "During the past week," said Townsend Mole, "twelve volunteers have explored the foundations of the factory. It's their opinion that the factory is rather badly constructed. Bedrock lies much deeper than the footings, and as a result, there's almost no support. Some cracks have already appeared in the concrete foundation walls through normal settling. It's their judgment that the factory was built much too fast for proper durability. Our Engineering Staff has prepared a cutaway diagram of the site, showing how the foundations are placed."

Roscoe and Franklin held up before the crowd a large square of cardboard on which the diagram had been carefully inked. Townsend continued: "You will

notice that there is very little structure below ground level. The parking lot and the Administration Building are entirely on the surface. The basement under the factory itself is fairly shallow. Think of it as a completely closed concrete box sunk not very deeply in the earth. It should be possible to dig under and around it without being detected, so that the whole structure—factory, offices, and parking lot—can be undermined with a honeycomb of tunnels.”

“What’s the soil like?” Fergus asked, taking notes. “Are there many large boulders or underground streams? What danger is there of the tunnels collapsing ahead of time?”

“The soil of the valley is fairly free of boulders,” said Townsend. “The rocks are mostly small and should cause no trouble. There is some underground water, but these areas have been mapped by the Engineering Staff. They can be avoided. There’s *always* the danger of cave-ins. But the soil is firm and stable at the depth you’ll be working. There are a few places where wooden supports will have to be built as the tunnels progress, but these can be pulled out when the work is completed.”

M. Lucius Ferret leaned across the table to Hilda Badger. “They found just what we thought they would!” he grinned. “Good old fault-lines! Good old glacier!”

Doctor Badger addressed the screen. “What should we do for a fresh air supply while we’re working in the tunnels?”

“Air shafts should be dug to the surface and reinforced against cave-ins,” Townsend answered.

“We’ll need them anyway to allow the trapped air to escape when the water comes in,” Fergus whispered to the doctor.

“Where does the pipeline from Cherrystone Lake enter the factory?” asked Parker Packrat.

“That’s shown on the diagram,” Townsend replied. “It’s well below ground level on the east side. The pipeline crosses over Little River and then goes underground to enter the boiler room which is in the factory basement.”

Their report finished, the Moles left through the side door and went with Fergus to the workshed where the materials for the Mole Simulator were being collected.

“We’re very grateful for your help,” said Fergus, leading them into the shed.

“And we’re grateful for yours,” said Murchison Mole. “The problem affects us all. You folks have come up with a plan. None of us can afford not to be involved.”

Fergus laid out his sketches and explained what he hoped to do. The Moles listened carefully and made suggestions. They pointed out how he could improve the action of the digging arms, demonstrated for him how real moles burrow through the soil, and suggested a means for removing the dirt. “We push the dirt behind us with our feet,” said Murchison. “You could simulate this pretty well with a moving conveyor belt extending through, under, and behind the machine: the belt would carry the dirt some distance down the tunnel and dump it into wheeled carts or wagons that could be taken away; then in a flat loop it would return to the machine in a continuous circle.”

Fergus leaped up, clapped a hand to his head, and cried: "Brilliant! Of course! I can see it!" He turned to Murchison. "If this machine is ever patented for other uses than burrowing under factories, I think the patent should be taken out in both our names!"

Murchison, quite surprised, said, "No, it's your invention. We Moles are not interested in devising Mole Simulators for general production."

"Well, then," said Fergus, "if the machine should be patented, and I should earn any money off its being marketed, I'd like to share the money with the Mole Community."

"That would have to be taken up with the Council," said Murchison. "But I don't really know what use we would have for surface money."

Fergus nodded, and said thoughtfully, "I guess I don't fully understand your way of life in the underground."

"There's no reason why you should," said Murchison. And Fergus had to agree.

In April, after a shutdown of nearly two months, the factory started up again. Within two weeks, it was working almost double its former rate to make up for lost production; and nothing that Grover had seen before could match the amount or the foulness of the pollution that now spewed forth from stack and pipes.

Folks stayed indoors as much as they could; they closed their windows and sealed the cracks with tape. Elizabeth H. and Farmer Ben gave up all hope of having even a small peach crop. Roscoe Lynx watched helplessly as his few remaining flowers were blighted in the bud. In Maple Crossing, Thorstein Raccoon fought hard to save his vegetables by stretching a tentlike canopy above them on frames and poles. It did no good. And when he saw his plants turn yellow, shrivel up, and die, he simply put away his garden tools and spent most of his time playing checkers at the Old Hex Inn. "There won't be any tomatoes for you this year," he told Lafayette Lizard over a mug of honey brew. "Now of course, *next* year may be another story."

At the end of April, Franklin Groundsquirrel, having reached a painful decision, wrote a long, sad letter to his niece and nephew. "Dear Peggy and Peter," it began, "You know how much your visits mean to me. I look forward to them all year long. Nonetheless, I'm asking you not to come see me this summer. The pollution here is worse than you can imagine. A visit would damage your health (most of us here have developed bad coughs, and our eyes are always watering from the fumes). Also, there wouldn't be much for you to do. Most everyone will be spending the summer underground, digging tunnels beneath the factory. If you were here, I couldn't let you help with that—it'll be far too dangerous. So it's for your own good that I'm asking you not to come see me. Maybe *next* summer if all goes well . . ."

The Twins quickly wrote back, telling him they understood and wishing him well in the tunnels. The day after he heard from them, Franklin received a note from their mother. "Peter and Peggy were heart-broken when they got your letter," Victoria wrote. "They'd been counting on coming to see you, as always. But they do understand the situation, and respect your concern for them. However (as I'm sure you know), they'd give anything if they could be there to help in the digging. Do keep us informed, Franklin—we're very anxious to know how it goes. I'm also writing the Otters to invite their children to visit us. It'll get them away from the pollution and free Lucy and Oscar to take part in the digging. We think of you constantly. Good luck, and be careful."

The one encouraging event in this dismal period was Thaddeus Higgins' recovery from pneumonia. When he was released from the hospital, his wife and several others went to the city to celebrate with him. Though still weak, Thaddeus was cheerful and felt better than he had for a long time. But Doctor Badger told him that he shouldn't return to Grover. "It would kill you," the doctor said sadly. "The conditions now are much worse than those that caused your illness. You mustn't go back till the danger's over."

So Thaddeus made arrangements to live with his sister in an even more distant city. Mayor Higgins did not go with him. "My place is in Grover," she told him. "I've got to stay and see the matter through."

He agreed. "That's right, you're needed. I only wish I could do my share. Promise me you'll be careful in those tunnels." She assured him that she would, and that she'd write him twice a week. And back she went to Grover to run the coffeeshop and chair Town Council meetings while Fergus Fisher worked to bring about Phase Three.

Parker Packrat was perhaps the person hardest hit by the factory's starting up again. During the two months of the shutdown, he'd bounded out of his depression and—with something of his old spark and enthusiasm—resumed working on his junk sculpture. He'd gone at it with a wild intensity, almost a frenzy; and when folks came by, they'd always find him scrambling about the structure, reinforcing internal supports, making repairs, and—with feverish urgency, racing the clock—scraping and sanding and polishing to restore the blighted gleam. At night, he could usually be found at the Old Hex Inn, taking part in the planning sessions, joking with Roscoe and Rebecca Raccoon, throwing darts with Matthew Muddie, and playing pool, cards, dominoes, checkers, and chess.

But as soon as the factory came to life and the fallout began, this ended. Parker climbed down from the sculpture, put away his tools, and went to bed. For three days he stayed there, hardly responding when people came to inquire about him. When he finally came out of the house, he avoided company and took long, lonely walks in the meadows. He would not even look at the sculpture.

Folks rarely saw him at the Old Hex Inn. When he did go, he no longer played games or talked with his friends—but sat by himself in the farthest and dimmest corners, drinking honey brew and facing the wall. Whenever others tried to include him in their conversations, he didn't encourage them, preferring silence.

And, though they kept trying to reach out to him in various ways, they respected his desire for privacy and for the most part left him alone.

Though what had happened to Parker saddened his friends and made them angry, they were at a loss how to help him. Late in the afternoon on the second of May, when the factory had been in operation for three weeks, Priscilla Possum and Elizabeth H. came to Fairblossom Farm to talk to Miss Proudie. As soon as she saw them, Miss Proudie could tell they were deeply disturbed. "All right," she said, preparing herself for the worst, "I know something's wrong. What is it?"

"It's Parker," Elizabeth H. said sadly. "There's not much left of him." She and Priscilla sank into chairs and took the tea that Miss Proudie silently offered them. "Go on, tell her your story, Priscilla."

"Yesterday," Priscilla began, "I went to Parker's house to tell him that he could have my old sewing machine for his sculpture."

"The one that belonged to your mother?" Miss Proudie asked.

She nodded. "That's right. My new one arrived last week. If the old one still worked, I'd have given it to Randy. But it was completely wornout. I knew Parker didn't have a sewing machine, and I was hoping it would perk him up. He'd always admired it."

"He'd always found it more interesting than the newer models," said Elizabeth H.

"Well, when I reached his house," Priscilla continued, "he didn't answer my knocking. I'd just decided he wasn't there, and was turning to leave, when he opened the door. He just stood there, all crushed and defeated-looking, and didn't say a word. So I told him why I'd come, that I wanted to give him the sewing machine. Do you know what he said?"

Miss Proudie shook her head, her eyes fixed on Priscilla's.

"He said 'What's the use?'—that's all—and started to close the door. I said, 'Parker, it was my mother's, and means a lot to me; I don't want to just throw it away, I want it put to good use. I want you to have it.'"

"Then what?" said Miss Proudie—for Priscilla had paused.

"He said 'All right' in a dead kind of way, and got his red wagon, and went home with me, and loaded the machine on it, and went back to the pasture." She paused again, sipping her tea.

"Tell her the rest," said Elizabeth H., leaning back and closing her eyes.

"This morning, I started for Grover," Priscilla continued. "When I reached the pasture, there was no sign of Parker. But do you know what I *did* see?"

"What?" asked Miss Proudie, her voice heavy with dread.

"The sewing machine—still standing in the wagon—near the edge of the pasture. He hadn't even put it with his other materials, or taken it near the sculpture. It was already speckled with fallout. I just couldn't bear it! I hurried home, and made a canvas slipcover to fit the machine, and came back and covered it up."

"I'm glad you did," Elizabeth H. said quietly.

"Someday," said Priscilla, "Parker may want to work on his sculpture again. If

so, I want that sewing machine to be ready to use when he wants it—and still bright and shiny!”

When she had finished, they all sat silent. Their helplessness in dealing with Parker's plight overwhelmed them. They had discussed it many times before, and had never come up with an answer. Today there was nothing to say that was helpful or new; so after a few minutes' talk on other matters, the visitors left. Too depressed to cook supper, Miss Proudie sat motionless beside the window till long after nightfall.

During the next week, Miss Proudie made it a point to observe Parker closely whenever she had the chance. Her concern for him grew as she watched him wandering aimlessly about, stoop-shouldered and shuffling, or sitting withdrawn and melancholy at the Old Hex. Twice she invited him to dinner, only to have him politely decline, with the feeblest of excuses. At the end of the week, she'd become quite anxious about the state of his health.

“You can tell he's not eating right,” she said to Roscoe Lynx, as they stood in the Old Hex kitchen. “Look how thin he's getting! Isn't there anything we can do for him? He's just wasting away.”

Roscoe wiped his hands on his apron and, with a shrug and a sigh, answered tiredly, “I don't know what. I've tried everything to cheer him up, but nothing works. You know how he used to like music; well, now when I play the harp, he won't even listen.”

“Even music!” she cried, gripping her parasol so tightly her knuckles went white. Miss Proudie was normally a calm, peaceful person. But on hearing this, she was seized by an almost uncontrollable rage. With jaw clenched and her eyes glaring ferociously, for one brief moment she wanted to use her parasol on Mr. Snade, or fly at the factory and tear it down, slab by slab, with her bare hands. Then, startled at seeing that Roscoe had stepped backward from her in dismay, she struggled to regain her self-control: “Roscoe,” she declared, “he's being *destroyed!* For Parker's sake—if for no one else's—I won't rest until I see that factory gone!”

But of course there was nothing that she or anyone else could do but wait—and bottle all the anger in—till Fergus Fisher had completed the Mole Simulator.

Chapter 26

TROUGHOUT THE MONTHS of May and June, Fergus Fisher worked tirelessly on the Mole Simulator. On two occasions, Townsend Mole and old Murchison Mole made midnight trips to the workshed to help him with the movements of the digging arms and the final design of the moving belt that would carry away the loose dirt. Much welding of metal was needed—a large and important job which Fergus felt to be beyond his skill; so he went to Parker Packrat to request that he do it. “You’re the best welder we’ve got,” he said. “And it’s got to be done right. Will you do it?” Without much enthusiasm, Parker agreed to do it; and the next day he hauled the equipment to the shed in his rusty red wagon.

When he started the welding, Parker was still withdrawn and depressed. Nonetheless, he did the best job he could, working slowly and carefully in his usual way, skillfully applying his flame to the metal with neatness and precision. And as he worked on the simulator, discussing with Fergus what had to be done, his spirits began to revive, and his eyes grew brighter with each passing day. One morning, after three weeks of watching the machine take shape, he remarked, “It does look a little like a mole.”

“If form follows function,” said Fergus, “I guess it would have to. By the way, Parker, you can be the first to know: I’ve named it the *Murchison*.”

Some of the work Fergus did alone—such as installing the steering mechanism and arranging the gears. But he had plenty of help with other jobs: Rebecca Raccoon did electrical wiring, Matthew Muddie and Farmer Ben hammered sheet metal plates, and Lucy Otter riveted. But whether he was working alone or with others, there were always observers present to provide encouragement, conversation, and advice.

During the night-time hours, Oliphant Owl was always there, and frequently Randy Possum and Franklin Groundsquirrel as well. During the day, watchers perched on the workbench or sat in folding chairs along one wall. Besides those who spent long hours in the shed, many others came and went in a constant stream throughout the day and into the evening. Tim and Tonia Turtle, for example, who came all the way from Cherrystone Lake at least three times a week; Grandfather Fieldmouse, who appeared between naps to see what was happening; Roscoe Lynx, to bring out Fergus’ lunch; Izzy the Witch and Prosper.

Of the regulars, who stayed long, Thorstein Raccoon seemed to know best what Fergus was doing; and he took great delight in explaining it to others when they arrived. Peabody the Postman brought his checkerboard and played many a game with Scooper Singebottom, Doctor Badger, and Elizabeth H. Parker Packrat, too, was frequently present—even when he wasn’t welding—for day by

day he was growing more excited as he watched the work progress. For Parker, a bright new hope had taken shape with the *Murchison*.

Though Fergus was glad of the interest his friends were showing, and of the support they gave him, he sometimes wished there weren't so many people underfoot. He was used to working alone, or with only Oliphant present, and often he felt so distracted and crowded by the talkative watchers that he wanted to chase them all out and lock the door. "How can a person avoid making silly mistakes," he muttered to himself, "with all these eager well-wishers watching every move?"

But Fergus kept his feelings to himself. For he knew that the others had a need to be present: in their despair, they had to have something to provide them with hope. Whatever the final outcome, at this point he and his work were providing it. Deep down, he also knew that although most of them couldn't help in constructing the *Murchison*, they nevertheless needed to feel that they were a part of it, participating in the final action. So Fergus said nothing, but simply kept working—as fast as he could. He did borrow Roscoe's earplugs, however, and secretly put them in to block the noise. That helped a little.

While the *Murchison* was being built, life outside the workshed went on as usual. Arabella Raccoon sold shoes, Simon Skunk made furniture, Priscilla Possum taught Randy how to create new clothing designs, Lafayette Lizard got out the *Gazette*, and Roscoe Lynx constructed a patio behind the Old Hex Inn.

The patio had come to mean a great deal to Roscoe. With his flowers gone (and only the hardiest plants remaining), he had turned his energies to other pursuits. He had wanted a patio for a long time: an attractive outdoor area, paved with flat stones, where someday perhaps (if their plan was successful) he could set out little tables, under bright umbrellas, for summer pleasure. He dug up a section of the blighted garden by the Inn's back door and set to work smoothing the ground, laying flagstones, and planting a neat border of tulip bulbs. By the end of May, the patio was nearly finished ("It's simply beautiful!" said Hilda Badger), and Roscoe was quite proud of it.

Toward the end of June, Fergus announced that the *Murchison* was ready for its first test run. In the early dusk, with only a few people present, he climbed into the closed cabin, started the engine, and drove it out of the shed.

Though Parker had said the *Murchison* looked "a little like a mole," the Moles might have said otherwise, if they'd been asked. For what sort of mole had a long metal body in the shape of a breadloaf—flat on the bottom, rounded on top, with vertical sides—mounted on half-tracks like a tank or a bulldozer? Or a large metal cone-screw in place of a nose, with a sharp point in front and a circular base? or sheet-metal arms with flexible joints? or scoop-shovel hands, with curving steel claws?

Perhaps strangest of all—from a Mole's point of view—was the broad rubber belt that ran from front to rear down the floor of a tunnel which Fergus had built through the body. This belt, emerging from the tunnel, extended some distance behind the machine, supported by a frame on wheeled metal legs. As the *Murchison* moved, the frame and the belt moved with it.

Outside the workshed, Fergus halted the machine for a moment while Lafayette Lizard took a flash photograph—just for “the record” (not the *Gazette*). Then Fergus slowly drove the *Murchison* down into the gully where, five months before, they’d filled the bag with Jamaica Mistake; the only sounds it made were a faint humming and a rhythmic clanking of the metal treads.

To begin the test, Fergus aimed the cone-screw—tilted slightly downward—into the wall of the gully. The screw whirled with a high-pitched whine; the steel claws scrabbled at the soil. Dirt, cascading onto the conveyor belt, moved through the machine and came pouring off the belt at the back.

Much faster than even Fergus had expected, the *Murchison* began burrowing into the earth. In a matter of seconds, all that the watchers could see of it was the end of the belt projecting from the large round tunnel the machine had formed; then that too vanished, and the tunnel mouth filled in with dirt.

“Well, he’s gone,” Priscilla Possum said nervously.

“And all *we* can do is wait,” said M. Lucius Ferret. “Though he said it wouldn’t take long.”

“Hold on!” cried Parker Packrat, suddenly quite agitated. “The plan was that Fergus would dig a short tunnel and then back out of it into the gully the way he came.” He pointed to the tumbled heap of fresh earth that marked the *Murchison*’s entrance into the gully wall. “But how can he? The dirt’s filled in behind him. There isn’t any tunnel left!”

Fergus, well underground, but safe inside the lighted cabin, leaned back calmly in the driver’s seat and adjusted the controls to tilt the cone-screw further downward. At once, the tunnel took on a descending slant. Good! The jointed treads and the wheels of the belt-frame smoothly followed the altered slope of the tunnel floor. Still more he tilted the screw, and the *Murchison* started a steeper descent.

So far it was going well. Couldn’t be better. Fergus closely studied the walls of dirt moving past the cabin windows. Gray-brown, moist, and grainy—aha! but firmly-packed. Excellent! The *Murchison*’s body was compressing and smoothing the walls as it went. He gave a satisfied nod. That would make their job easier. Cave-ins mightn’t be much of a problem at all. Over the whine, he heard the clanking and thumping of rocks and small stones as they spiraled down the screw into the scoops, and were tumbled onto the belt.

Quite satisfied, Fergus stopped the descent, brought the *Murchison* level, and turned off the engine. Thinking aloud, he jotted quick notes on a pad. “For building the tunnels,” he muttered, “we’ll need to have some way of knowing our exact position under the ground. First, a device to show us how far we’ve come, and how far we have to go. Let’s call it a ‘distancer.’” It seemed to be awfully warm in the cabin. He loosened his collar and kept on writing. “Next, a depth-gauge, to tell us how deep we are, how close to the surface. And a direction-finder, so we can stay on course. The tunnels will be very close together, with lots of criss-crossing . . .” He stopped abruptly as he noticed that his breathing had become very heavy and fast. The air in the cabin was getting awfully stuffy.

He frowned in irritation. Surely there wasn’t a ventilation problem! There

should be plenty of air in the tunnel. There was even a little hatch at the back to let it in. The *Murchison* wasn't designed to be an airtight vault!

But a ventilation problem there seemed to be. A bad one. Fergus found himself fighting for breath. "Time to back out," he declared. And as quickly as possible. He started the engine and set the gears in reverse.

The *Murchison* had just begun its backing motion when it stopped abruptly, as though it had run into a wall. The engine hummed angrily.

Puzzled, Fergus moved the *Murchison* forward a bit, then reversed it, and once again tried to back out. Again it stopped.

Breathing was becoming quite difficult. Fergus killed the engine, left the cabin, and crawled down a narrow passageway between cables and drive shaft, generators, gear boxes, and battery banks to the rear of the body. There, he opened the hatch in the back wall and peered out to see what was wrong.

Blackness met him, and a moist-earth smell. He could see nothing, try as he might.

He scrambled back along the passageway into the cabin, there found a flashlight, and returned to the hatch. The light beam showed the tunnel choked with dirt.

"Oh, of course!" he growled, slapping his head in disgust. "The *Murchison's* buried itself!"

Gasping for breath, he crawled to the cabin and started the engine. There wasn't much time. Two minutes at most before he blacked out. He collapsed in the driver's seat and pointed the screw sharply upward. "Well," he thought grimly, "if there's no backing up, it'll have to be forward!"

The cone-screw whined, and once again the gray-brown walls were moving past the windows. But so slowly! The packed moist earth seemed to creep by the glass. Now he was panting for breath, rapidly blinking his eyes to keep them from closing. How far to the surface? Oh, for a depth-gauge! Was the angle too steep? What if it was? and the *Murchison* couldn't crawl out of its hole? Spots danced before his eyes as, with head swimming, he fumbled at the controls till he'd lowered the screw for an easier exit.

Then, all at once, the pressure released. The engine's throbbing changed to a hum. Dim light flooded the cabin, grew brighter. With its cone-screw whirling, the *Murchison* pulled itself out of the tunnel and into the open air.

Right by the back door of the Old Hex Inn. Smack in the middle of Roscoe's new patio.

Roscoe Lynx had just been coming out the back door onto the patio when the *Murchison* burst forth. Almost under his feet he saw the flagstones buckle, the earth erupt crumbling as the cone-screw, spinning, poked through it, the steel claws grasping, scooping the air. With a loud shriek, Roscoe toppled backward into an iris bed, where he lay staring upward, legs pedaling in the air as though trying to run.

When Fergus had climbed from the cabin, he found Roscoe there, in a state of shock, among the flattened irises.

"Are you all right?" Fergus asked, kneeling beside him and patting his cheeks.



RDS

Roscoe stared at him wildly. "Watch out!" he cried hoarsely. "It's coming for us!"

"No, no, it's all right, it's just the *Murchison*," said Fergus. "Be happy, Roscoe! The test run was a complete success!" He paused and corrected himself. "Well, *almost* a complete success. There's still one problem to be worked out."

Roscoe sat up dazedly and shook his head. For a long somber moment he stared ruefully at the *Murchison* and took in his ruined patio. "Just *one* problem?" he mumbled vaguely. "You've got yours, and I've got mine."

The others were running up the slope from the gully. Parker Packrat was the first to reach them. "Are you all right, Fergus? We didn't expect you to come out over here!"

"Neither did I," said Fergus. "Yes, I'm all right, but I'd have been in a real jam if the electricity had failed." As they gathered around, he told them everything that had happened.

"So you had to go forward," said Priscilla. "We knew you'd have trouble backing out when we saw the tunnel filling with dirt."

"Well, you knew more than I did," said Fergus. "But I had no idea where I was going to come out. If I'd had a choice, it certainly wouldn't have been in Roscoe's patio."

They stood quietly and studied the damage. It would have been more accurate to say "in Roscoe's ex-patio."

"I'm awfully sorry I ruined your work," said Fergus. "But think, Roscoe; it could have been worse. A little farther, and I'd have surfaced in the middle of your kitchen!"

"That has occurred to me," said Roscoe.

"It made a *very* large hole," said M. Lucius Ferret, in amazed admiration.

"I hope it does as well for the factory," said Roscoe. He gave a dejected sigh. "I know you couldn't help it, Fergus; and I'm glad you're safe. But what am I going to do about that hole?"

"You could plant a tree," said Priscilla.

"A big one," said Lafayette.

"Or build a wishing well," suggested Oliphant.

Roscoe blinked. A wishing well! His eyes lit up at the thought. A round wishing well, with a low stone rim, and a little roof, and a trellis with ivy and roses. "It will have to be a *large* wishing well," he mused. "More like a mine shaft. But that's all right; I can put stone benches around it."

Fergus was already thinking about the things he had learned from the test run. "We'd better put an oxygen tank in the *Murchison*," he said. "Or better yet, a tank of compressed air. Just for emergencies—such as cave-ins. And in digging the tunnels, we'll have to clear the dirt out immediately—both for an air supply, and for backing the *Murchison*."

"It'll be an enormous job," said Priscilla. "Even if we do as Murchison Mole suggested, and have folks follow behind with wheeled carts, it will take a long time, and lots of people. And the carts will have to be small, so that the full ones and the empty ones can pass in the tunnels."

"What it means is slow digging," said Fergus thoughtfully. "But I think you're right, Priscilla: wheeled carts. I can't think of any other way. A longer conveyor belt would save steps, but I can't lengthen it much. It has to be straight—and if we make a honeycomb of the tunnels, there'll be sharp corners to turn."

It was getting quite dark. Fergus drove the *Murchison* into the workshed and locked the door. When he returned to the group on the patio, several others had arrived. The wind had shifted also, and the fumes from the factory were causing their eyes to sting and water.

They all went inside and sat in the game room to continue their planning. Roscoe brought each of them a mug of honey brew.

"Fergus, now that you've seen the *Murchison* perform," said Lafayette Lizard, "do you feel we're ready to start digging the tunnels?"

"Almost," Fergus answered. "There are a few things more I need to do before the *Murchison's* completely ready. With a double network of tunnels, one above the other, and air shafts to the surface and between the levels, we've got to know precisely where the *Murchison* is at any moment." He quickly sketched a diagram on his notepad and passed it around. "First we'll dig the upper set, and then the lower. The only support for the ceilings will be the columns of dirt we leave standing between the corridors. With all of the criss-crossing and moving up and down between levels, it's going to be tight, and we can't afford to be making mistakes." He leaned back and took a long drink of honey brew. "So to know where the *Murchison* is, we'll need some way to measure distance, direction, and depth. I think I see how to do it, but it will take a few days."

This got them talking about the digging itself. All of them were nervous about it. They had decided several weeks before that the best approach to the factory would be from the basement of Otters' old house, abandoned since Jamie's illness. The house stood on a knoll beside Little River, just south of the factory. The basement extended under the entire house, and was fairly large; through doors in its eastern wall, it opened onto a boat dock. As Lucy was fond of saying, Oscar had made the doors so watertight that the basement stayed dry even when the river was rising.

The *Murchison* would burrow into the knoll from the south, then tunnel toward the factory through the basement's northern wall. Dirt removed from the tunnels would be brought to the basement, taken out through the doors to the boat dock, loaded on barges, and floated downstream. When the digging was finished, the doors would be sealed shut and both the tunnels and basement flooded with lakewater. If all went well, the Sudge-Buddle Company would never know what the house had been used for.

How to get rid of the dirt from the tunnels had puzzled them. It would be a quantity large enough to arouse Sudge-Buddle suspicions once it was seen. Farmer Ben had suggested the solution. "I've got a low, marshy spot on my river frontage," he'd said with a grin. "It would be perfect for making a landfill—and it's downriver, too!"

But the digging itself still bothered them.

"What about light?" asked Parker Packrat. "We've got to be able to see what we're doing."

"And maybe to get out in a hurry," said Lafayette.

"It seems simple enough," said M. Lucius Ferret. "We can just string electric light bulbs down the tunnel we're working in. If we had to get out in a hurry, we'd just follow the lights."

"Good idea," said Fergus. "It'll take lots of cord, and a great many bulbs. But we can take up a collection to buy 'em."

Thorstein Raccoon set down his mug and leaned forward. "The Moles said that some sections will have to be shored up with wooden supports while we dig. When we're done, will those have to be pulled out so the lakewater will make the tunnels collapse?"

"I don't think so," said Fergus. "Not if the water does its work like I think it will. When the lakewater comes in, it should dissolve the dirt columns to the point that the weight from above will collapse 'em. A few wooden braces shouldn't make that much difference."

"Fergus, when do you think we'll be finished?" Priscilla Possum asked.

"Hard to say," Fergus answered. "Let's aim for the middle of August. I don't really think we can get it done in a month and a half, but let's try."

"One thing's sure," said Priscilla. "If we *do* try, we'll get done sooner than if we didn't."

Chapter 27

THE NEXT FEW DAYS were busy. Fergus installed a rear spotlight on the *Murchison*, put an escape hatch in the back, and designed and built the measuring devices. Simon Skunk and Thorstein Raccoon built sixteen flat wooden barges in Simon's workshop; when these were finished, they were joined together with stout rope in two groups of eight and stored in the maintenance building at Grover Park. Ben Barker ran an advertisement in the *Grover Gazette* announcing his plan to make a landfill on his river frontage, and inviting bids from people who could supply him with large quantities of dirt. Two eager suppliers telephoned from Rawlinsville offering to sell him the dirt; and he had to explain (to their great disappointment) that he'd already made other arrangements.

Randy Possum, Oscar Otter, and Mayor Higgins collected tools, electrical cord, light bulbs, and lumber; these, under cover of darkness, they sneaked into the basement of Otters' abandoned house. Even during the late night hours they had to work stealthily, for every now and then the Sudge-Buddle helicopter came chattering along the property line with its stabbing searchlight. From the dark windows of the house, they could see the factory parking lot, brightly lit for the heavy trucks that came and went through the night, and—tall beneath its cloud—the red and white smokestack, bright against the sky.

To escape notice, the digging of the tunnels and the transporting of dirt would have to be done at night. Since the work would be heavy, three shifts were created, of three hours each, the first to begin at nine o'clock. Rebecca Raccoon volunteered to keep track of the work schedules and make sure that everyone was in the right place at the right time. She arranged for people to work half of their shifts aboveground, and half below. Oliphant Owl was put in charge of supplies; and the basement became his headquarters.

Since the *Murchison* would be working all three shifts, Fergus divided *his* labor by teaching Miss Proudie Fairblossom and Randy Possum how to run the machine. As the time approached to start digging, Farmer Ben and Thorstein Raccoon prepared the way for the *Murchison* in Otters' basement by knocking out two large sections of the concrete blocks that formed the walls.

Finally, on the night of July 10, the digging began. Shortly after nine o'clock, Fergus drove the *Murchison* across the bridge that spanned Little River by the Old Hex Inn and moved northward toward Otters' house through Pheasant Run and the trees of Grover Park. Halfway through the park, he had to make a detour through the picnic tables to get around the line of barges which a large group was rolling from the maintenance building to the riverbank on small logs. He waved from the cabin window, and his friends—mere shadowy figures in the

dark—waved back with their flashlights.

When he reached Otters' house—on the side away from the factory—he burrowed the *Murchison* straight through the side of the knoll into the basement. Crossing to the opposite wall, he aimed the cone-screw toward the factory and entered the earth where the concrete blocks had been removed. The group that had been waiting upstairs in the kitchen came down and started their work.

While Fergus began tunneling, Rebecca Raccoon and Randy Possum towed the sixteen barges upriver to Otters' boat landing. To avoid being seen, they kept the barges close in to the west bank and walked through the shadows as much as they could. When they had tied the barges near the boat ramp's watertight doors, they left them to be filled by others and hurried off to sleep at Mayor Higgins' house till the third shift.

As the *Murchison* burrowed toward the factory, Arabella Raccoon, Doctor Badger, Peabody the Postman, and Lucy Otter—each pushing a wheeled cart—followed it along the freshly dug tunnel to collect the dirt from the conveyor belt. Close behind the rear wall of the *Murchison*, Simon Skunk and Mayor Higgins walked along the sides of the belt to shovel onto it any dirt that remained on the tunnel floor. Matthew Muddie was present also, with a double job to do: first, to string electric light bulbs along the tunnel ceiling, anchoring the cord to the fresh packed earth with U-shaped staples; second, to take note of any spots that seemed weak enough to need wooden supports to prevent cave-ins.

By ten o'clock, the first eight barges, heaped high with dirt, had been floated downstream by M. Lucius Ferret to the site of Ben Barker's landfill. Here they were unloaded by M. Lucius, Thorstein Raccoon, Roscoe Lynx, and Hilda Badger. With only shovels to use, the work was heavy and long; and before M. Lucius could start back upriver with the empty barges, the other eight—heaped full—had started their journey downriver under the guidance of Priscilla Possum.

And so it went for the first shift. It was a long three hours, and everyone was tired when the shift ended. Oliphant stayed on duty and greeted the new workers when they arrived. Miss Proudie took over the *Murchison*, climbing into the cabin through the rear hatch while Fergus Fisher stood in the tunnel mopping his face.

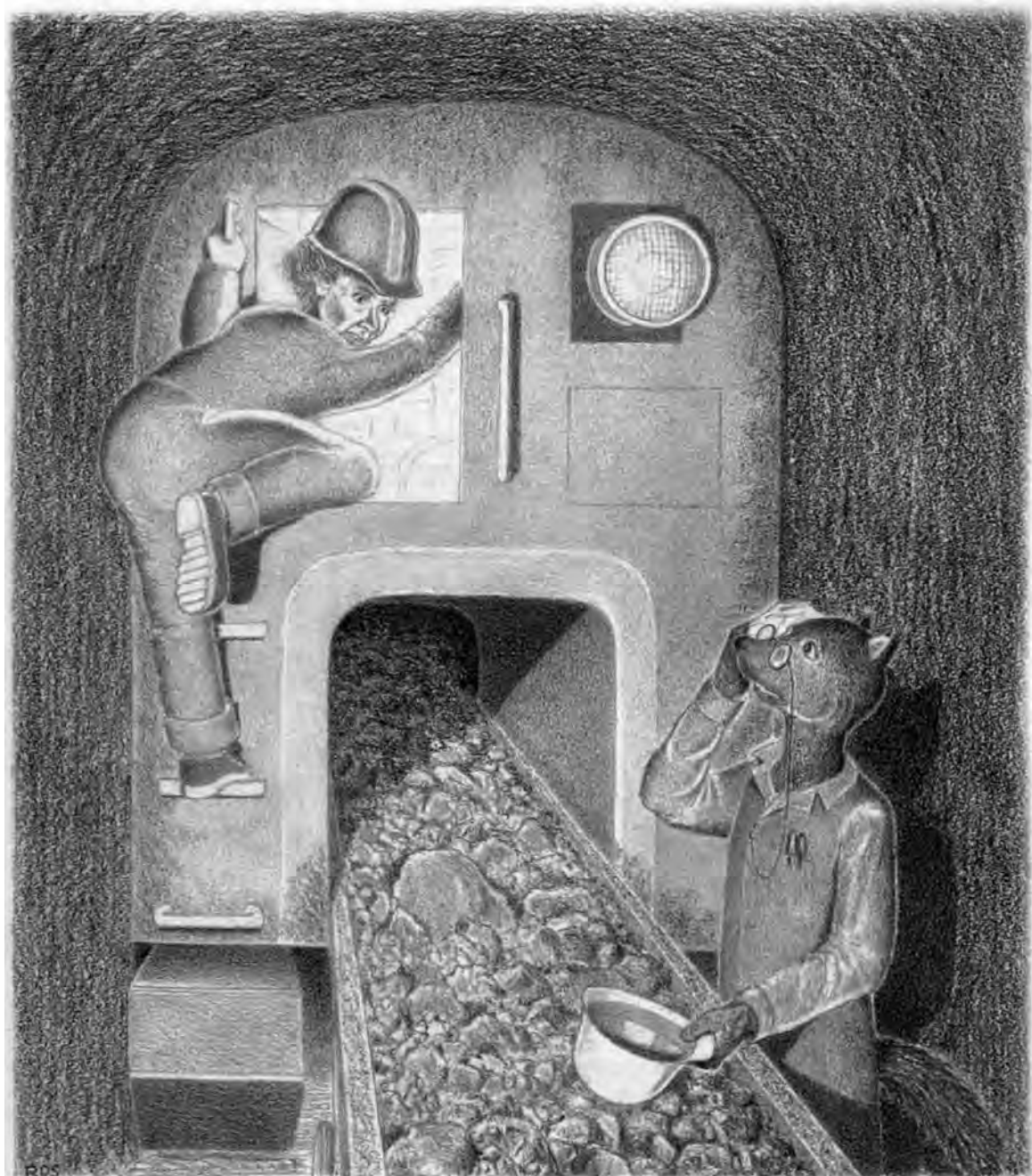
"It gets warm in there," Fergus warned her. "And you'll have to go slow to give them time to get the dirt out behind you. If you keep the depth-gauge at four-point-nine, the tunnel will stay level. I left the map beside the direction-finder; you can't miss it."

"How far do you think we've come?" Miss Proudie asked.

"About halfway to the parking lot, as I figure it. We're making fair time. No boulders so far; all the rocks are quite small. Just before you got here, I made the first air shaft. You passed it coming along. It wasn't hard to make—just a gradually sloping passageway to the surface. You'll have to make one, too."

"They worry me a little," she said.

"It's really easy. When you reach ground level, just let the screw poke through



and make a circular hole. Then, after the others have cleaned out the tunnel, back straight down to the main tunnel and continue forward. We didn't string lights in the air shaft, of course; and when it was finished, Matthew Muddie went up and camouflaged the opening with a screenwire cover and loose twigs and branches."

"Was there any problem backing down the tunnel?" Miss Proudie asked.

"No. Just make sure it's straight and the slope is gentle."

Fergus walked back down the main tunnel along the tracks of the *Murchison's* treads. He met the new shift coming in: Parker Packrat and Tonia Turtle with shovels; Oscar Otter, Izzy the Witch, Prosper, and Elizabeth H. with wheeled carts. In the basement, he spoke to Matthew Muddie, who was showing Simon Skunk where supports would have to be built to reinforce the ceiling and walls. "How does it look?" he asked.

"Pretty good so far," Matthew replied. "The *Murchison* tightly packs the dirt as it goes. That's a big help. And the soil has a rather dense texture, too. I don't think we're going to have much trouble with cave-ins."

"Let's keep our fingers crossed," said Fergus, walking toward the basement stairs.

Franklin Groundsquirrel called out to him from the boat ramp, where he was loading dirt onto the barges. "Fergus, we've got to find a quicker way to empty the carts! New ones keep coming before we're done with the old."

Fergus came to the boat ramp and studied the carts. Though Franklin had been shoveling for all he was worth, he'd already fallen badly behind. Four fresh carts were waiting to be emptied.

"Shoveling's hard to begin with," said Fergus. "Having to go so fast will wear you out." He stooped down and examined the wheels of the cart that Franklin was emptying. "How would it be," he mused, "if one side of the cart opened out on hinges? You'd just release a catch at the bottom and lift it up. If there was some way to raise the other side of the cart, it would be like a dump truck, and the dirt would pour out onto the barge." He pondered a moment, then shouted, "Of course! At one end I can install a device like an automobile jack, to be cranked up with a lever! Once it's raised, and the other end opened, the dirt will simply slide out!"

"It *sounds* good," said Franklin. "Something's needed to speed this up."

"I'll go back to the lab and design it tonight," said Fergus, starting for the stairs. Ideas for the lifting device were already buzzing through his head. And while he was at it, he'd think of something to speed up the unloading of barges down at the landfill. Those folks were probably overworked, too. Perhaps some sort of mechanical scoop . . . Fergus smiled as he entered the kitchen. It had been a good night's work. He hoped that their digging could continue at the same rate, and that their luck would hold.

During the daylight hours, the digging stopped; and folks either slept, or went about their usual business to give the impression that nothing was happening out of the ordinary. The barges were hidden beneath brush at Farmer Ben's

landfill; and anyone who might happen to examine Otters' house—from a helicopter, say—would find that it looked as deserted as ever.

As the days went by and more air shafts were dug to the surface, Matthew Muddie was careful to camouflage them so as to be invisible from the air. There were already six of these shafts on Sudge-Buddle property, at some distance from the parking lot; and the Groverpeople fervently hoped that no one from the factory would, through some unlucky accident, fall into one. ("Which would be very awkward indeed," M. Lucius observed.)

A few problems did arise. The first was Parker Packrat's determination to work all three shifts every night. "I don't need to take breaks," he'd said when they questioned his wisdom. "I can sleep during the days. I'm certainly not doing anything else then." After meeting to discuss this, the whole group decided to let Parker work as much as he wanted. He threw himself into all three shifts with a fierce driving energy, and was apparently happiest when he was down in the tunnels. But the work was tiring, and the working conditions hard: within a week's time, Parker had exhausted himself—though he refused to admit it. He became cross and irritable, and made mistakes, and was slower in getting his work done. Finally, for his own good and the good of the whole operation, the others had to insist that he take time out to rest. Three shifts were just too much; and Parker was getting on their nerves.

"But I *want* to work all three shifts!" he protested. "The harder we work, the sooner we finish!"



“Parker, we admire your energy; you’ve been an inspiration to us all,” Rebecca Raccoon said gently. “But if we’re to succeed in our plan, we can’t afford to have *anyone* burn out from overwork. Everyone of us is needed. If you push yourself so hard that you collapse, it will take the rest of us that much longer to finish the job. So please don’t overdo it.”

A compromise was reached. The group agreed to let Parker work two shifts each night, and Parker agreed to rest for the third. This arrangement worked out pretty well, and Parker found that he was able to accomplish more in six hours than he had been able to in nine.

The second problem was the result of an accident. Mayor Higgins suffered a bad bruise when her hand was pinned against the tunnel wall by a fully loaded dirt cart. For three nights she was unable to work, and her place had to be taken by substitutes working double shifts. The third problem was mechanical: two whole shifts were lost because of a breakdown in the *Murchison’s* electrical system and the difficulties Fergus had in making repairs.

But aside from these problems, things went quite smoothly. By the end of July, according to plan, a tunnel had been dug beneath the entire factory, straight through to the far side, at a depth below the foundations of the boiler room; and from this central tunnel, four loop tunnels had been dug—curving out and around and rejoining it—so that the whole pattern had the shape of a four-leaf clover.

Since removing the dirt was such a difficult job, they wanted to keep each tunnel as short as possible; for then the cartloads of dirt could be quickly wheeled to the main tunnel from whatever branch they were working in, and back to Otters’ basement. As more tunnels were finished, the easier the job became; for as the *Murchison* began to slice back across its own trail at numerous points, more and more exits to the main tunnel were created. After the basic four-leaf clover design was complete, the *Murchison* began looping back and forth through the pattern to make a network—the maze they had talked about.

Fergus’ depth-gauge, which allowed the operators of the *Murchison* always to know where the machine was in relation to the surface, made it possible for the tunnel floors all to be level. Following M. Lucius Ferret’s suggestion, electric lights were strung only in the main tunnel which led to Otters’ basement and the one branch tunnel they were working in at a particular time. All the other corridors were left dark. Since it would be easy to get lost in the honeycomb, they had a standing rule: that if the lights should ever go out, folks working in the tunnels were to stay where they were (and not wander about in the dark) till a rescue party could reach them by following the electrical cord from Otters’ basement.

Each night Thorstein Raccoon and Simon Skunk built in wooden supports where the ceiling or walls looked weak enough to collapse. They were glad there weren’t many such spots. As the tunnels extended farther and farther from Otters’ basement, more and more people were needed to wheel full carts out and empty carts in. The work was exhausting, the tunnels hot and stuffy; and folks’ tempers began to wear thin. Though it certainly wasn’t true (thanks to Rebecca), people came to feel they were spending most of their time underground.

"It's going slower than I'd hoped," Fergus said one night to Franklin Groundsquirrel, as they pushed their empty carts along a curving tunnel. "Still, we've made good progress. There have been only two cave-ins we know about: the fall of the ceiling in Tunnel 8-B which created the high-domed chamber, and the collapse of the wall between 6-A and 11-D when Randy miscalculated and pushed it down while backing the *Murchison* out of an air shaft. The shafts are working well, and none have been discovered by the Sudge-Buddle people. The lights have only gone out once—the time that Oliphant accidentally disconnected the generator. And when that happened, nobody got lost, thank goodness."

"It was pretty scary, though," said Franklin. "One moment everything was bright and busy, and the next, everything was black. It was an odd feeling—cut off, somehow—to be deep in the earth surrounded by tunnels. Like being trapped in a mine."

"Very similar, I should imagine," Fergus smiled. He had been sleeping that shift. "But it didn't take Oliphant long to realize that something was wrong, and to re-connect the generator. Only half a minute."

"It seemed long," said Franklin.

Fergus didn't disagree. "And we've only had to make a few repairs on the *Murchison*," he continued, steering his cart away from the wall. "That business with the electrical system, the left digging arm, two readjustments of the cone-screw, lubrication—but that doesn't count—replacement of the batteries. All in all, I'm really quite pleased."

They met Priscilla Possum going out with a loaded cart. Its fat rubber wheels made almost no track on the packed dirt floor.

"Moving the dirt's a lot easier since we put the battery-powered drive mechanisms on the carts," said Fergus, looking over his shoulder to watch Priscilla disappear around a bend. "When we get down to the second level, we'll need those battery-drives to get the filled carts up the sloping air shafts to this level."

"Where are we now in relation to the factory?" Franklin asked, his eyes following the string of light bulbs till it curved out of sight.

"According to my calculations, the *Murchison*'s right under the factory. If it dug straight up through the ceiling of the tunnel it's in, it should run into a concrete slab—the underside of the factory's basement floor. At this level, we really aren't far below the surface."

As they walked, they continually passed—at very short intervals—the dark openings of tunnels branching off to either side. They met Roscoe Lynx, Izzy the Witch, and Doctor Badger coming up the tunnel with full carts; and they guided their own carts close to the wall to let them pass.

"As soon as we finish this loop," said Fergus, "we'll take the *Murchison* down to start the lower level. It'll be tricky to accomplish, but some of the air shafts to the second level should be made to connect with the main tunnel that leads to Otters' basement. That'll make removing the dirt easier, and also provide a central air supply to the lower level . . . Is something wrong?"

For Franklin was shaking his head. "No," Franklin said with a smile, "I was

just thinking that four months ago, all of this seemed impossible.”

“And here we are!” Fergus laughed. “Not done, but far enough along to be encouraged! Now, when we’re ready to cut the water pipe from Cherrystone Lake—we’re about even with it now—we’ll approach it from the lower level. That way, when the water pours in, it’ll fill up the lower level first. Then, as this level fills up, the air will be pushed to the surface. And then we’ll know just what *was* possible.”

“Are you sure you know where the water pipe is?” asked Franklin.

“Well, I know where the Moles said it is,” Fergus answered. “We’ve avoided going near it while digging on this level—not wanting to cut it too soon, by accident. When the time comes, we’ll uncover it with a long sloping shaft dug up from below, the very last thing we do. All in all, I figure we’re about halfway done.”

“And here it is already the middle of August,” said Franklin. “Do you suppose we’ll be finished by the first of October?”

“I hope so,” said Fergus.

A dull rumble reached their ears. Then a babble of shouts and shrieks.

Peabody the Postman, who was approaching them with a full cart, looked behind him down the tunnel and cried: “A cave-in! Down where the *Murchison* is working!”

The three of them left their carts and began running down the tunnel past the quick dark openings that yawned like gaping mouths on either side.

Chapter 28

THE CAVE-IN was a bad one. A tumbled heap of moist dark earth completely blocked the tunnel. All that could be seen of the *Murchison* was a short length of conveyor belt poking out of the dirt like a swollen tongue. Arabella Raccoon, Mayor Higgins, and Lucy Otter were frantically digging at the pile with their hands. Peabody, Franklin, and Fergus pushed their way through the jumbled carts and fell to digging beside them.

"We've got to get them out!" cried Arabella, flinging aside great armfuls of stones and dirt.

"Who?" shouted Fergus.

"Lafayette and Prosper!"

"Where?" cried Franklin.

"We don't know!" said Mayor Higgins. "When the roof fell in, they were shoveling dirt onto the belt—Lafayette on that side, Prosper on this!"

Silent now, the six of them clawed at the heap, scattering dirt in all directions, and into each other's eyes and mouths. Peabody cried, "A shovel!"—and hauling it out, stood up and began thrusting its sharp steel blade into the dirt. "Watch out!" cried Lucy, "you'll be hitting Prosper!" Peabody slowed up and dug more carefully.

"I've found Lafayette!" cried Arabella. But his limp arm only. Lucy and Fergus rushed to help her dig. In a matter of seconds, they'd uncovered his face and chest. Lafayette Lizard's eyes were closed, and his slack mouth hung half-open.

"Is he alive?" Peabody called. "We can't tell," said Lucy.

"He doesn't seem to be breathing," said Arabella, turning his face from side to side. Lucy began rubbing his wrists while Fergus cleared the rest of his body.

Lafayette wheezed—a choking rattle: then, a shallow intake of breath. And another. Slowly his breathing resumed, became deeper, more regular. His eyes fluttered open and looked at them dazedly, focusing. "Thanks," he gasped.

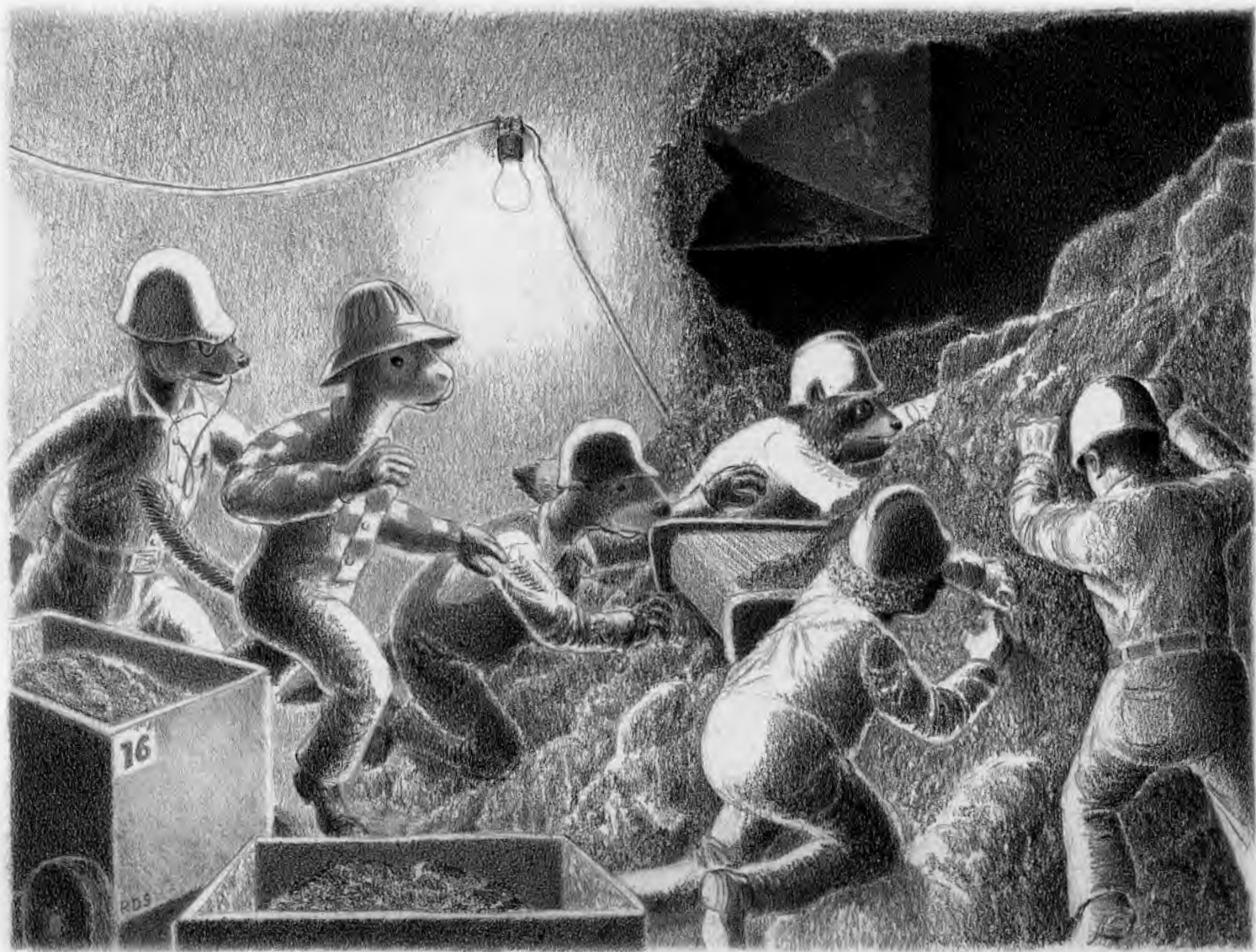
"He's alive!" Arabella shouted across to the others. "Have you found Prosper?"

"Not yet," said Franklin.

Lafayette anxiously shifted his eyes to the other side of the tunnel. "Prosper too?" he said weakly. He tried stiffly to sit up. "Here, I'm all right," he said to the three who'd pulled him out. "I'll manage. Go help find Prosper."

Lucy and Fergus went. Arabella stayed with Lafayette and gently helped him into a sitting position where he could see what was happening.

The others had moved a lot of dirt in their frantic search. "Try over here!" said Mayor Higgins, tugging at Peabody's sleeve. Peabody began scooping his shovel



at floor-level while she and Franklin cleared dirt from under the conveyor belt. Fergus pointed: "There's his tail!" It was quick work to uncover Prosper's feet; then, with Mayor Higgins grabbing one leg and Franklin the other, they pulled him out. Caked with dirt, Prosper lay stretched on the tunnel floor while Lucy and Franklin brushed away the damp soil from his nose and mouth.

"I think he's alive," said Lucy, "but he seems to be unconscious." Prosper's face was peaceful, and his eyes were closed. Gently they raised his head to look for wounds; and seeing none, they rubbed his wrists and slapped his cheeks and sat him up against the tunnel wall. Slowly he opened one eye; then the other. He blinked and looked about him. He coughed and shifted his weight against the wall.

"Caught me by surprise," he muttered, closing his eyes again.

Lafayette Lizard came and knelt beside him. "Are you all right?" he asked. "No broken bones?"

Prosper opened his eyes, raised one shoulder cautiously, and flexed his toes. "Nothing missing," he replied. "All in a night's work." His gaze moved from face to face as they bent over him. "Thanks for pulling me out. The dirt was heavy. Did you find my shovel?" Peabody held it up. "Got to get back to work," said Prosper, trying to stand. Lucy held him down: "You and Lafayette rest for a bit. We can dig out the *Murchison*."

Fergus and Franklin went to get their empty carts. While Prosper and Lafayette sat watching, the others went to work with both shovels to clear the tunnel. They were still digging and filling the carts when Priscilla Possum, Matthew Muddie, and Izzy the Witch arrived pushing their empty ones.

When she learned what had happened, Izzy went at once to Lafayette and Prosper. "Do you both feel all right?" she asked.

"Ready to start digging again," said Lafayette.

"A little rumped," said Prosper. "They wouldn't let us work any more. So I've been sitting here looking up at the place the dirt came from. We seem to be right at the edge of the factory's foundation wall."

Izzy looked up. There where the ceiling had been was an expanse of damp gray concrete, the underside of the factory's foundation floor. The falling dirt had also exposed a section of vertical concrete wall extending upward. "We're right at the corner," she said. "The dirt was probably looser here where the walls meet."

The filled carts were taken away. Fergus and Franklin arrived with their empty carts, and following them was Doctor Badger with his. The doctor hurried over to check Lafayette and Prosper for possible injuries. He tapped them and poked them and looked into their eyes. Then he smiled in a satisfied way and said, "You're both very lucky."

"Are you *sure* they're all right?" Izzy asked anxiously.

Doctor Badger nodded. "Just shaken up, as far as I can tell."

"Can we go back to work now?" inquired Lafayette.

"As soon as you like," said the doctor.

The diggers had exposed the back of the *Murchison*. As soon as the escape hatch was cleared, Miss Proudie Fairblossom climbed down to join them.

"I'm certainly glad you folks were back here to clear out the dirt," she said. "Otherwise, I'd have had to surface; and—if the map's right—I'm sure it would have been right by the factory wall." Looking up, she saw the concrete floor above them, and gave a quick nod: "Indeed!"

"We worried about you being trapped in there," said Mayor Higgins, "but we figured you'd have enough air till we got you out."

"It got pretty stuffy," said Miss Proudie, "but I used some of the compressed air that Fergus put in. I knew something had gone wrong—that a huge weight was pressing on the conveyor belt—when the *Murchison's* forward movement slowed, and I stopped the engine immediately."

"As soon as we've cleared the dirt," said Fergus, "we'll be ready to start digging the tunnels on the lower level. I'll readjust the depth-gauge and take over driving the *Murchison* to start the descent."

"And then," said Priscilla Possum, "the hardest part begins."

They had just started work on the second level when a letter arrived from Butcher, Skinner, Flesher, and Tanner, Attorneys at Law, informing them of the court date on their lawsuit against the Sudge-Buddle Company. "The pictures taken by our photographer," wrote Mr. Skinner ("Humpf!" said Lafayette), "are ready to be entered as evidence. Likewise, your statements and the chemical analyses we had done of the factory smoke and the water in Little River." ("Pooh," said Fergus.) "However, we do need several of you to testify regarding the damage the factory has caused to your health, property, and general well-being." He set a time for a delegation of Groverpeople to come to his office in the city, and a group of them went.

Nobody could get very excited about going to court, or even feel much interest that the lawsuit had resurfaced in their lives. They were all too tired from digging. Besides, it irritated them to have to twice stop work on the tunnels—first, to meet with Mr. Skinner and make arrangements for their testimony, and then to have to sit and cool their heels in court. They saw it both as an inconvenience and a discouraging delay.

At the trial, Mr. Skinner was present, along with several others from his firm whom the Groverpeople didn't know. Six lawyers were representing the Sudge-Buddle Company. Mr. Snade was there, too, fidgeting nervously and nibbling his fingernails, and Mr. Sudge himself, who sat passing notes to his lawyers and scowling at the Groverpeople from across the courtroom. Most of the Groverpeople made a point of ignoring Mr. Sudge; but Randy Possum frowned back at him—partly to *keep* him scowling while, with brightly colored threads, he embroidered a comical likeness of Mr. Sudge's face on a piece of fine linen.

Sitting in rows were the Sudge-Buddle witnesses—Company experts, three chemists, a medical doctor, and two night watchmen. The judge, a gray-haired man with eyeglasses, said very little while the arguments and testimony and examining of witnesses went on, but for the most part merely listened, leaning

back in his chair with his eyes closed. Now and then he would rouse himself to ask a question, or to scribble quick notes on a yellow pad.

When the time came for the Groverpeople to testify, both sets of lawyers asked them questions. Mr. Skinner tried to make them feel at ease, and asked them to explain as clearly as they could their side of the case. Rebecca Raccoon had brought along a particularly foul bedsheet to display, and during her testimony, she spread it out on the floor to show what the factory smoke had done.

Mr. Skinner had warned them in advance about the questions of the Sudge-Buddle attorneys: "They will try their best to discredit you as witnesses—to make you look untrustworthy, stupid, dishonest, and greedy." But even Mr. Skinner's warning didn't prepare them for the nastiness of the Sudge-Buddle attack. Every one of the lawyers' questions was designed to make them appear, at worst, as liars; and, at best, as stupid and silly.

There was no proof, the lawyers said, that the alleged illnesses of Thaddeus Higgins and Jamie Otter had been caused by the factory. And even if they *had* been ill, Doctor Badger's opinion didn't count; he was only a country doctor, far removed from developments in modern medical research and the sophistication of city practice; and besides, he was a plaintiff in the lawsuit, an "interested party" who had a great deal to gain in saying that the factory was to blame.

Moreover, they implied that Lucy and Oscar Otter were simply using their son's alleged illness to defraud the Company of a cash return. The child was well now, wasn't he? with no permanent damage? Of course.

And as for the failure of the Barkers' peach crop—fiddlesticks! It had been a bad year for peaches everywhere. Besides, Ben Barker and Elizabeth H. were incompetent farmers who had no basis for claiming damages, since they never made much money from their peaches even in good years, and certainly didn't stand to lose much in a bad year: they always *gave* much of their crop away!

And if painters (whether of buildings or pictures) were inept and bungling, how was the factory to blame?

As for the complaints about the truck traffic, hadn't the Company shown a sense of responsibility and demonstrated its concern and good will by helping to pay for a fence to protect the schoolchildren? The attorneys reminded the court of the efforts the Company had made to reduce pollution at the factory, the expense they had gone to; of the sabotage by "parties unknown" of the waste pipes and smokestack; of the lack of cooperation shown by the local Sheriff in pursuing the investigations.

They tried to discredit Lafayette Lizard's testimony on the grounds that he was a sensationalist editor trying to sell newspapers; and Rebecca Raccoon's on the grounds that, as a reporter, she'd written stories against the factory and thus had a "vested interest" in the lawsuit above and beyond whatever money she hoped to receive.

As for Rebecca's blackened bedsheet—well, to use *that* as an exhibit was simply laughable: any number of things could have caused the spotting.

At this point, Mr. Skinner offered—if it pleased the court—to present an expert witness later, a chemist who could testify that the spotting was similar to the

“known composition” of the factory fallout. The Sudge-Buddle attorneys objected. The judge called the lawyers for both sides up to the bench; and after much back-and-forth mumbling which no one else could hear (try as they might), the judge granted Mr. Skinner the court’s permission and recessed the trial till the following day. The Groverpeople all went home. (“Thanks for coming,” said Mr. Skinner. “I’ll be in touch with you.”) Back to the tunnels.

The second level was far enough below the first to allow the dirt between to form a solid roof. Nonetheless, the danger of cave-ins was greater than ever before. Frequent air shafts were needed between the upper and lower levels, but digging them was very difficult. Whenever the *Murchison* started a new shaft from below, they had to be sure that when it emerged on the upper level, it would come through the floor of a tunnel, and not demolish a column or wall.

In mapping the two levels, and trying to figure all of this out, the complex calculations involving distance, direction, depth, and angle of ascent nearly drove Fergus crazy. Each time he finished, he could only hope that he’d done it right. By and large, he did pretty well. In the digging—which was the test—there were some mistakes and some failures (though no disasters), some lucky and unlucky accidents, and several brilliant successes. But without question, the lower level was at least three times harder to dig than the upper level had been; and as they progressed, the patterning of the tunnels was not nearly as neat and elegantly precise.

Getting the dirt out was also a problem. The sloping air shafts which were used as exit ramps to the upper level were almost too steep for the battery-powered dump carts, which were extremely heavy when loaded with dirt. Fergus was forced to go through an entirely new set of calculations to make the air shafts longer and more gently sloping. The change worried him, because it increased the possibility of the tunnels collapsing too soon when the lakewater came surging up from below. But there was nothing else to be done.

On the lower level, as on the upper, they tried to keep each tunnel as short as possible to save folks’ energy and speed up the removal of dirt. As before, only a single string of light bulbs led from Otters’ basement to the place where they were working. In spite of the many air shafts, there seemed to be less air to breathe on the lower level than on the upper, and what there was seemed stale and putrid.

As the days went by, the tight oppressiveness of the tunnels began to jangle everybody’s nerves. Everyone came to dread going to work on the lower level. They felt trapped, imprisoned, cut off from the rest of the world. It terrified them to be so far below the surface, to be separated from it by a second maze of tunnels which could swallow them up if they strayed off the lighted track. They found they could endure it better if they didn’t talk about it much. While trying to sleep between shifts, some of them began having terrible dreams that woke them up wide-eyed and screaming.

Aware of what his friends were feeling (for he felt it himself), Roscoe Lynx had tried to set an example of strength and good humor, both to help them keep their spirits up, and to help them find the courage to continue. In a gruff, bumptious, hearty manner he had gently given them support when they most needed it, and had himself gone cheerfully to work, jokingly referring to their digging as "the Job." He had never mentioned his own bad dreams, or talked of the crawling terror he always felt in the lower tunnels. But every time it was his turn to do "the Job," it took him every bit of his strength and will to force himself to go down into the dark honeycomb. Each time he went, he was certain he would never come out. It was like being nailed into a box and buried alive.

Roscoe was the first to crack. One night in late September, when he was standing in Otters' basement just preparing to begin his shift, he gave a sudden cry, threw himself onto a chair, and clung to it as someone drowning would cling to a plank.

Doctor Badger, extremely tired from working his own shift, had just come up from the tunnels and was chatting with Oliphant Owl when Roscoe fell onto the chair. The Doctor saw that Roscoe was shaking all over, as though suffering a severe chill.

He went immediately to Roscoe's side. "What is it? Are you sick?"

Roscoe's trembling was so violent he could hardly speak. His thoughts tumbled out explosively, shattered and broken. "I can't . . . go back down there! I *can't*! I wasn't meant to live like a mole! I was made for the sun and the sky. For the fields and open air. Down there, I feel I'm smothering! Like the whole earth is coming down on me . . . squeezing my breath away! That enormous weight hanging just above my head!—all those dark tunnels going in all directions! I just can't take it anymore!" And he clung to the chair, his eyes shut tight, muscles rigid, rocking back and forth. Oliphant and Doctor Badger watched helplessly. Though he hadn't admitted it to anyone, Doctor Badger felt the same way that Roscoe did.

For some time now, Doctor Badger had been expecting someone to crack. He had no way of knowing who it would be, or when it would come; but he knew that it would. He was surprised it had taken so long.

"Try to hold on, Roscoe," Oliphant said quietly. "We're just about finished. Fergus thinks one more week will see it through."

Roscoe, his eyes still tightly shut, swallowed, and shook his head. "We've been down there night after night for almost three months—and I just can't take it anymore!" He wiped his nose with his shirt sleeve and looked at them beseechingly, his eyes wild and sad. "Look," he said quickly, "there must be something I can do up here! I'll take the barges down to the landfill. I'll stay in the basement and empty the carts. Anything but the tunnels!"

Doctor Badger patted his shoulder reassuringly. "It's all right, Roscoe. Don't feel bad about it; there's no need to. We're all feeling the strain. I hate to go down there too. I have to force myself each time. But somehow I'm still able to put up with it. You stay up here and work the barges. I'll take your shift."

The Doctor went back to the tunnels; and Roscoe, greatly relieved (though



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somewhat embarrassed by his breakdown), hurried to the watertight doors and began working doubletime to load the barges. They had never been filled so fast.

On that same shift, the second person cracked. This time it was Elizabeth H. She and Doctor Badger were shoveling dirt on opposite sides of the conveyor belt, close behind the *Murchison*; she had just turned to speak to him when the lights went out.

Darkness fell upon them like a fist; swallowed them like a mouth. A blackness total and complete; the darkest dark of bankvaults, coalsacks, and forgotten graves.

Elizabeth H. screamed—long and loudly: a piercing shriek that went on and on, rising and falling, so filled and quavering with panic and despair that it lifted the hairs on Doctor Badger's scalp. Then it stopped, and he heard her shovel fall clattering beneath the wheels of the conveyor belt. The silence was almost worse than the scream.

Suspended in the blackness that from all sides pressed in upon him like a crushing weight, Doctor Badger shrank back against the tunnel wall as the conveyor belt's steel frame continued to clank and rumble past him. The *Murchison* burrowed onward through the earth, moving farther and farther away, and the clattering of stones in the cone-screw became very faint. The conveyor belt had moved past him, and he could hear the dirt spilling off the end onto the tunnel floor.

His eyes, adjusting to the dark, caught a faint gleam of light that came from the rear escape hatch of the *Murchison*. As fast as he could, he groped toward it down the narrow space between the wall and the jiggling belt-frame, climbing and stumbling over the heaps of loose dirt that were piling up in the *Murchison's* wake. Twice he lost his footing and nearly slid under the wheels. Then, finally at the rear of the machine, he frantically pounded on the hatch. Almost at once the *Murchison* stopped. Fergus Fisher opened the hatch and looked out, quite astonished at the darkness.

"Turn on the spotlight!" the Doctor cried. Fergus flipped a switch beside the hatch and flooded the tunnel with light.

Over the tumbled heaps of dirt, they saw Elizabeth H., some distance away, sitting motionless against the wall. M. Lucius Ferret was bending over her. As Doctor Badger and Fergus scrambled toward them over the dirt, Priscilla Possum came running from the opposite direction, from far down the tunnel where the *Murchison* had left her stranded with her cart.

Her face chalk white and streaked with dirt, Elizabeth H. sat loosely slumped, like an unstrung puppet, or a crumpled rag doll. "Are you hurt?" Doctor Badger asked, dropping to his knees beside her. "Were you caught in the machinery?"

Quaking with heavy sobs, she shook her head, unable to speak. She seemed to be staring into space at something they couldn't see. Through her sobs she began a soft moaning.

Doctor Badger put his arm around her shoulders and began speaking in a calm, even voice: "It's all right, Elizabeth H. We're all here, and safe. You, and me; Fergus; Priscilla; M. Lucius. The lights went out. We don't know why. But

Fergus has turned on the spotlight, and there's no reason to be afraid. We'll just sit here and wait till the overhead lights go on again." Over her bowed head, he motioned to Priscilla with his eyes; and Priscilla, nodding, sat down next to Elizabeth H., picked up her limp hand, and held it in both her own.

"Are you sure you aren't hurt?" the Doctor continued gently.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "No, no," she sobbed, "not hurt."

"Good," said Doctor Badger, patting her shoulder. "When the lights went out, I wasn't sure what had happened to you. I was hoping you hadn't been injured. The blackout caught us all by surprise. Why, Fergus didn't even know about it. He just kept burrowing away as though nothing had happened. You know, Fergus, you ought to install some kind of rearview mirror on the *Murchison* so you can see what's happening to your friends."

"It's an idea," said Fergus. "The kind I should have thought of."

Elizabeth H. gave a little smile at this. Her sobbing grew quieter. She sniffled and wiped her nose with the back of her hand, then shook her head again, and said in a shaky voice, "I'm sorry to give way like this—and cause you people so much worry. I—I don't know what came over me. I don't usually carry on so." Priscilla gave her hand a squeeze. "But when the lights went out, something inside of me just snapped. That's all I can say. I didn't realize I was so close to the edge. I don't know if I can stand to be in the tunnels anymore."

"You're not alone in feeling that," the Doctor told her.

"We're all close to the edge," M. Lucius Ferret said softly. "Why, if I didn't manage to keep my mind on other things, I wouldn't be able to work down here at all."

"I've got to get out of here!" cried Elizabeth H. "Can't we take one of the air shafts up to the first level and find our way back to the basement? There's a shaft down this tunnel not very far back!" She gathered herself as though to stand up, and Doctor Badger had to restrain her. "You know the rules," he said. "When the lights go out, we're to stay in place till either they go on again, or a search party comes."

"I don't *want* to wait!" she cried.

"We've at least got *light* here," said M. Lucius. "If you went to the upper level, you'd run the risk of getting lost and wandering around in the dark."

Her cheek twitched, and her chin began to tremble. With a sigh, she settled back against the wall and closed her eyes. "We'd better wait," she said.

They waited.

"Do we know who else is working the carts?" asked Doctor Badger. He knew that Hilda was. "I'd like to know who else is trapped in the dark."

M. Lucius pulled a list of names from his pocket and read it to them in the glare of the spotlight. They listened tensely, wondering, as they heard each name, how that person was faring.

"Matthew Muddie. Simon Skunk. Miss Proudie Fairblossom. Thorstein Raccoon. Tonia Turtle. Parker Packrat. Izzy. Arabella Raccoon. Mayor Higgins. Franklin Groundsquirrel. Hilda Badger. Peabody. Oscar Otter. All of them with carts, either coming or going. On this level, or the one above."

Doctor Badger thought about his wife. Hilda wasn't the type of person who gave way to panic or went to pieces in a crisis. But then neither was Roscoe Lynx nor Elizabeth H. "They all know the rules," he said. "That they're not supposed to go anywhere—but just sit tight and wait till the lights go on, or rescue comes. Like us."

"Yes, but *we've got light*," said Priscilla.

They settled in. Except for a faint humming that came from the *Murchison*, the tunnel was so still they could hear each other's breathing. The air was becoming oppressively stale and stuffy. As the minutes dragged by and their own nervousness grew, they increasingly wondered how well the others were enduring their own private darknesses.

Suddenly, Priscilla Possum startled them by voicing the thought that each of them had been pondering silently: "Do you suppose there's been a cave-in up there? Can it be that we're trapped down here, and they can't get to us?"

"Don't think about that," said M. Lucius quietly. "We've got to stay calm. If there *was* a cave-in, we'd still have many tunnels to get out of, and there would still be air shafts open to the surface."

Once again Elizabeth H. began to cry softly; and Doctor Badger, shaking his head, put his finger to his lips. They nodded and stopped talking. All five of them settled down, in their own ways, to wait as long as necessary.

The minutes crept by. Fergus got up and moved down the tunnel, where, at some distance, he began pacing nervously among the carts. Doctor Badger got rather stiffly to his feet and went to join him. M. Lucius Ferret took the Doctor's place beside Elizabeth H.

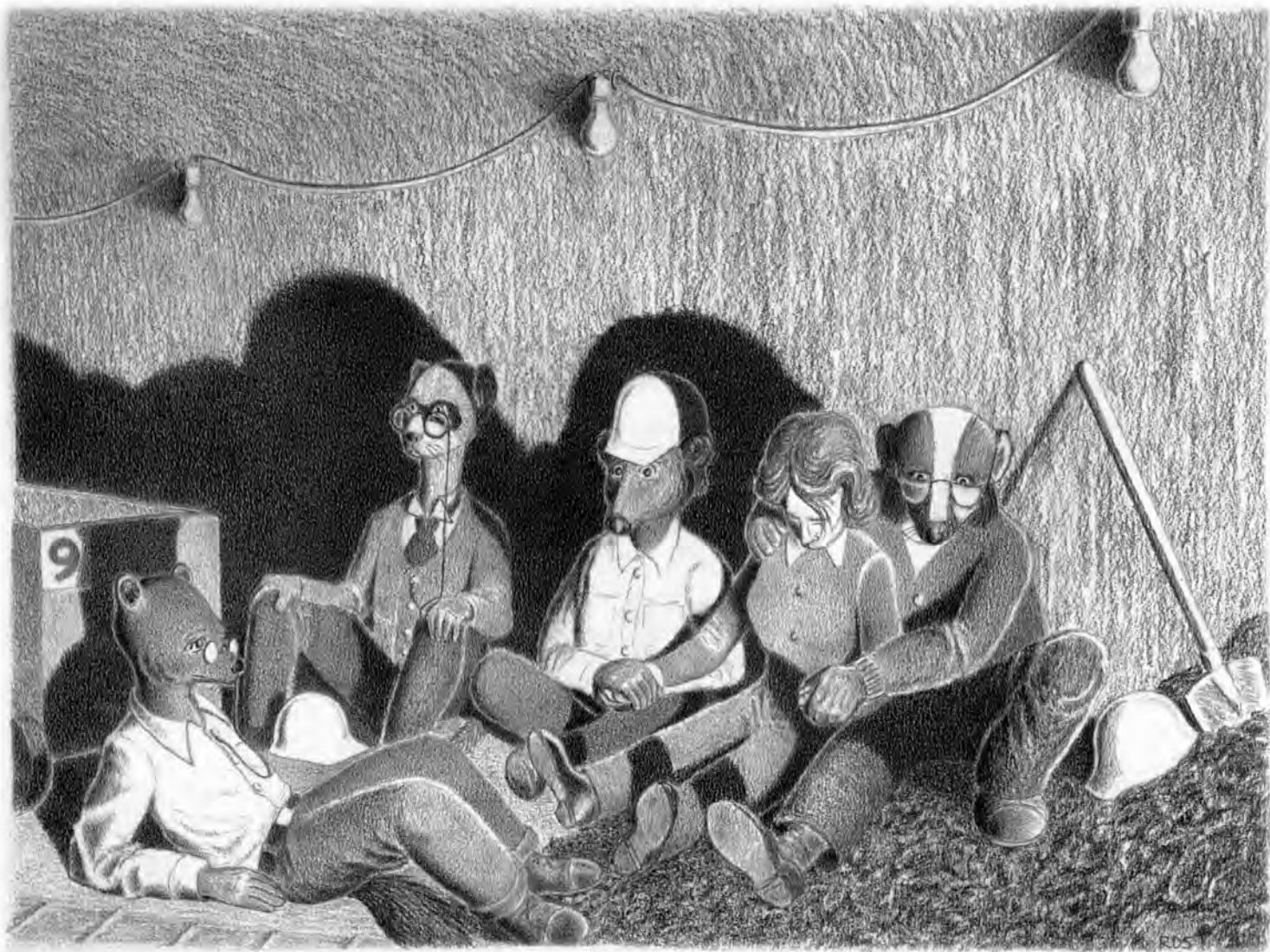
When the Doctor reached him, Fergus was glaring at the dark light bulbs strung along the tunnel roof as if, through sheer force of will, he could make them light up again. "Fergus," said the Doctor, "I know that the tunnels are almost finished, and that we've only got another week to go. But I think we should quit now, and go with what we've got. Elizabeth H.'s breakdown was the second one tonight. Roscoe was the first; he couldn't even come down to work. If nerves are worn this thin, I hate to think what might be happening to all those other people trapped in the tunnels. Surely we've done enough."

"I agree," said Fergus. "We'd better stop." He reached into his pocket and brought out a carefully drawn map. "We're here," he said, pointing. "When the lights go on, we'll dig one more tunnel: upward. To the water pipe from Cherrystone Lake." He pointed. "The pipe enters the factory at the depth of the upper level, just a little ahead of where we are now. I'll start a sloping ascent right from the point the *Murchison's* at."

"Look!" said Doctor Badger. Far down the tunnel a powerful light was bobbing toward them. "It must be a search party," said Fergus. As the light came closer, toward the answering beam of the *Murchison*, they finally could see who was bringing it: Izzy, and Franklin, and Mayor Higgins.

"What happened to the lights?" Priscilla asked, as the rescue party arrived.

"The generator shorted out," replied Mayor Higgins. "Rebecca Raccoon is trying to fix it."



M. Lucius Ferret handed her the list of names. "Did you find everybody in the tunnels whose name is on this list?"

She read it and nodded. "We found them all."

"Were they all in good shape?" Doctor Badger asked anxiously.

"Yes," she said, "and they were very glad to see us! Nobody was hurt or in a state of collapse. Peabody had just curled up and gone to sleep."

"Well, during the day he's got to deliver mail," said M. Lucius with a smile.

"So now everybody's out except us," said Franklin.

"Well, I wonder if we shouldn't go too?" said Elizabeth H. "I've had it."

Fergus looked again at his map, glanced at the *Murchison*, watched Elizabeth H. making her way through the carts leaning on Priscilla's arm, and then—with quick decision—went to the Mole Simulator, climbed in, turned off the spotlight, and killed the engine. It was eerily dark again as he hurried to catch up with the others, who were crowding around the flashlight as they moved up the tunnel. He'd come back later to do the final digging: but for now, Fergus had had it too.

After the generator had been repaired and the electric lights were on again in the tunnels, the whole group had a brief planning session in Otters' basement. Fergus explained what he wanted to do. The *Murchison* would dig one last tunnel, sloping up from the lower level to a point just below the water pipe, then back down again, veer off to one side, and burrow underground to surface on the other side of the Sudge-Buddle property line. The sloping tunnel to the pipe would be cleared of dirt in the usual way, but shovels would be used to remove the last dirt from around the water pipe. It wouldn't be necessary to clear the *Murchison's* escape tunnel; but since the machine would fill in the hole behind it as it moved, once he'd begun it Fergus would have no choice but to go forward until it was time to surface.

Once the water pipe was laid bare, the final action could begin.

"Who wants to help with the very last tunnel?" Fergus asked.

Everyone volunteered except Roscoe Lynx and Elizabeth H.

"Then let's go," said Fergus.

Chapter 29

THE LAST TUNNEL went according to plan. After digging upward from the lower level to within a short distance of the water pipe, Fergus backed the *Murchison* down the slope until he was even with the upper set of tunnels—which lay to his left behind a vertical wall of dirt. On this wall he sprayed a patch of yellow paint to show the others where to dig in order to break through into the upper level.

Then he slowly backed down to the bottom, changed his direction, and burrowed a new tunnel upward—away from the pipe. This new tunnel nobody cleared, and dirt blocked it completely as the *Murchison* circled eastward toward the river, then south toward Otters' house. When his map and distancer told him he was past the Sudge-Buddle property line, Fergus tilted the cone-screw downward to avoid cutting through the main tunnel that led to Otters' basement. The *Murchison* descended, passed beneath the main tunnel, and finally surfaced in the field to the south of Otters' house.

From there, Fergus drove overland through Grover Park and Pheasant Run to the bridge by the Old Hex Inn. Crossing the bridge, he saw from the cabin window a line of dirt-filled barges passing below in the dark water. Someone walking beside them on the bank (in the dark, he couldn't tell who) waved to him, and Fergus flashed the spotlight in reply. As he locked the door of the workshed behind the *Murchison*, Fergus felt a warm satisfaction—both with how well the digging had gone, and at his knowledge that now the entire factory—plant, parking lot, administration building, and smokestack—was surrounded by the hidden openings of the slanting air shafts.

While Fergus was making his getaway, Matthew Muddie and Randy Possum dug the last dirt from around the water pipe. When the pipe was completely bare, stretching wall to wall above their heads, they moved down the slope to the spot that Fergus had marked with yellow paint. Here they began digging at waist height with their shovels, and in a few minutes had pushed a hole through into the outermost tunnel of the upper level. They made the hole just large enough to crawl through.

Then, well satisfied, they continued down the slope to the lower level, taking down the string of light bulbs as they walked. Ahead of them, the other workers were pushing out the last cartloads of dirt. Down, down they went to the very deepest part of the lower level, then up again by the shortest route to the main tunnel. As they took down the lights, Matthew Muddie unscrewed each bulb just enough to make it go dark in the socket, and Randy Possum carefully coiled the electrical cord into an empty cart they had beside them. By the time they reached the main tunnel, the cart was overflowing with bulbs and cord, and both of them

had long loops of cord draped over their shoulders.

While the others carted the dirt to Otters' basement for its trip downriver, Matthew and Randy, following one of Fergus' maps, re-strung the lights down a series of tunnels on the upper level, taking the shortest route possible to the outermost wall and the water pipe. Each time he secured the cord to the ceiling with a U-shaped staple, Matthew Muddie screwed a bulb into its socket. As they progressed, they left behind a bright trail of light bulbs that would lead them out when they were finished.

Right on target, they arrived at the crawl space they had dug in the outer wall. Through the hole they could see the dark tunnel from the lower level sloping up to the water pipe.

"There it is," said Randy. "Waiting for Parker." Finding they still had quite a lot of unused electrical cord, they coiled it neatly against one wall and then returned the way they had come, pushing the empty cart before them.

The next night—September 27—was the time set for the Final Action. Though everyone was tired, during the afternoon they held a last planning session at the Old Hex Inn. The scheme was really very simple—if everything worked right. As always, they'd left Sheriff Badger out of the planning, so that, if the Sudge-Buddle Company should want him to conduct an investigation for them, he'd be able to undertake it with an open mind. All the Sheriff knew about the night of September 27 was that *he* would be visiting the Otters' home to help Oscar install a new shower bath off the children's bedroom—and maybe play a few games of chess with Oscar afterwards.

Miss Proudie Fairblossom was in charge of the afternoon meeting. She had made a list of the jobs to be done, talked with people to decide who would do what, and organized the doers into teams. There were six teams altogether, each with a code name relating to the job it was supposed to do.

"We'd better run through it," Miss Proudie said to get the meeting underway. "It's important for everyone to know what other folks are doing. Group One has the code name 'Firefly'. Group Two is 'Waterwheel'. Group Three, 'Drumstick'. Group Four, 'Standby'. Group Five, 'Honeybrew'. Group Six, 'Eyeball'. And then, of course, Elizabeth H., whose name will be 'Runabout'. You go through your actions first, Elizabeth H."

"As soon as it's dark," said Elizabeth H., "I'll take Group One—Firefly, that is—to Otters' old house in the truck. Then I'll come back to the Old Hex to be here if Doctor Badger has to be driven somewhere in a hurry."

"We hope there won't be any injuries," said Miss Proudie, "but we've got to be prepared. Firefly will consist of Ben Barker, Simon Skunk, and Parker Packrat. Parker, you'll take your oxy-acetylene cutting torch to Otters' house in the truck—"

"Yes," said Parker. "Ben and Simon and I will go into the tunnels and wait by the water pipe from Cherrystone Lake till it's time to cut it."

"Right. Now let's hear from Waterwheel: Matthew Muddie, Franklin Groundsquirrel, Hilda Badger, Izzy, Prosper, Lucy Otter, Fergus Fisher, Ambrose Fieldmouse, and Cassandra Scissortail."



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"Earlier this afternoon," said Franklin, "Matthew and I hid two rowboats on the south shore of Cherrystone Lake, along with oxygen and acetylene tanks and Parker's other cutting torch. We muffled the boats' oars in old gunnysacks."

"Tim and Tonia Turtle have scouted out the approach to the pumphouse," Matthew Muddie added, "and they'll give us final instructions when we get there."

"We'll cross the Lake in the rowboats," said Ambrose Fieldmouse, "and while Group Three—Drumstick, I mean—distracts the Sudge-Buddle guard, we'll capture the pumphouse, turn off the water supply to the factory, and after Parker's cut the pipeline in the tunnels, turn the water on again and use the cutting torch to remove the valve wheels."

"And then we'll take to the boats for our getaway," said Hilda Badger.

"And I'll act as lookout and serve as cross-country messenger if necessary," said Cassandra Scissortail.

"And I," said Izzy the Witch, "will plant some more of the night-creeping arbutus so the Sudge-Buddle people won't know what's happened at the pumphouse."

"Good," said Miss Proudie, checking the items off on her list. "Now let's hear from Drumstick: Randy Possum, Priscilla Possum, Rebecca and Thorstein Raccoon, Oliphant, M. Lucius Ferret, Scooper Singebottom, and Summerfield Scissortail. What will you be doing?"

"Our job will be to make a disturbance along the pipeline to lure the guard away from the pumphouse," said Priscilla Possum. "So Waterwheel can capture it."

"A diversionary tactic!" smiled M. Lucius, rubbing his hands together.

"Oliphant, Scooper, and Summerfield will act as lookouts and messengers," Priscilla continued, "letting us know where the guard is at all times. The rest of us will probably be spread out along the pipeline, and won't be able to talk to each other."

"And if you're attacked by the guard?" Miss Proudie asked.

"We scatter in all directions," said Thorstein Raccoon. "He can't catch us all."

"I'd hope he wouldn't catch *any* of us," Rebecca commented.

"And when Waterwheel is finished at the pumphouse," Priscilla said, "we'll come back to the Old Hex across the meadows."

"All right," said Miss Proudie, "you seem to know what you'll be doing. Now what about Group Four—Standby? That's Mayor Higgins, Lafayette Lizard, and me."

"We'll go to Otters' basement," said Mayor Higgins, "and stay there while Firefly is in the tunnels. Our job will be to see that the lights stay on, and be ready to go into the tunnels to rescue Firefly if there's any trouble."

"If all goes well, we may have the dullest job of all," said Miss Proudie. "Now, what about Honeybrew: Doctor Badger, Roscoe Lynx, Elizabeth H., and Peabody?"

"We'll stay at the Old Hex," said Roscoe, "to answer the telephone and treat any injuries that come in. Elizabeth H.—"

"I'm Runabout," said Elizabeth H.

"Excuse me," said Roscoe. "Runabout will have the truck ready in case we need to go anywhere in a hurry. Earlier this afternoon, Peabody and I built a roadblock on the lane that runs through The Glen to the road the Sudge-Buddle Company built along their pipeline. If the factory sends out a truckful of people to see what's going on at the pumphouse, they won't be able to get through to their road. It'll take them a good long while to remove *that* roadblock."

"It's a very solid roadblock," Peabody said proudly.

"If they send the helicopter to the pumphouse, that's another story, and a problem we'll have to face when the time comes," said Roscoe.

"I didn't know about the roadblock," said Miss Proudie. "That was good thinking."

"It was Peabody's idea," said Roscoe.

"I've always wanted to build a roadblock," said Peabody, with a broad smile, "but never had a reason to before."

"Group Six," said Miss Proudie, looking at her list. "Eyeball: Grandfather Fieldmouse and Arabella."

"Scooper Singebottom and I spent the morning on the bluffs above Cherrystone Lake," said Arabella Raccoon. "We watched the pumphouse with my binoculars, and I found an excellent specimen of fossilized fan coral. But tonight the job will be to stay at the Grover Schoolhouse and watch from the attic window to see what's happening at the factory."

"If anything strange happens," said Grandfather Fieldmouse, "or if they send people to Otters' house or the Lake, we're to telephone Honeybrew at the Old Hex, and Oscar Otter at home. If necessary, Oscar will get the Sheriff out to preserve the peace."

Miss Proudie folded her list and nodded with a businesslike smile. "You all seem ready for action. Now we'd better go over the sequence of events—everything will depend on strict timing. We'll meet here at nine o'clock sharp for a last-minute briefing and to synchronize our watches. Then we'll scatter to do our various jobs." Here she referred to a second list. "At exactly ten-thirty, when Waterwheel is almost across the Lake in the boats, Drumstick will start the disturbance along the pipeline to draw the guard away from the pumphouse. Waterwheel will capture the pumphouse and keep the guard from coming back in. At ten-fifty, Waterwheel will turn off the water coming from the Lake. Firefly, in the tunnels, will then cut the pipe where it enters the factory. Parker, you'll have exactly ten minutes to get the pipe cut."

"That should be enough time," said Parker. "I looked it over pretty good last night; I think I'll have time to spare."

"Well, don't misjudge the time," said Miss Proudie gravely. "Use your fire, and fly. You'll have just ten minutes, for at eleven o'clock sharp, Waterwheel will turn on the water again at the pumphouse. We don't have any way of knowing how those tunnels will stand up with water pouring into the lower level. You've got to get out of them fast."

She glanced back to her list, then continued: "When the water is turned on

again, Hilda Badger will slice off the valve wheel with the cutting torch while it's in open position. With the wheel gone, the Sudge-Buddle people can't turn the water off even if they manage to get back into the pumphouse. Then Waterwheel will escape in the boats and come back to the Old Hex by way of Maple Crossing."

"I want to report something I learned," said Oliphant. "For the last week I've been keeping an eye on the pumphouse during the late night hours. There's only one guard, but he does have a two-way radio, and he might use it to summon help."

"He may not get a chance to use it," said Miss Proudie. "If he does, I hope it's a truck they send, and not the helicopter." She looked around the group. "Any questions?" No one had any. "All right," she said, "it's home to supper. See you all at nine."

When they reassembled at nine o'clock, the meeting was brief. They were too nervous, excited, and eager to spend much time talking. "Let's synchronize watches," said Miss Proudie. "I have exactly thirteen minutes after nine." They all set their watches at nine-thirteen. It was time to start.

"Here's to our success," said M. Lucius Ferret. "May we all return safely."

"With missions accomplished," Miss Proudie added.

"And a brighter future," said Priscilla Possum.

"There'll be hot honey brew when you all get back," Roscoe Lynx called out, his voice a little louder than he'd intended. "You take care of yourselves, hear? And don't do anything stupid."

They gathered up their things and went their various ways.

Doctor Badger followed his wife to the door and held her hand for a moment before she left. "I wish I were going to the Lake, too," he said, "instead of sitting here by the telephone while you people are having all the fun."

"It would be nice to go boating together again," said Hilda Badger. "But you're needed here, Bascom, in case someone gets hurt. I hope you have a quiet night."

"Peabody and I will play checkers," he said.

"I just hope that I can remember everything Parker taught me about using the cutting torch," said Hilda.

"You'll do fine," he said, squeezing her hand. He watched her go down the path to join the others in Waterwheel as they started up the road toward Maple Crossing.

Simon Skunk and Franklin Groundsquirrel stood briefly on the front porch before separating. "I don't envy you trying to capture the pumphouse," Simon remarked. "Remember what Roscoe said: don't do anything stupid."

"Roscoe would like to be coming with us," said Franklin, with a smile. "He's sure he'd find the pumphouse more interesting than he will the Old Hex Inn." Then, becoming serious, "Simon, I don't envy *you* going down into the tunnels.



Please be careful. Get out before the water comes in."

"Parker has the hardest job," said Simon. "Ben and I are just there to help him out if he needs it."

Clutching her binoculars, Arabella Raccoon went to speak to her mother and father. "You will be careful, won't you?" she asked. "In some ways, I think Drumstick may have the most dangerous job of all."

"We'll be careful," said Thorstein, patting her shoulder. "Don't worry about us."

"With M. Lucius along," Rebecca smiled, "what could possibly go wrong? We'll see you later."

Arabella Raccoon and Grandfather Fieldmouse rode with Standby in Mayor Higgins' car. When the Mayor had parked at the schoolhouse, they let themselves into the building with Matthew Muddie's key and went up to the attic storeroom where, by the east window, they settled into chairs and prepared to watch the factory.

Mayor Higgins, Miss Proudie, and Lafayette Lizard walked back down the road to Otters' house, arriving just as Elizabeth H. drove the truck into the weed-filled yard. Elizabeth H. sat behind the wheel while her husband and Simon and Parker unloaded the pipe-cutting equipment. Then Farmer Ben came to the window of the truck cab and said quietly, "See you later, Runabout. Along about eleven-thirty."

"Try not to get your feet wet," she replied, and quickly backed the truck out of the yard and started for the Old Hex Inn. Ben Barker watched the truck till it was out of sight, then helped the others carry the oxygen and acetylene tanks down to the basement.

"The tunnel lights are working perfectly," Mayor Higgins told them as they came down the stairs. "We'll be waiting for you," said Lafayette. "And if you aren't back here by ten minutes after eleven," said Miss Proudie, "we're coming in after you."

Wheeling their equipment before them in one of the dirt-carts, Ben Barker, Simon, and Parker Packrat followed the single string of lights to the outermost tunnel on the upper level, in the eastern edge of the cloverleaf, and there took up their position beside the hole that had been dug through the tunnel wall.

While Parker set up and adjusted his equipment, Simon stood looking back down the empty tunnel. "Goodness!" he said, "We've come a long way. Straight-through walking is a good reminder of how big the honeycombs really are!"

"If you ever want another reminder," said Farmer Ben with a smile, "I know of a spot downriver with a mighty large landfill!"

Simon chuckled. "I guess I'm wondering how long it'll take us to get out after the pipe's been cut. I didn't look at my watch when we started in. But it certainly took a long time for us to get here."

"Indeed it did," said Parker Packrat. He hoisted himself up to the edge of the hole and crawled through with a flashlight to inspect the water pipe one more time.

"I clocked our trip at eight and a half minutes," said Farmer Ben. "That's with

steady walking;—but we also had the cart and weren't in a big hurry. We might be going faster on the way out."

"True," said Simon.

Parker came back through the hole very excited. "It's really quite a big pipe," he said, "but ten minutes should be enough—with time to spare."

"Let's hope so," said Ben Barker.

Looking at his watch, Simon said, "It's twenty minutes till ten. We have over an hour to wait. I brought along a chessboard. Who wants to play?"

Parker was too excited to play chess, and could only pace up and down the tunnel. So Ben Barker and Simon sat down cross-legged and began a game.

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Walking cross-country to the pipeline and the western edge of the Chickalooga Forest, the members of Drumstick discussed what they would do to lure the guard away from the pumphouse at Cherrystone Lake.

"Whooping in the woods," said Randy Possum. "That would bring him out."

"No thank you," said Priscilla Possum. "I'm not going to whoop in the woods. Or holler, either."

"Just a teensy weensy bit," said Randy, grinning. "You're not too old to whoop and holler, Aunt Priscilla."

"I never said anything about being too old," said Priscilla. "I said I wasn't going to do it."

"Whooping and hollering there may be aplenty," said Thorstein Raccoon, shifting the heavy suitcase he carried from his left to his right hand. "But I'd rather *they* did it, and not us. I think the best way would be hammering on the pipe."

"That's what we'd settled on," said M. Lucius Ferret, "and the more I think about it, the better it seems. The pipe will carry the sound right into the pumphouse. The guard will certainly come out to see what's happening. And if we're far enough away, he'll have to come out pretty far."

"It sounds like a good way to start, at least," said Rebecca Raccoon. "Are you sure you brought enough hammers, Thorstein?"

"Yep," said Thorstein, patting the suitcase. "And a Hallowe'en mask for whoever wants one."

"How shall we split up?" asked Rebecca. "If we're going to hammer at different places along the pipe, we'll have to decide on who'll be where."

"The guard will never know how many of us there are," said Randy, "and we can come at him from all directions, if we have to."

"I'd like to be closest to the pumphouse," said Thorstein, "so he can see my mask."

"I wish I still had my trumpet," said Randy.

After walking for another ten minutes in the light of the half-moon, they reached the Sudge-Buddle pipeline. Perched upon its trestles above the ground, to their left it arrowed off downhill to the cluster of lights in the valley that

marked the factory. To their right, the pipeline angled uphill into the woods, climbing to the High Country and Cherrystone Lake.

"Look," said M. Lucius, pointing upward. "Oliphant, and the Swallows."

"Right on schedule," said Priscilla, looking at her watch. "It's ten minutes till ten. It'll be ten after ten when we reach the pumphouse. Uphill all the way." They waved to the birds and began following the pipe into the High Country, along the road so conveniently provided for them by the Sudge-Buddle Company.

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On their way to Cherrystone Lake, the folks in Waterwheel stopped in Maple Crossing at Izzy's General Store. There Izzy rummaged through her display racks to find dark clothing for those who didn't have any: a charcoal sweater for Hilda Badger, a navy blue jacket for Matthew Muddie, and a black raincoat for Fergus Fisher. While Prosper put on his black cape, Izzy packed several items into her wicker basket and covered them with a blue and white checked cloth. Then, keeping their voices to whispers, they left Maple Crossing and began the winding climb through the Chickalooga Forest.

"Autumn is coming," Ambrose Fieldmouse observed. "Already some of the trees are losing their leaves. We finished the tunnels at a good time; in a couple of weeks more, the nights would be getting chilly, and it wouldn't be nearly so much fun rowing on the Lake."

"It's not just autumn that's making the leaves fall," said Izzy. "It's partly the smoke from the factory. Here, let me show you what I mean." She shone the bright beam of her flashlight toward an outcropping of limestone. "Do you remember how that moss *used* to look?"

They looked at the moss-covered rocks in the beam of her light and gave a gasp of astonishment. When they had last seen it, the moss had been a thick carpet the texture of rich velvet—in color, a bright emerald green. Now it was parched and brown, crispy brittle, as if scorched. In many places, clumps of it had simply disintegrated and fallen away, exposing patches of bare rock.

Izzy nudged some of it with the toe of her boot, and it crumbled into dusty fragments. "The smoke has been much worse in Maple Crossing since they got the factory going again," she said. "On bad days, when the wind is wrong, it's almost impossible for us to breathe."

"The surface of the rocks looks very odd, too," said Ambrose Fieldmouse. "Like some sort of chemical change has been taking place."

"An acid reaction," said Fergus Fisher, "caused by sulfur compounds in the smoke mixing with moisture in the air. It's eating away the limestone."

"Let's go on," said Matthew Muddie grimly. "It's getting on to ten o'clock."

When they reached the lakeshore, Tim and Tonia Turtle were waiting for them at the spot where the rowboats were hidden. "There's one guard on duty," Tonia told them. "Till six in the morning. He does have a shotgun, so be careful."

"The fence they've built around the pumphouse extends into the water on both sides," said Tim Turtle. "You'll have to guide your boats right between the two

arms of the fence. The water's deep enough for you to bring the boats in close to shore; you shouldn't have to do much wading."

"On the far side of the pumphouse, there's a gate in the fence," said Tonia. "It locks from the inside—though a key can unlock it from outside, of course."

"Steer straight toward that light," said Tim, pointing to a tiny bright spot on the opposite shore. "The pumphouse has two windows—one on this side, and one facing the woods."

They thanked them and went to the boats. Franklin Groundsquirrel and Hilda Badger rowed the one containing the valve-cutting equipment and Fergus Fisher and Cassandra Scissortail as passengers. Matthew Muddie and Lucy Otter rowed the other; their passengers were Izzy and Ambrose Fieldmouse sitting at the front, and Prosper, calm and dignified, riding at the rear.

Sometimes side by side, and sometimes with one or the other in the lead, the boats moved stealthily across the Lake. The muffled oars made almost no sound as they dipped and raised, dipped and raised. No one talked, and the only thing to break the silence was the lapping of waves against the sides of the boats.

Across the broad expanse of dark water, blackness crowded down to the barely visible shoreline, there to clump and gather into the shapes of trees.

Over the treetops to the north and east, the limestone bluffs rose pale and dim against the sky, catching a faint glimmer from the moon.

Slowly they drew closer to the pumphouse. The lighted window was much larger now, a bright rectangle against the dark. Peering through his binoculars, Fergus Fisher couldn't get a fix on the window because of the gentle rocking of the boat as the waves lapped against it. "Can't you hold the boat still?" he asked the rowers.

"Shhh!" whispered Hilda Badger. "Voices carry far over water!"

In the other boat, Lucy Otter asked, "What time is it?" Izzy, glancing at her watch, replied: "Twenty-six minutes after ten." "Four minutes till Drumstick begins," Ambrose whispered.

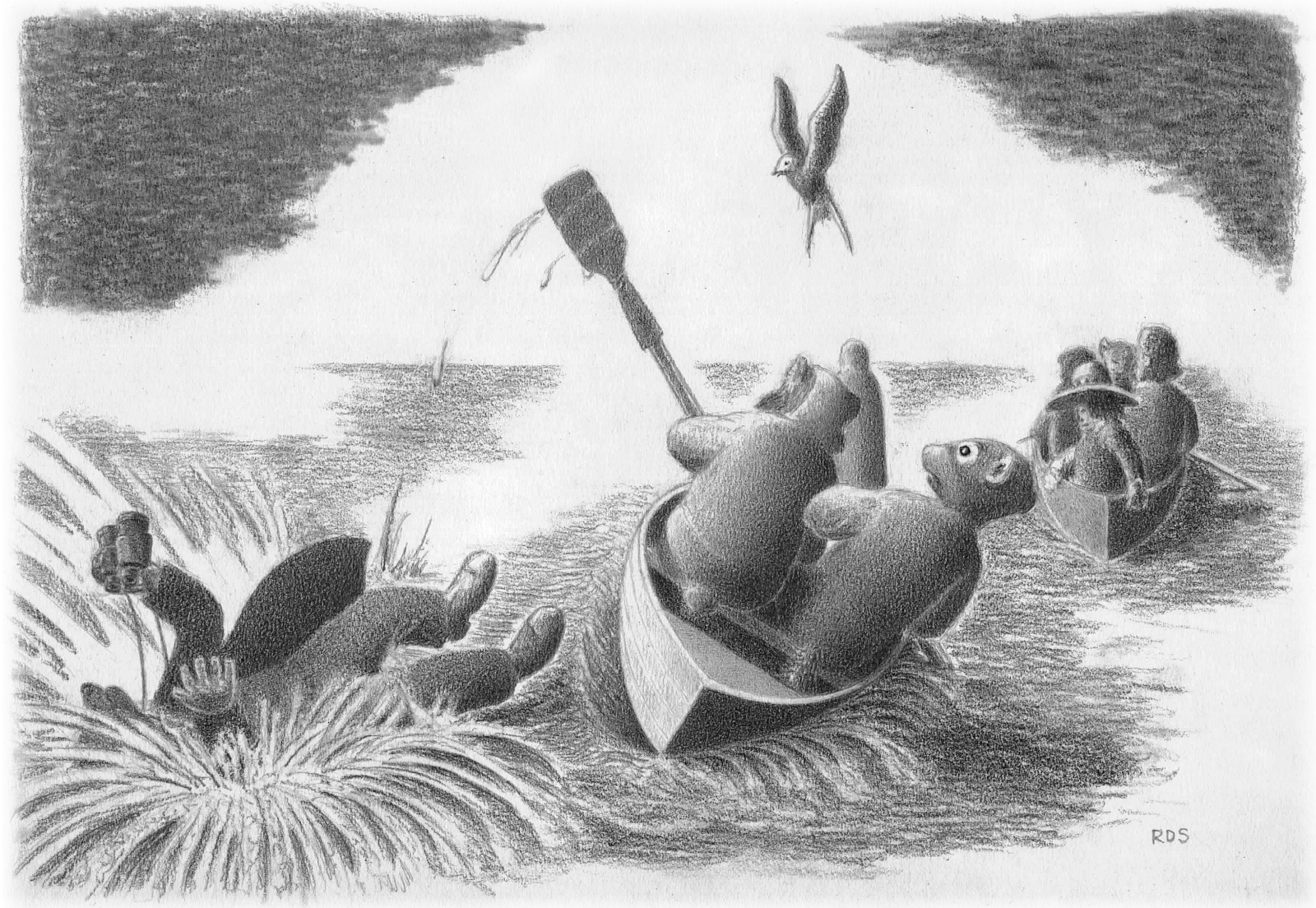
In the lead boat, Fergus was still struggling with the binoculars. "I can make out two lines of fenceposts that come into the water," he whispered. "One on each side of the pumphouse. We'll have to aim right between them."

They moved closer. The window was a spot of warm yellow in the cold blank wall of the pumphouse. Suddenly, a distant ringing sound of metal striking metal shocked the stillness—a rapid rhythmic clanging that swelled and grew.

"Ten-thirty," said Franklin. "They're right on time."

"Ah!" said Fergus. "Drumstick strikes! There's some action inside the pumphouse, too. Someone moving past the window, back and forth." He was fumbling frantically to focus the binoculars. "It's the guard; he's excited, moving about. But I can't quite see what he's doing."

Attempting to get a better view, Fergus drew himself up into a crouching position and leaned far to his right. "Don't stand up in the boat!" cried Franklin, throwing himself to the left to restore the boat's balance. Too late: Fergus teetered shakily, one arm waving, then toppled overboard with a loud splash. The boat rocked violently, and Hilda's oar slapped the water.



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"Oh, for heavens' sakes!" said Izzy from the boat following. "Was that Fergus?"

"Who else would stand up in the boat?" Franklin whispered hoarsely.

Fergus Fisher came struggling to the surface and grabbed the side of the boat with one hand, holding the binoculars high with the other. "Chilly," he muttered, "but not so cold as I would've thought. Not very deep, either. Anyway, before I fell out, I saw what the guard is doing. He's calling for help on his radio."

"That'll bring reinforcements," said Franklin—"maybe even the factory helicopter. I was worried about that radio when I heard about it."

"Look!" whispered Cassandra Scissortail. "The guard's coming out of the pumphouse. Unlocking the gate! There he goes into the woods."

"Let's hurry then!" said Hilda, redoubling her efforts with her oar. "We don't have time to haul you in, Fergus. Can you swim alongside?"

"I'll manage," said Fergus. "Watch that fence!"

The boats glided between the two arms of the chain-link fence and moved in close to shore. "You're doing fine," Fergus said from alongside. "I can touch bottom. All right—" and he let go of the boat and started wading ashore, splashing noisily—a strange, ungainly figure in his black raincoat, with the binoculars held high above his head.

They beached the boats, unloaded the valve-cutting equipment, and carried it through the open door into the pumphouse. Lucy Otter and Izzy the Witch ran to the gate in the fence which the guard had left open. They closed it and locked it from the inside. "Remember, he can open it with his key," Lucy said. "I'll get some wire and a pair of pliers, and we'll tie it shut." She started for their boat, where she had stashed a kit of tools.

"That won't be necessary," said Izzy. "I've got a charm that will do it."

While Izzy was working her charm, Lucy went for the tools. "Just to make double sure," she told her.

"If it makes you happier," Izzy said with a little sigh.

Having worked the charm, she knelt beside her wicker basket and began planting seeds of the night-creeping arbutus along the fence.

Inside the pumphouse, Fergus Fisher was quickly examining the machinery to see what was connected to what, and which things should be taken care of. Nodding and muttering to himself, he studied the brass valve wheels, the dials and gauges on the electrical switch panel, the pipes and cables and push buttons. Matthew Muddie and Franklin Groundsquirrel set up the oxy-acetylene equipment; and Hilda Badger, following Parker Packrat's instructions, adjusted the hoses and pressure gauges to strike off a sample flame with the cutting torch. She got a smoky orange flame which, with further adjustments, she reduced to a piercing blue point.

"How much time do we have?" she asked.

"It's twenty minutes till eleven," said Franklin. "We have ten minutes yet before we shut off the water."

"That's going to be a long time," said Ambrose Fieldmouse. "The guard may come back any minute. And the help he called may arrive anytime. How are you

coming, Fergus? Have you got it figured out yet? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I think I've got it figured out," Fergus answered. "I understand what goes with what, and how they go together. But there's one important switch I can't find."

"It's over here," said Prosper; and with his walking stick, he tapped a small metal box that projected from the electrical panel.

"That's it!" said Fergus. "I don't know how I could've missed it." He turned back to Hilda. "When the time comes, let me operate the valves to shut off the water, and turn it on again. With the torch, you should cut this wheel—it's the main one—and this, and this, and that."

"Right," she said. "I'm all ready to go."

"Good," said Fergus; and then, with great interest, he turned his attention to the two-way radio.

Chapter 30

AT TEN-THIRTY sharp, Drumstick began the diversionary action. Surrounded by the shadows of trees, but standing in the moonlight in clear view from the pumphouse, Thorstein Raccoon, wearing a stiff Hallowe'en mask like a yellow skullface, began banging rhythmically on the water pipe with a steel hammer. Further along the pipe, as it angled down toward the valley, Rebecca Raccoon, Priscilla Possum, Randy, and M. Lucius Ferret began to hammer too. The clanging carried right up the pipe into the pumphouse.

The guard's face appeared in the window. Thorstein beamed the flashlight at him, and then (when he had his attention) shined the light upward at his yellow skull mask. The guard vanished. Thorstein stopped hammering and retreated into the thick underbrush among the trees. The others kept hammering.

The pumphouse door flew open, and the guard came running out. He opened the gate and came galloping along the pipe, clutching a shotgun.

Oliphant Owl fluttered past Rebecca Raccoon. "He's coming, Rebecca! Run for it!" She stopped hammering and ducked into the trees, and a moment later the guard went running past, his shotgun ready. The source of the hammering was still ahead of him, out of sight among the trees further down the hill.

Priscilla Possum was pounding away with her steel hammer (and enjoying it greatly) when Summerfield Scissortail swooped down urgently: "He's almost here, Priscilla. Get out of sight!"

She darted into the bushes and watched with interest as the guard hurried past. Further on, Randy Possum and M. Lucius Ferret continued their hammering.

Scooper Singebottom dipped close to Randy's ear: "Time out, Randy! Head for the trees!"

Which left M. Lucius hammering alone. Where *he* stood, the trees were not so thick; so, to be on the safe side, he had already picked out his hiding place: a weed-filled hollow behind a fallen log which lay near a patch of wild blackberry bushes. Even before Scooper arrived to warn him, M. Lucius heard the guard's heavy footsteps crunching toward him through the twigs and brambles. "Hide!" whispered Scooper Singebottom, swooping past. M. Lucius made a running dive into his hiding place and lay pressed flat behind the log, as the guard trotted by panting for breath.

A short distance down the hill, the guard stopped abruptly in confusion. For here, with fewer trees, he had a clear view of the pipeline. Seeing no one farther along it in the moonlight, and quite startled by the complete silence, he stood uncertain and bewildered for a long moment—then turned and slowly began retracing his steps.

Suddenly, from further up the pipe—about halfway to the pumphouse—the hammering began again. That should be Priscilla, M. Lucius thought with a smile. The guard began running in the direction of the noise. M. Lucius looked at his pocket watch. Ten thirty-eight. He crawled from his hiding place and stood beside the pipe, waiting patiently till Priscilla stopped her hammering. When she did, he began hammering again.

He kept it up till Summerfield arrived to say the guard was coming back. “Well, he doesn’t give up,” M. Lucius thought, lying flat behind the fallen log. The guard went by as before, then stopped, turned, and started back on tiptoe, peering nervously into the darkness on all sides. Then Randy Possum began hammering: clang, clang, clang. And the guard took off running in the direction of the sound. M. Lucius took another look at his watch. Ten forty-three. He felt that it was going to be a long night.



At ten thirty-five, Arabella Raccoon turned to Grandfather Fieldmouse in the schoolhouse attic and said, “I think they should know about this.”

“So do I,” said Grandfather Fieldmouse, “and the sooner the better. You go make the call, and I’ll keep my eye on the helicopter.”

Arabella left the attic and ran downstairs to the telephone in Matthew Muddie’s office. She dialed the number of the Old Hex Inn.

“Eyeball to Honeybrew,” she said urgently, when Roscoe answered the phone.

“Come in, Eyeball,” said Roscoe.

“There’s a lot of excitement at the factory,” she said. “Something must be happening somewhere. Some men came running out of the administration building and talked to the helicopter pilot. He wanted to take off, but Mr. Snade stopped him. There was a big argument, and then the pilot took the helicopter up. But he didn’t head for the Lake; he just started circling the smokestack. He’s still there. But Mr. Snade rounded up three of the night watchmen and sent them off in a truck—through town. I think they’re heading toward the Old Hex. They’re probably going to the pumphouse.”

“The guard may have radioed for help,” said Roscoe. “Yep, here they come over the bridge. They’re turning north along the riverbank, on the lane that leads through The Glen. No doubt about it: they’re heading for the road the Company made when it built the pipeline.”

“Do you think they’ll be able to get through the roadblock?” Arabella asked.

“Not with a truck,” Roscoe replied. “With a bulldozer, maybe. Or a tank. But I wouldn’t count on it. Peabody designed it to stay. And they can’t drive around it because of the stone walls on both sides. No, they’ll either have to take it down, or else leave the truck and continue on foot. Either way, it’ll be quite a while before they get to the pumphouse.”

Arabella hung up, then called Oscar Otter at home to tell him what was happening.

“Interesting,” said Oscar. “I hope everybody’s all right. Sheriff Badger and I

got the new shower bath installed, and now we're playing a rather slow game of chess. Let me know if there's any real trouble, and I'll send the Sheriff to settle things."

Arabella promised, and with growing excitement, ran upstairs to report to Grandfather Fieldmouse and return to the attic window.



The pumphouse guard wasn't the only one bothered by Drumstick's banging on the pipe. No, Waterwheel too—sad to say—was nearly driven crazy by twenty minutes of constant rhythmic clanging. It rang in their ears; it rattled their teeth. Only Fergus Fisher, deeply engrossed in taking apart the two-way radio, seemed not to notice it, but went happily about his work humming a little tune.

At ten forty-nine, Cassandra Scissortail appeared at the doorway and shouted: "The guard's coming back! And he's coming fast!" Izzy and Prosper, who'd been sitting outside having a late snack of cheese and crackers, got up and went with Ambrose Fieldmouse to the gate. On all three sides of the pumphouse, the tall fence was completely hidden by the broad green leaves of the night-creeping arbutus. Like a dense bushy wall or a thick hedge, it entirely screened their activity from outside view.

"The guard may come, but he won't get in," said Izzy with a smile of satisfaction.

"Listen!" cried Ambrose Fieldmouse.

From the other side of the screen, they faintly heard the sound of running footsteps: then a muffled cry, and the footsteps rapidly stumbling away. Cassandra Scissortail flew down laughing and perched on Izzy's shoulder. "The guard took one look at the fence, stopped dead in his tracks, and ran back lickety-split along the pipe!" she gasped.

"Well, he's seen the arbutus before," said Izzy. "He's the same guard who was here when we came up with Carlos Caligo to plant it the first time. I recognized him from the boat when he left the pumphouse. Right, Prosper?"

"He has the same shotgun, too," said Prosper.

Inside the pumphouse, Franklin Groundsquirrel looked up from his watch. "Time," he said.

Fergus Fisher looked up from the radio parts spread before him on the floor, nodded, sighed, and stood up, dusting the seat of his pants. Moving quickly and with great precision, he went to the main valve wheel and turned off the water.



Simon Skunk looked up from the chessboard. "Now," he said to Parker.

Parker Packrat crawled through the hole in the dirt wall and dropped into the dark tunnel that sloped down to the lower level. With him he had his welding goggles and cutting torch. Behind him through the hole trailed the oxygen and acetylene hoses. Simon and Farmer Ben stood ready to operate the tank valves.

"All right," said Parker through the hole. "It's all set, ready to go. Do just what I told you."

They followed his instructions, and a moment later glimpsed a flicker of blue light from the other tunnel. Parker approached the water pipe from below. He would cut it in two places: there, where it came through the wall on his right, from the Lake; and there, where it went into the wall on his left, into the boiler room. When both ends were cut, a section of pipe almost as wide as the tunnel would simply fall away. It should be quite easy. He set to work on the left end first.

Slowly, with cool precision and an artist's care, he applied the flame to the metal pipe. Like a skilled surgeon, he took great pains to make his cut as smooth and clean as possible, avoiding ragged edges. As he planted his feet firmly on the sloping floor and gave his full attention to his work, a great calmness settled over him, and his hand was steady and sure. The many bitter months of hate, and anger, and despair, of anxious waiting, of agony and pain now focused in a single point to be resolved and purified in that blinding blue flame. As he worked, he saw the removal of the section of pipe (and what it meant for everybody's future) as a surgeon would see the removal of a spreading cancer—an act that would allow the whole body to live. To Parker, the operation he performed was not so much revenge as it was an act of healing.



The first incision was complete. Close against the tunnel wall, the pipe had been entirely severed through. He quickly turned his attention to the other end.

"Hurry!" Ben Barker shouted through the hole in the wall. "You have only four minutes left!"

Parker jumped. Was it possible that six minutes were gone already? He set his teeth grimly and started work on the second cut.

He worked fast. The edges of the second cut weren't nearly so smooth and neat as those of the first. He was almost finished when Simon Skunk shouted through the hole: "Parker! The time's almost up! Aren't you done yet?"

"Just about!" he cried, working feverishly. Just a little more! There . . . there . . . a tiny bit more . . .

"Parker!" they cried together.

It was done. The long section of pipe, its connections severed at both ends, dropped thudding to the dirt floor, mashing Parker's foot. Rolling, it knocked his legs from under him. He toppled over it and belly-flopped on the tunnel floor. Dazed, he turned and stared down into the blackness below him, listening in shocked dismay as the section of pipe went rolling down the slope till it came to rest on the floor of the lower set of tunnels. "It wasn't supposed to *do that!*" Parker muttered. He'd been planning to put it on the Twentieth Level beside Priscilla's old sewing machine.

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At the pumphouse:

Franklin Groundsquirrel said, "Eleven o'clock."

"Then let's hope Firefly is finished," said Fergus Fisher. He seized the valve wheel and turned the water on—full force. Lucy Otter checked the gauges on the wall panel: "Looks good. Maximum flow."

"Now," said Fergus to Hilda Badger, who stood ready with the ignited cutting torch, "it's your turn. Start with the large valve wheel in the center. Slice it off flush with the pipe. Don't even leave a nubbin."

As she began the cutting, they all became aware that Drumstick's hammering had stopped. They had all become so accustomed to the clanging that it took them a minute to get used to the silence. "What does it mean?" asked Ambrose Fieldmouse.

"It may mean that we'll be getting visitors soon," said Izzy. She went to the door and listened. From far away: *whump! whump!*—two loud gunshots. They all looked at each other.

"Hurry, Hilda!" said Matthew Muddie. "Just as fast as you can!" But it really wasn't necessary to urge her on.

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In an agony of indecision, Parker Packrat crouched on the tunnel floor looking down into the darkness. His impulse was to make a wild dash down to recover the cut section of pipe from the lower level. But there wasn't time. Any second now, the water would be flooding in. He simply couldn't risk it.

Through the hole, Farmer Ben and Simon were calling to him frantically. Parker gave a great sigh, and shouted back, "I'm coming!" He moved down to the patch of light that marked the hole. They pulled the cutting torch through, and he was just hoisting himself up to crawl through after it, when—with a thunderous whoosh—a waterfall exploded in the darkness above him and a heavy surge of lakewater slammed against his legs and lifted his feet right off the tunnel floor. Parker dug his fingers into the dirt and clung to the edge of the hole, his legs thrashing to regain their footing. Knee-deep and as cold as death, the water rushed against and past him, pushing, tugging at his legs, roaring down the tunnel like an underground river.

"Parker!" Simon shouted above the roar of the water. "Grab hold, we'll pull you through!"

Straining every muscle, Parker stretched his arm into the hole; and his fingertips just barely touched those of Simon reaching in from the other side. But the tunnel floor had turned to slippery mud; he couldn't gain a foothold. The strong current swept him off his feet and away from the hole, tumbled him like a sack of potatoes, end over end, and carried him swiftly, rolling and sliding, down the long slope into the total darkness of the lower level.

In the lighted tunnel above, his friends were stunned. "I had him!" Simon cried. "I felt his fingers!"

"He may have gone all the way down to the lower level," said Ben Barker. "Crawl through and call to him. See if he answers."

Simon crawled into the hole with his flashlight held before him. Poking his head and shoulders through into the dark tunnel, he heard the water thudding against the dirt wall above his head and rushing by beneath him. "Parker!" he shouted, shining the light down the tunnel. "Can you hear me?" The flashlight beam could not reach to the lower level. What it revealed, before it was swallowed in the darkness, was a dry ceiling, half-wet walls, and a slanted floor of rushing water. Uptunnel, the light showed only a thick cylinder of water roaring from the severed end of pipe, jetting across the tunnel to hit the opposite wall like a battering ram. In the light beam, spray and shattering droplets glittered like jewels.

"Do you see him?" Ben Barker shouted, his voice distant and faint over the roaring of the water.

"No!" cried Simon, crawling backward through the hole. "If he's down on the lower level, there's no way he can climb back up against that current." Ben Barker pulled him through into the light. "At the rate the water's coming in," Simon gasped, "the lower tunnels will be full in no time!"

"Then we'll have to go down after him," said Farmer Ben.

"How?"

"Well, what about this electrical cord?" asked Farmer Ben, lifting several loops from the coil that had been left over from stringing the light bulbs. "There's a lot of it. Do you think it would reach the bottom?"

"I don't know. We'll have to try it and see."

Farmer Ben took a pair of insulated pliers from the pocket of his overalls and

cut the electrical cord just beyond the last lighted bulb. "Now you take all this loose cord and get it through the hole into the other tunnel," he said. "I'll tie this end around Parker's oxygen tank."

Simon began poking loops of cord into the dark tunnel while Ben Barker securely tied the other end to the long, heavy tank. "All right," said Farmer Ben, finishing the last knot, "there's our anchor. We'll place it crossways to the hole so it can't pull through. Now, into the tunnel! We'll lower ourselves on the cord till we reach the lower level—"

"Or the end of the cord," said Simon.

They climbed through the hole; and with Simon in the lead holding the flashlight, they began a cautious, backward descent along the slanting, slippery floor, holding tight to the cord stretched above them and bracing their legs against the rushing weight of water. The flashlight was almost no help at all, and their climb down was slow and dark and difficult. At every moment they expected to come to the end of the cord. They had no way of knowing how deep the water would be on the lower level, and they weren't sure that cave-ins might not occur at any moment. They were alarmed to see how rapidly the mud wall beside them was crumbling away beneath the rush of water.

Suddenly the flashlight beam caught Parker, standing knee-deep in water on the lower level, waving his arms to greet them. They had cord enough to get to the bottom, and some to spare.

"Am I glad to see you!" Parker said, as they reached him. "I tried and tried to get back up, but it's too slippery, and the water's coming too fast."

"Are you all right?" Ben Barker asked. "Did you get hurt?"

"A little scuffed and bumped about," said Parker. "Nothing serious."

"How are the walls doing down here?" Simon asked quickly. "What chance of cave-ins before we get out?" He shined the light around the muddy walls, but couldn't tell much. The flowing dark water swallowed the beam.

"I don't know about the walls," said Parker, "—this is the first I've seen 'em. But the water in all the lower tunnels must be as deep as it is here." The water now reached above their knees.

"Let's go," said Simon nervously.

"You first," said Farmer Ben. "Then you, Parker. Then me."

"Is there any way we can take along this section of pipe?" Parker asked anxiously.

Ben Barker stared at him in surprise, then looked at the pipe. Most of it was underwater; only a narrow strip of the upper surface was showing. Ben started to say "What for?" but stopped himself with sudden understanding. "I don't see how, Parker," he said gently. "It's too long and fat and heavy."

"We've got to!" Parker's eyes were desperate. "I thought it was gone, but now that I've got it again, it would be a shame to leave it here! Look, what if we tied the electrical cord around it? Longways, through the hole. Couldn't we pull it up after us?"

"We can try," said Farmer Ben. He stooped down and passed the cord lengthwise through the pipe, tying the loop securely with a large knot. "Now let's

get out of here," he said. "You first, Simon." The water had risen to the middle of their thighs.

Hand over hand they pulled themselves up against the plunging water, fighting to keep their legs under them by digging their heels deep into the soupy mud. The wet cord was so slick it gave no grip, and their hands kept sliding down it. Whatever ground they gained, they had to fight to keep. Twice, Farmer Ben would have been swept away if Parker hadn't been able to respond to his cries by reaching out to hold his arm till he'd regained his footing. Since all hands were needed for climbing, the flashlight was useless; and after vainly trying to stuff it into his pocket, Simon just tossed it away, and they made their climb in darkness—never knowing how far they'd come or how far it was they had to go. With only the cord to guide them, sometimes gaining and sometimes losing ground, they edged their way up the tunnel; suspended in blackness, surrounded by the roar of rushing water, they lost all sense of time. The climb seemed endless.

But finally, Simon saw a patch of light above him; he shouted his discovery to the others, and a moment later had reached the hole. With Parker—anchored by the cord—pushing him from behind, Simon hoisted himself up and crawled through the hole into the lighted tunnel. Parker followed, with Simon helping him from the front and Farmer Ben supporting him from behind. Which left Ben Barker alone in the darkness, clinging to the cord for all he was worth, soaked through from the water thundering into the tunnel just above him. The cord helped him pull himself into the hole; once he was there, Parker and Simon were able to grasp his arms; and with their help, he too managed to scramble through into the lighted tunnel.

Exhausted, wet, and muddy but—for the moment—safe in the dry upper tunnel, the three of them began hauling up the cord, and with it the section of pipe. It took their combined effort to drag the pipe up the slope against the current. At last they had it at the hole; but no matter how hard they jerked and heaved, the pipe wouldn't start through the opening.

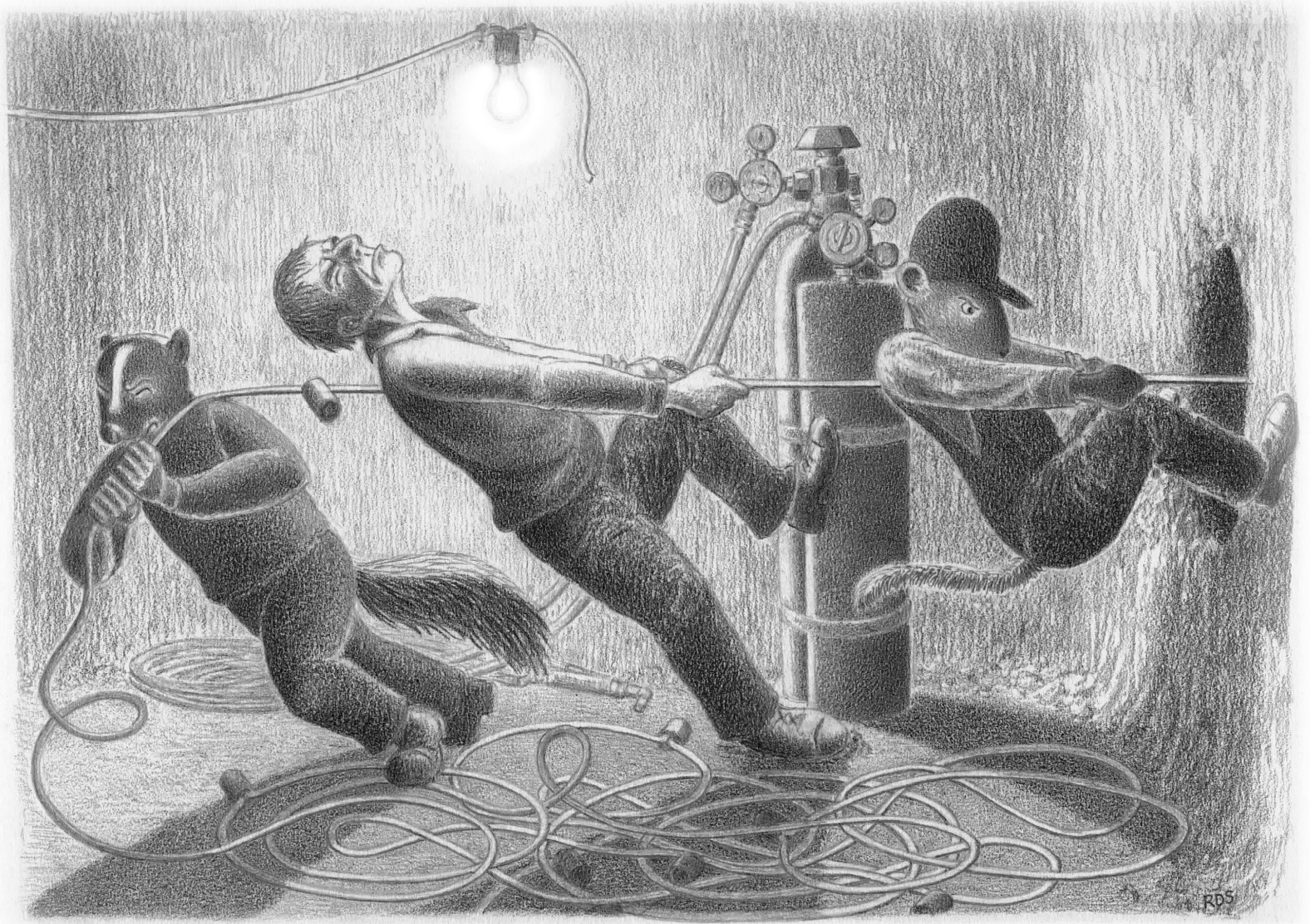
"I think it's catching crossways," said Parker, almost in a frenzy. "Can't we make the hole bigger?"

"Try this," said Farmer Ben, handing him a large screwdriver. Parker scrambled into the hole and began chiseling away the dirt. Quite damp by now, it fell away quickly. "I think it's ready," Parker said, climbing back into the lighted tunnel. They all pulled together, and the section of pipe slowly nosed through the opening and slid to the floor.

"Oh, thank you!" Parker said, as Ben Barker snipped the cord away from the pipe with his pliers. "You really don't know how much this means to me."

"Glad we could save it," said Farmer Ben. "Now let's get out of here and save ourselves. I don't trust those walls on the lower level."

Simon and Parker began rolling the section of pipe along the tunnel. Farmer Ben followed them with the dirt-cart containing the chessboard and the pipe-cutting equipment. As quickly as they could, they made their way along the packed earth floor, following the single string of light bulbs past the mouths of



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dark tunnels branching off to either side. It was rather slow going, for the pipe was heavy and almost as wide as the tunnel.

Suddenly Mayor Higgins and Lafayette Lizard appeared from around a bend. "There you are!" said the Mayor, with a smile of relief. "We waited and waited, and when you didn't come back, we set out to find you. Are you all right? Was there any trouble? Ah! so that's the pipe."

"Yep," said Parker.

"We wondered what was taking you so long," said Lafayette Lizard. "We were afraid there'd been an accident. A cave-in, or your getting caught in the water. It is coming in, isn't it?"

"Under your feet," Simon said, pointing—and Lafayette looked down nervously—"the lower tunnels are filling up like a bottle. It won't be long till Otters' basement is full."

Mayor Higgins said, "While we were waiting for you, we sealed shut the watertight doors. Oscar says they always kept water *out* of the basement; we have to hope that this time they keep it *in*." She helped guide the section of pipe across the opening of an air shaft on the planks that had been laid over it to form a bridge. "We also got the stuff out of the basement that we want to save—the bulletin board, and the chairs, the tools and scrap lumber."

They turned into the main tunnel and saw before them the lighted opening that led to Otters' basement. Miss Proudie Fairblossom stood in the tunnel entrance, watching anxiously. She waved when she saw them.

"Gracious, you fellows gave us a scare!" she called. "We were frantic, thinking you were drowned or buried! What took you so long? Is the water coming in?"

"Yep," said Parker with a peaceful smile.

"That's a handsome piece of pipe, Parker," said Miss Proudie, stepping aside as they rolled it past her into the basement. "Such a neat job of cutting!"

While Miss Proudie doublechecked the steel doors bolted across the opening to the boatdock, Ben Barker and Mayor Higgins carried the pipe-cutting equipment upstairs to the kitchen. As soon as the stairs were clear, Simon, Parker, and Lafayette—with much difficulty and a great deal of puffing and panting—wrestled the heavy section of pipe up the steps. From a small landing at the top of the stairs, a right-angle turn was necessary to get through the doorway into the kitchen. Unfortunately, the pipe was too long to get around the turn; and they had to stop, hemmed in by walls. Lafayette, five steps below the landing and supporting the pipe's lower end, was the one most affected by this blockage. "Stand it on end!" he shouted. They tried, by raising the upper end, but then the ceiling blocked the pipe. His arms shaking with the strain of holding up the additional weight, Lafayette cried "Lower it, lower it!" as he fought to maintain his balance on the stairs. "Ow! You just mashed my finger!"

"Sorry," said Simon. "I'm trying not to drop it on your head."

"Having trouble?" asked Ben Barker from the kitchen. He left the doorway and returned a moment later with an axe. "Protect yourselves!" he shouted; and with swift, powerful strokes, he splintered one side of the doorframe and chopped away part of the wall. "Now try it," he said. They tried it; and though it was still

a tight fit, they got the pipe around the corner and into the kitchen.

"I'm glad," said Lafayette, inspecting Farmer Ben's axe job, "that the Otters don't live here anymore."

"It's a little untidy to use an axe," said Farmer Ben, "but I've always found it's a surefire method for enlarging doorways." He went back to the basement to help Miss Proudie disconnect the electrical generator and bring it upstairs. Then they all left the house.

Crouching down and looking over their shoulders at the Sudge-Buddle helicopter circling the smokestack, they hurried through the tall weeds of Otters' side yard toward the road. Parker wanted to roll the section of pipe all the way to the schoolhouse, but they finally convinced him to leave it hidden in a thick clump of rose bushes in Otters' garden.

When they reached the schoolhouse, Mayor Higgins dashed inside to get Arabella Raccoon and Grandfather Fieldmouse. They met her on the attic stairs.

"We watched you people coming across the road," said Grandfather Fieldmouse. "Was the mission a success?"

"Firefly got wet," said Mayor Higgins, "but aside from that, everything went smoothly."

Arabella went to the telephone and called Oscar Otter. "Firefly has finished and linked up with Standby and Eyeball. All three are leaving now to rejoin Honeybrew."

"Wonderful!" said Oscar. "Is there any word on Drumstick or Waterwheel?"

"Nothing yet. Stick tight with Sheriff Badger. How's the chess game going?"

"We've each won one game, and now are in the middle of a third."

"Call the Old Hex if anything further happens on this end," said Arabella. And she went out to congratulate Firefly on a job well done. "You've shut down the factory," she said to Parker Packrat. "Twenty minutes ago they stopped the furnaces."

"They also know that something's wrong at the pumphouse," said Grandfather Fieldmouse. "Half an hour ago they sent a truckload of men to investigate."

"I'm sure they don't have any idea what's really happening," said Miss Proudie. "They only know that the factory isn't getting any water. Mr. Snade probably thinks it's been shut off."

"Think how he'd feel if he knew the truth!" said Mayor Higgins. "Oh, they're still getting the water, but at some distance *below* the boiler room!"

"Let's hope he doesn't find out," said Simon, as they all began crowding into the Mayor's car for the trip back to the Old Hex Inn, "or at least not until it doesn't make any difference whether he knows the truth or not."

Chapter 31

AT TEN MINUTES till eleven, while Parker was crawling through the hole to cut the water pipe and Fergus Fisher was turning off the water at the pumphouse, M. Lucius Ferret was once again leaving his hiding place to start hammering on the pipe—for the guard had just raced off in the direction of Randy Possum's pounding. But he had barely reached the pipe when Summerfield Scissortail swooped down urgently: "The guard's coming back! Take cover!" M. Lucius dived behind his log and lay flat, holding his breath. Why was the guard coming back? He should have been heading for Randy.

There! the guard came into view almost running along the pipe; and as he came, he continually turned his head, peering about him and glancing nervously over his shoulder, waving his shotgun erratically. What's wrong with him? M. Lucius wondered. Then, much to his dismay, the guard suddenly turned from the pipe and hurried straight toward him!

M. Lucius pulled in his ears and squeezed himself even flatter against the ground. He must have been seen! Too late to run! He'd have to make a fight of it. He envisioned himself leaping up from behind the log, grappling with the guard for possession of the shotgun, wrestling him down, then streaking off into the woods to make his escape. He tensed his muscles to leap.

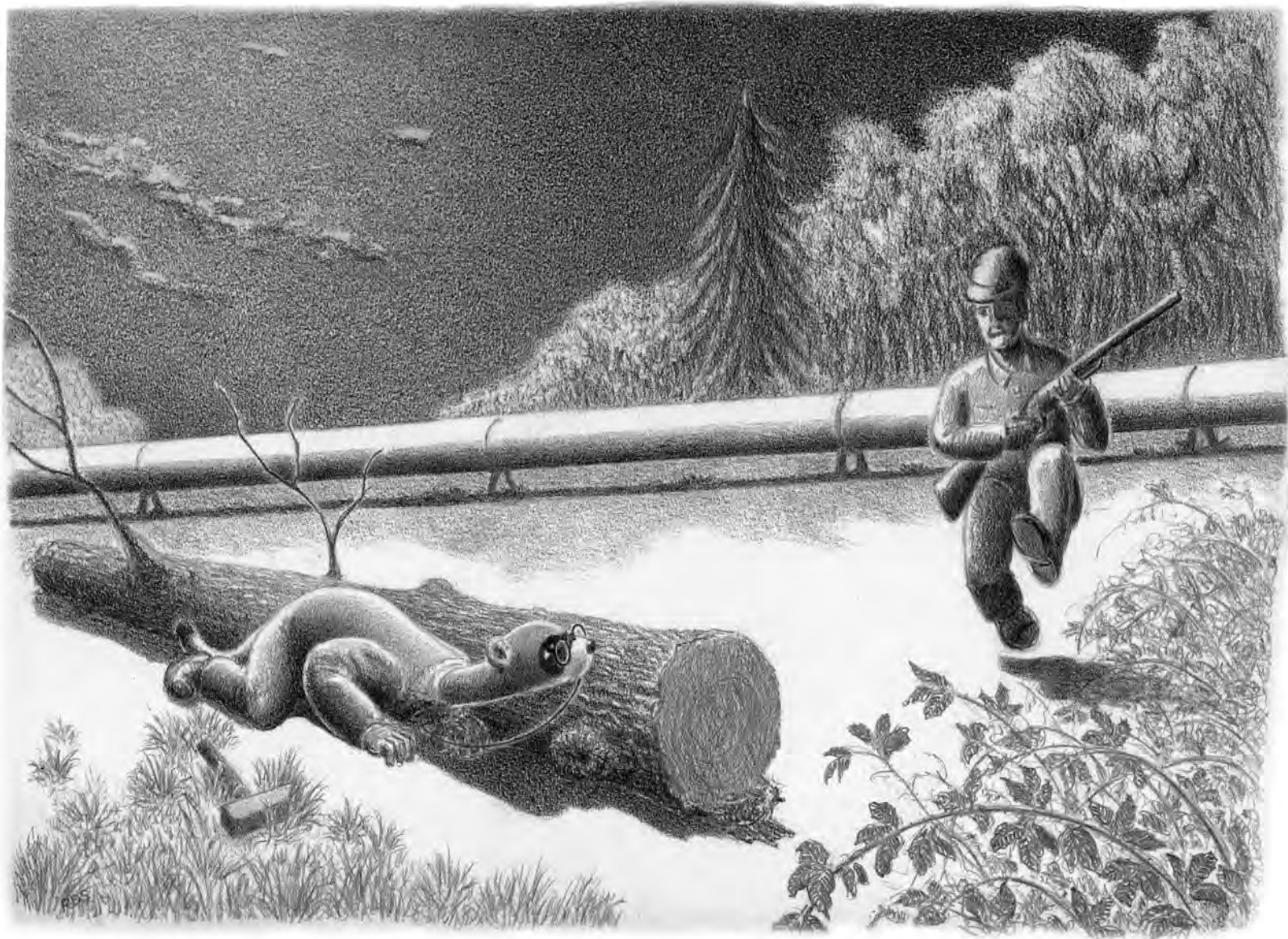
But no, the guard apparently hadn't seen him. The man turned aside and furtively crept into the nearby clump of blackberry bushes, where—almost even with the fallen log—he squatted down holding the shotgun across his knees. He was so close that M. Lucius could see the pale moonlight glinting on the buttons of his uniform.

It took M. Lucius a moment to realize what was happening: the guard was hiding! Probably waiting for help. M. Lucius gave an inward groan and began breathing again.

And there they stayed, each lurking in his own hiding place, within whispering distance of one another. While Priscilla's hammering continued to echo along the pipe, M. Lucius lay motionless, listening to the guard's heavy breathing. He tried very hard to make sure the guard didn't hear his.

"If I sneezed," M. Lucius thought, "the jig would be up." And of course, just thinking about it made him want to sneeze. It was chilly lying on the ground, and M. Lucius found little comfort in knowing that the guard was chilly too. Moreover, his nose began to itch, and he didn't dare to scratch it. And even worse, a painful cramp began to develop in his leg.

Every now and then, the guard shifted his position to get more comfortable—which irritated M. Lucius because he wasn't free to do the same. No, he lay like a fallen statue with his itch and his cramp while Priscilla's pounding—or Randy's,



or Rebecca's, or Thorstein's (he couldn't tell whose and didn't much care)—went rhythmically on and on: clang, clang, clang. Then suddenly it stopped. M. Lucius sneaked a look at his watch. The dim moonlight showed eight minutes after eleven. "Which means," he thought, "that Parker has cut the pipe, and the water is on again." That was, of course, if everything had gone according to plan.

Voices and the sounds of heavy feet were coming uphill toward them along the pipe. With a loud grunt, the Sudge-Buddle guard leaped up from his hiding place (almost frightening M. Lucius out of his wits), plowed through the blackberry bushes, and dashed further uphill, into the trees.

At last! M. Lucius gratefully scratched his itchy nose, and moved his crampy leg. Then: *whump! whump!*—two shotgun blasts from very close by.

M. Lucius jumped, lurched forward, and banged his head against the log. Randy! "He's shot Randy Possum!" M. Lucius groaned. If only he'd leaped up and taken the guard's gun when he'd had the chance!

Behind him was the sound of running footsteps. As M. Lucius half turned to defend himself, Priscilla Possum, breathless and frightened, dropped to the ground beside him. "I saw you here from the woods," she whispered. "Who was he shooting at?"

"Where's Randy?" M. Lucius demanded.

"I don't know," she answered. "Do you think he shot Randy?" Her eyes grew wide with horror.

"I'm afraid it might have been. He was next in line up the pipe."

"Shhh," said Priscilla. Three men in gray uniforms came running uphill, conversing together in low shouts and excited mutterings. As they drew opposite the fallen log where M. Lucius and Priscilla huddled, the pumphouse guard came running downhill from the direction of the shots.

"What took you so long to get here?" he shouted. "I radioed for help over half an hour ago!"

"We ran into a roadblock," said one of the newcomers. "Who'd you just shoot at?"

"Didn't you hear the pounding on the pipe?" the guard asked. "There's been some monkey business here—prowlers and saboteurs. I've just been chasing 'em in the woods. There's at least ten of 'em—with skull faces. But when I fired, they all got away. They still may be hiding in the woods."

"Well, who was it?" asked another of the newcomers. "Was it these local folks? Did you get a good look at 'em?"

"Just shapes in the dark," said the guard. "But they've done something to the pumphouse. The fence is covered with some kind of leafy vine. I couldn't even get in the gate!"

The four of them continued up the slope, their voices growing fainter. M. Lucius, peering from behind the log, watched them trudging away into the shadows.

Summerfield Scissortail swooped down and perched on the log. "I was wondering if you were still here," M. Lucius greeted him, getting stiffly to his feet.

"Oh, sure," said Summerfield. "I've been right over there watching you from that birch tree. It's been quite a show, believe me! I didn't dare come down while the guard was hiding at your elbow!"

"Then the guard didn't shoot Randy?" Priscilla asked anxiously.

Summerfield laughed. "No. When he heard his friends coming, he just went up the pipeline a bit and fired his gun into the air so they'd think he was doing his job. He couldn't let them know he was hiding!"

"Where are Randy and Rebecca and Thorstein?" M. Lucius asked.

"They've left the pipe and started back to the Old Hex," said Summerfield. "Scooper tells me that Waterwheel is finished at the pumphouse. Izzy planted the night-creeping arbutus to cover their tracks. Those guards will never get in."

"Let's join the others," said Priscilla tiredly. They started cross-country away from the pipeline and soon found the others waiting for them at the Blasted Oak.

"Scooper tells us you were playing peek-a-boo with the pumphouse guard," Thorstein Raccoon said to M. Lucius.

"It seemed to be a popular place to hide," said M. Lucius. "Priscilla liked it, too."

"When the guard's friends arrived, he pretended he'd been shooting at prowlers," said Priscilla.

"We heard the shots when we were coming through the woods on our way here," said Randy Possum. "We thought he must have been shooting at you."

"And we thought he was shooting at *you*," said M. Lucius. "Altogether, a very strange way to spend an evening." He counted noses. "Where's Oliphant?"

"He went to the pumphouse," said Rebecca Raccoon. "He'll stay with Waterwheel till they get back to the Old Hex."

"Let's get back ourselves," said Scooper Singebottom. "I, for one, could certainly use some hot honey brew."

• • • • •

Izzy the Witch leaned in the door of the pumphouse and whispered, "Hurry, Hilda. Oliphant says that four of them are coming along the pipe toward the fence."

"I'm just about finished," said Hilda Badger, putting the torch to the last valve wheel on the instrument panel. A moment later Fergus Fisher went to the fuse box and broke the electrical circuits. They finished their work with the aid of Franklin's flashlight.

"They'll get in here eventually," said Fergus. "When they do, I'd like for them not to be able to tell whether the water is on or off. If they're not getting any at the factory, they'll assume the water's off." He and Lucy Otter took all the hands and pointers off the pressure gauges. Prosper collected all the severed valve wheels and put them in a brown gunny sack.

Oliphant Owl appeared in the doorway. "They've reached the fence," he whispered.

"I'll go out and see what they're up to," said Ambrose Fieldmouse.

When Ambrose got to the fence, he could hear the four men talking excitedly

on the other side of the thick green wall formed by the night-creeping arbutus. "It's that plant again!" one of them cried. "The same thing that ruined the other pumphouse!"

"Maybe the place is jinxed," another voice said. "I don't know what Mr. Snade is going to say about this—but I don't think it's going to be pleasant."

"Well, *you* try to find the gate," said a third voice. "Here, take my key."

Ambrose heard a great deal of scrabbling and an angry rustling of leaves. After a full minute of this, a voice said, "All right, there's the gate." Then the sound of a key scratching at the lock. This too went on for a long time; finally the voice said disgustedly, "The key won't turn in the lock." Other keys were tried, with no better success. "It beats all," said one of the men. "But at least *we* heard the hammering on the pipe, too. It's a good thing for you that we did. I don't know how you're going to explain all this to Mr. Snade."

"It gives you the creeps," said another. "Like there's spooks or goblins behind it."

Another man snorted contemptuously. "I suppose it was goblins that built the roadblock back where we had to leave the truck! No, this is the work of those local people. But it sure is hard to catch 'em at it, or prove they're behind it!"

Ambrose Fieldmouse hurried back to the pumphouse. Izzy the Witch was planting seeds of the night-creeping arbutus around the walls of the building. Close behind her followed Prosper, sprinkling the ground with droplets of red liquid.

"Let me report what I heard at the fence," Ambrose said, as all the others came out of the pumphouse.

"Let's put off from shore first," Lucy Otter whispered.

They slid the boats out into the water and climbed in to sit patiently while Izzy and Prosper finished their work. Already they could see broad-leafed snaky vines climbing the pumphouse walls. Fergus Fisher leaned back in his black raincoat, yawned in a relaxed manner, and began tracing constellations of stars in the dark sky. Ambrose Fieldmouse reported what he had heard, and they all listened gravely. "What *will* he tell Mr. Snade?" Matthew Muddie inquired.

Izzy and Prosper joined them. The boats pushed away from shore, quietly moving with muffled oars. The moon had moved considerably down the sky. When they reached the middle of the Lake, Prosper opened the gunny sack and, smiling solemnly, took out the brass valve wheels and dropped them overboard.

Early the next morning, while Arabella was opening the shoestore, and Matthew Muddie was preparing to teach an arithmetic lesson to his fourth graders, and Simon Skunk was sleeping late, and Lafayette was pulling together the *Gazette's* next poetry feature, and Farmer Ben and Thorstein were smoothing the new landfill, Mr. Snade himself (as Scooper Singebottom later reported) took the factory helicopter to see exactly what *had* happened at the pumphouse the night before.

While Scooper watched from a nearby oak tree, Mr. Snade climbed out of the

helicopter, followed by the pumphouse guard and a grim-looking man in a blue suit, and stood staring in angry disbelief at the jungle of green leaves, thick vines, and pale purple flowers that completely covered the pumphouse fence.

"This is just what we had *last time!*" cried Mr. Snade. "Have those plants turned off our water?"

"We'll have to get in to find out," said the man in the blue suit.

Mr. Snade tried to unlock the gate. "It won't open!" he cried.

"That's the way it was last night," said the guard.

Mr. Snade gave the key to the man in the blue suit. "Here, you try it." But it wouldn't open for him, either.

"Well, how are we to get in?" fumed Mr. Snade, pacing back and forth.

"I see two choices," said the man in the blue suit. "Either someone gets lowered in on a rope from the helicopter, or someone swims around the fence and gets in from the lake."

Mr. Snade pondered these alternatives. "Start swimming," he said to the guard.

The guard waded out into the Lake as far as the end of the fence, then paddled around the last post and came back to shore inside the green wall.

"Can you open the gate from the inside?" Mr. Snade shouted to him.

"It won't budge," said the guard.

"Then get into the pumphouse, and turn the water on."

But getting into the pumphouse wasn't all that easy. First, the guard had to take a hatchet to the tough vines that covered the door. This took almost ten minutes. Then, when he had the doorway sufficiently clear, he found that the doorknob wouldn't turn.

"It seems to be locked," he called back through the fence.

"Did you lock the door last night?" asked Mr. Snade.

"No sir, I left it standing open," replied the guard.

Behind the night-creeping arbutus, Mr. Snade grumbled something that the guard couldn't hear. Then the factory manager called out: "Don't you have a key?"

"It doesn't work, sir," said the guard.

More grumbling. "Then it's simple," came the crisp voice of the man in the blue suit, "we'll have to break down the door. Guard, you have a hatchet: use it!"

But it was a very thick door, designed to keep people from getting into the pumphouse. It wasn't to be jimmied or broken down.

"I'm not getting very far, sir," the guard called, after ten minutes of fruitless hatcheting.

"Try an axe, then," Mr. Snade cried testily. "I'll bring one from the helicopter." A moment later he called, "Here it comes!" And over the fence it came, gleaming in the sunlight. The guard went to work with great energy, and after another five minutes he announced that he was making progress.

"It's about time!" Mr. Snade snapped impatiently. "We've got to get that water turned on! We're losing production time. Do you realize how long it will take to get the furnaces going again?"

"Time is money, Snade," said the man in the blue suit.

"Oh yes, sir, that is true," said Snade. "*Hurry it up, guard!*"

It was another half hour before the door was sufficiently broken down for the guard to peek inside. "I never saw a door like this!" he called. "It's almost like it's bewitched!"

"Don't talk nonsense!" said Mr. Snade. "I think you're stalling. Now get in there and turn on the water!"

Peering through the hole he had made in the door, the guard could only see a solid wall of green. "The plants have gotten inside, too!" he shouted. "The place is filled with 'em!"

"That does it!" cried Mr. Snade. "I'm coming in too. Pilot, take the helicopter up and lower me into the enclosure by the rope ladder!"

At this point, Cassandra Scissortail swooped down to join Scooper Singebottom in the oak tree. "You look as though you've been enjoying yourself," she commented. "What's been happening? Have they found out that the water's still on?"

"They've been working an hour," said Scooper, "and they haven't even gotten into the pumphouse!"

"An *hour!*" said Cassandra. "Izzy certainly knows how to do it! Well, it's good it's taken so long: for our purposes, every minute counts."

The helicopter rose chattering and moved to hover above the fenced enclosure. A rope ladder tumbled out of it and hung swaying. Mr. Snade climbed out awkwardly and placed his feet on the second rung down. "Now you be careful, pilot," he commanded; and, with an expression on his face that suggested his breakfast wasn't agreeing with him, he shakily began to descend the swinging ladder.

As soon as he touched the ground, Mr. Snade ran to the hole in the pumphouse door and peered in. "You're right," he said angrily, as though it was the guard's fault: "The plants are *inside* too. Maybe you can crawl through a window if the door won't open."

"What windows?" the guard asked, looking at the solid wall of vines and leaves.

"Find one!" shouted Mr. Snade. "You were supposed to guard this place, and you let that stuff get in. This will be remembered in your yearly evaluation!"

The guard looked him squarely in the eye, thought for a moment, and said, "I quit. I'm not going in there with those plants and turn your blasted water on. This here's the work of spooks and goblins!" He pulled off his factory identification badge and slapped it into Mr. Snade's hand.

"Now see here, guard—" Mr. Snade began.

"The name is Timmons," said the guard. "Mr. William Timmons." And he turned and waded out into the lake.

"Come back here!" shouted Mr. Snade.

"Nope," said Mr. Timmons, "you're on your own." And he swam around the end of the fence to the outside, returning to shore behind the wall of night-creeping arbutus.



Mr. Snade stood helplessly at the door of the pumphouse, pale with frustration and fury. He stared at Mr. Timmons' factory badge, then threw it on the ground and stamped on it, and went back to the rope ladder. "Pull me up!" he commanded the pilot.

Swinging on the ladder as the helicopter lifted him over the fence, he shouted down to the man in the blue suit: "We'll have to take down the fence and bring in a bulldozer to open the pumphouse."

"That means you've lost another day's production," said the man in the blue suit. "Well, it's your problem, Snade, and you'll have to solve it. You know, of course, that I've got to report this to the Home Office."

Mr. Snade looked suddenly sick. "Remind them," he said weakly as he hung from the rope ladder, "that *last* year, under my management, the factory had a record output for a first year's operation."

"It's *this* year's production that concerns them," said the man in the blue suit. "And *next* year's," he added ominously. "Onward and upward—you know the rule."

"Set me down!" Mr. Snade screamed to the pilot. And the pilot obliged, setting him down so fast it made his head swim.

Chapter 32

LATE THAT AFTERNOON, Matthew Muddie went up to the schoolhouse attic to chat with Arabella Raccoon, who was watching the factory with her binoculars. "It's pleasant not to have trucks roaring in and out the gates," he said.

"The way I figure it," said Arabella, "the tunnels must be filled by this time. It doesn't really matter whether they discover the water is actually on or not, or whether they somehow get it turned off."

"Fergus is back at his raddermelish patch trying to understand the failure of his last plant food," said Matthew Muddie. "He isn't thinking much about the factory anymore. He figures the water is doing its work."

"It hasn't rained, has it, in the last few days?" she asked suddenly.

"You know very well it hasn't. Why do you ask?"

"Come to the window," she said. "Take the binoculars." He did. "The tunnels *are* filled," she said. "Because if it hasn't rained, I don't know any other explanation for those circular puddles of water standing all around the factory."

"Aha!" he said, focusing the binoculars. "The air shafts!"

"Full to brimming." Smiling, she put on her blue baseball cap. "Shall we go to the Old Hex? I'm sure there are some folks there who'd like to know about the puddles."

At the same moment that Arabella and Matthew Muddie were making their discovery about the air shafts, Mr. Snade and several men in gray uniforms were poking through the ruins of the pumphouse making some interesting discoveries of their own. The fence had been uprooted and torn down, and a bulldozer had ripped the pumphouse to pieces. (They had tried to protect the instrument panel by working only at the front of the building; but unfortunately the night-creeping arbutus was so thick and tangled and firmly attached that, as they had tried to push it aside, it had twisted the walls askew on the foundation and brought down the roof.) All in all, when they'd finally got in and chopped their way through to the machinery with axes and machetes, things were pretty much a shambles. Watching from the oak tree, Scooper Singebottom and Cassandra Scissortail had been very much impressed with their determination. They guessed that Mr. Snade must be fairly desperate.

"These valves have been sliced off with a cutting torch!" one of the men announced.

"And the needles have been taken off the gauges!" said another.

"And the electrical cable has been cut," said a third, "and part of it removed. Definitely sabotage, Mr. Snade."

"But what about the plants?" cried Mr. Snade.

"Can't explain the plants," the first man said.

"Well, how do we turn the water on?" asked the manager.

"It is on," said a workman at the severed main valve. "Here, feel this pipe. See how cold it is?"

Mr. Snade, goggling in disbelief, felt the coolness of the pipe on the factory side of the valve, then staggered back pale and speechless. Finally he managed to stammer out: "Then where's the water going? The *factory* isn't getting any!"

"It's a puzzle," said one of the workmen. "We didn't see any leaks or lakes from the helicopter as we came along the pipeline. If the water is coming through this pipe like I think it is, there's bound to be a lake somewhere."

Horror crept like an icy finger down Mr. Snade's spine. "Stop the pump!" he shouted.

"Oh, the pump stopped when the electricity went off," said the first man. "But the water was flowing when that happened. What we've got now is a siphon effect, with gravity pulling water down into the valley."

"It's too bad you didn't put closeoff valves at various points along the pipeline," said the helicopter pilot. "You could have turned the water off there."

"The original plans called for them," said Mr. Snade, "but we didn't put them in because we were trying to save money. We didn't think there'd ever be a problem. With the lake and pumphouse up here, and the slope down to the valley, it seemed like an ideal setup."

"Well, it'd be nice to have cutoff valves now," said the bulldozer operator.

They became silent. Mr. Snade paced rapidly in a tight circle. "What's the fastest way to stop the water?" he asked.

"I'd say plug the intake pipe that leads in from the lake," said the helicopter pilot. "It's down near the bottom right offshore here, pretty deep."

"All right!" said Mr. Snade, with firm decision. "Plug the pipe. Cap it with steel."

They went to do it. Mr. Snade got back into the helicopter. As it rose high and followed the pipeline back to the factory, he pressed his nose against the window and searched the ground below for any sign of the lakewater which must have issued from the pipe. There was nothing. No sign of lakes or leaks. Maybe the water was flowing into Little River and going downstream. No, there was nothing to indicate that. The river looked no broader or deeper than usual. But: across the river, all around the factory and parking lot, the land was dotted with round pools of standing water. Bright pools, reflecting the clear blue sky and—as the helicopter dipped closer—sparkling in the sunlight.

"Oh no! No, *no!*" cried Mr. Snade.

There was no doubt about it. The Sudge-Buddle factory was sinking. Very slowly at first, then more and more quickly as the days went by, the

administration building, smokestack, production plant, parking lot, and all the land around them began to settle. Not all at once, but here and there, in patches. As the underground honeycombs of tunneled mud collapsed beneath the factory's weight, sinkholes filled with water began appearing on the surface. Some of these came swiftly, with a gurgling rush; others, more gradually, as soupy patches that spread and deepened till they joined with others to form water-filled ravines.

The railroad track vanished early. Late in the night following Mr. Snade's last visit to the pumphouse, the embankment suddenly tilted and caved away, wrenching the rails like looped spaghetti and toppling the switch engine and three coal cars into a newly formed marsh. In six hours, the train was entirely under water.

The next morning, Mr. Snade was in his office going through files and sorting papers when a large crack appeared in the opposite wall. Right before his eyes it formed, snaking down from the ceiling across the pale yellow plaster into the lime-green carpet. By evening, similar cracks (and worse) were appearing everywhere. Especially nasty were those in the concrete walls of the basement boiler room, for they brought with them patches of damp ooze and steady trickles of lakewater.

By noon of the second day, one whole corner of the parking lot—a rather large area—had gone into a sinkhole; and the floor of Mr. Snade's office had become so tilted that his chair kept rolling away from his desk in a southwesterly direction. Doors no longer fitted in their frames.

Throughout the second day, Mr. Snade wandered about in a bewildered fuddle. He was able to understand that—through some horrible circumstance—the Cherrystone pipeline had flooded beneath the factory. That was clear enough. But he couldn't explain the sinkholes, which suggested caves or other open spaces underground. *That* he couldn't understand at all.

His communication with the Home Office was rather guarded. On the third day he telephoned them to report that "problems with the water supply" would cause further delays in getting the factory back into production. The Home Office immediately called back, ordering him to start production as soon as possible. And later in the day, Mr. Buddle himself telephoned to ask some pointed questions: "What's going on there, Snade? Is it those people again? The ones who disrupted the stockholders' meeting, and filed the lawsuit, and did the other sabotage?"

"That's hard to say, sir," Mr. Snade answered. "I *think* so."

"Don't think, Snade! Do something!" And he hung up before Mr. Snade could reply.

At five o'clock that afternoon, he received a phone call from Mr. Sudge; and, if anything, his tone was even nastier than Buddle's. "Are you doing your job, Snade? If you aren't we'll find someone who can."

"The problem here is—uh—uh, deep and complex, sir," said Mr. Snade, watching his penholder slide off the top of his desk.

Mr. Sudge gave a snort. "See to it, Snade. The Company is holding you

accountable for what happens!" And *he* hung up before Mr. Snade could reply.

At noon the next day, the man in the blue suit returned. As his helicopter angled in to land in the pond-riddled parking lot, the visitor was astounded by what he saw. The buildings all looked tipsy, and many had broken windows. The red and white smokestack was leaning noticeably toward the river, its base surrounded by a shallow pool. The man hurried into the administration building and went straight to the manager's office, where he demanded to be taken on a tour of the factory.

His visit was unexpected, and it caught Mr. Snade at a bad time. The office was piled with packing crates and file folders, littered with loose papers and chunks of fallen plaster. One side of the office was considerably higher than the other, and the floor showed a pronounced slope. When the man in the blue suit stormed in, Mr. Snade was busy placing small pieces of folded sandpaper under the objects on his desk—calendar, clock, penholder, paperweight—to keep them from sliding off.

"A tour of the factory?" said Mr. Snade. He quickly swallowed two headache pills. "Yes sir, that can be arranged." And he took the man on a roundabout walk through those areas which showed the least damage, and provided the best opportunity for not getting wet. But signs of the general settling were everywhere, and couldn't be avoided.

"Why, the concrete floor is all ups and downs! uneven! buckled!" cried the man in the blue suit.

"Yessir," agreed Mr. Snade. "All ups and downs." They marched on, over and around the obstacles in the crazy-quilt floor. "Why is it so dark in here?" asked the man. "Don't the lights work?"

"I had the electricity turned off," said Mr. Snade.

"A strange way to get back into production," said the man.

"It seemed safer," Mr. Snade said vaguely.

"This place is a shambles!" the man shouted. "It looks like there's been an earthquake! Let me see the boiler room."

Mr. Snade began to stammer. "There's nothing much to see there, sir. Really there isn't. Why don't we go upstairs instead, and—"

"I want to go to the basement!" the man said angrily.

"Uh—yessir; the basement." With a sigh of resignation, Mr. Snade led him to the basement door (which leaned noticeably to the north). He unbolted it and pulled it open.

"It's dark in there," said the man in the blue suit. He went through the doorway to the stairs, gave a shriek, and vanished with a splash. Mr. Snade rushed to his rescue, grabbed hold of his coat sleeve, and pulled him thrashing and struggling back into the light.

"It's full of water!" the man cried, getting to his feet drenched and dripping.

"Yessir," said Mr. Snade. "Brim full."

While catching his breath, the man in the blue suit leaned against the wall and scribbled some notes on his soaked yellow pad. "Now," he said grimly, "show me the rest."



Mr. Snade led him to the main production rooms, where they stopped among the empty conveyor belts and motionless machines. The man in the blue suit was dumfounded by what he saw: rows and rows of silent hulking shapes, tall and shadowy in the gathering darkness, their great jaws open or closed, as they'd been when the shutdown came—all casting their cold reflections in the water that covered the floor.

Finally, his pencil poised above the notepad, the man asked, "How many employees have you laid off?"

"Only five so far," said Mr. Snade. "The guards and maintenance men are still on duty. That's sixteen left. As you know," he added, with a touch of rueful pride, "this factory didn't need people. Machines did it all."

The man said, "I'm aware of that. I also know that the Company was counting on the success of this factory. What you've done, or allowed to happen, is a *disaster*, Snade! You've sabotaged the Company's plans—" he paused, wide-eyed, as a low rumbling sound reached their ears. Louder and louder it grew, a grinding thunderous roar of heavy structures toppling, of concrete giving way—mingled with the tortured shriek of metal tearing, the groaning of wrenched pipes, and the crash of shattering glass.

"What was *that*?" he cried.

"Well, I'd *guess* it was a heavy-equipment room at the far end of the building," said Mr. Snade. "Or else the loading dock and warehouse."

"I've dropped my pencil!" the man said, stooping down. He reached into the water and groped around on the floor. "It's lost. I can't find it." The water came up well over his wrist.

"Here, take mine," said Mr. Snade, giving him a ball-point pen.

The man took it and began scribbling on his pad. "You're well aware," he snapped, "that the Company simply can't afford these endless delays you've allowed to happen. I'm to tell you that the Company has made other arrangements for fulfilling the mission of the Grover Factory."

"Other arrangements," Mr. Snade repeated dully.

"Be here at ten o'clock tomorrow morning," said the man. And he waded out to his helicopter, leaving Mr. Snade ankle-deep among the silent machines.

Mr. Snade was in his office at nine-thirty the next morning. There had been further sinkings and collapses during the night. Yesterday the main production plant had been two stories tall; today, only one story showed above the placid surface of the lake surrounding it. The smokestack, too, was shorter than it ought to be, and leaning more than ever. A thin skin of water covered all that remained of the parking lot. One whole wall of the administration building had fallen away—an event which gave Mr. Snade an openair exposure on the east, with a marvelous unobstructed view of the river. A rather close view also. For the ground between the building and the riverbank had sunk during the night, allowing the river to flow onto the property and form a shallow marsh that now reached all the way to the office's foundation wall.

There wasn't really any work left for Mr. Snade to do. All of the factory's files and business papers, carefully packed in waterproof boxes, had been shipped out to a warehouse in the city. There were no lights or telephones; the television cameras and monitor screens had been removed. Mr. Snade would have done more to salvage heavier items, if he had dared. But two days ago, the bulldozer, which had been parked in the equipment shed, had disappeared—along *with* the equipment shed; and after that, Mr. Snade had been afraid to bring in big trucks to carry out the heavy machines. By now, most of the machines were under water.

Sitting at his tilted desk and doodling X's on a piece of paper, Mr. Snade felt a shudder run through the building. Ceiling plaster showered down upon him, and the desk suddenly shifted back to a level position. Indeed, the whole room righted itself—only somewhat lower than before. Through the open wall, the marsh came into Mr. Snade's office and covered up his carpet.

He waded out to the parking lot and perched on a window-ledge to wait. At three minutes till ten, a large blue and white helicopter came chattering down from the direction of the city. On the side it was marked in large black letters: THE SUDGE-BUDDLE COMPANY. Mr. Snade climbed off the window-ledge and started toward it as it settled into the water on the parking lot. Two men climbed out and splashed quickly toward him. He gave a groan: it was Mr. Sudge and Mr. Buddle, looking very sour indeed as they stared about them at the wreckage and got their trouser cuffs wet.

"Snade, what's the meaning of this?" said Mr. Sudge.

"It means we're sinking, sir."

"How could you let this happen?" Mr. Buddle demanded.

"I don't fully understand it," said Mr. Snade.

Mr. Sudge waded closer and shook his fist in the manager's face. "You've botched it, Snade!"

"Yessir," said Mr. Snade. "But *I* didn't do it. I'm sure it was the people of Grover!"

"But it was *your* job, Snade, to make sure they didn't succeed!" said Mr. Buddle.

From far across the parking lot: a gurgling turbulence as water gushed in to fill a new depression.

"We came to tour the factory," said Mr. Sudge. "But it seems there isn't much left to see."

"Where are the guards and maintenance men?" asked Mr. Buddle.

"I dismissed them last night," said Mr. Snade, "and told them to report to the Sudge-Buddle work-pool for re-assignment."

"And the factory records?" asked Mr. Buddle. "The files?"

"Sent to Warehouse Thirteen."

"And the production machinery? and the computer?" asked Mr. Sudge.

"Still in the factory," said Mr. Snade.

"Under *water*?" cried Mr. Buddle. "You didn't get them out?"

"No sir."

From the administration building came a rumbling, crashing roar that lasted for several seconds. As they watched open-mouthed, the whole structure jiggled itself lower. When the settling stopped, the water reached halfway up the windows on the ground floor.

Purple with rage, Mr. Buddle turned to the manager and stabbed a finger at his chest: "Snade, I hope you realize the investment the Company has sunk in the Grover Factory! Are you aware of the damage you've done to our Worldwide Plan? Because of you, your mismanagement, your shutdowns and delays, we've had to make other arrangements!"

"But it wasn't my fault—" Mr. Snade whimpered.

"It was your responsibility!" said Mr. Sudge.

The ground quaked, and the concrete slab beneath their feet dropped as swiftly as an elevator. Mr. Sudge, suddenly waist deep in water, bellowed: "Snade, you're through!" And, still sinking, though more slowly now, he and Mr. Buddle started thrashing and floundering toward the helicopter. Mr. Snade trailed after them, wringing his hands.

The helicopter had lifted off to escape the water, and now it was hovering just above the surface. Beneath the whirling rotors, the pilot leaned out to give them a hand. "Hurry it up!" he called.

Mr. Sudge found climbing up no easy matter. Even with the pilot tugging from above, and Mr. Buddle boosting from below, it took him much huffing and puffing, clutching and scrambling to haul himself in. He finally succeeded; though in doing so, he popped two buttons off his shirt and lost a shoe.

Then it was Mr. Buddle's turn. He hoisted himself from the chest-deep water, gripping the pilot's hand and shuffling for a foothold on the side of the helicopter. For a moment it looked as though he'd make it. But no—his wet hand slipped from the pilot's grasp, his foot slid off the side, and back he fell into the water with a *smack!* He surfaced red-faced and spluttering, tried once again, and once again fell back. Turning his head, he saw the manager, and over his shoulder shouted: "Help me, Snade!"

Mr. Snade struggled over to him; and finally, with the pilot and Mr. Sudge yanking from above, and Mr. Snade heaving from below, Mr. Buddle was able to hook one leg over the doorframe and drag himself in.

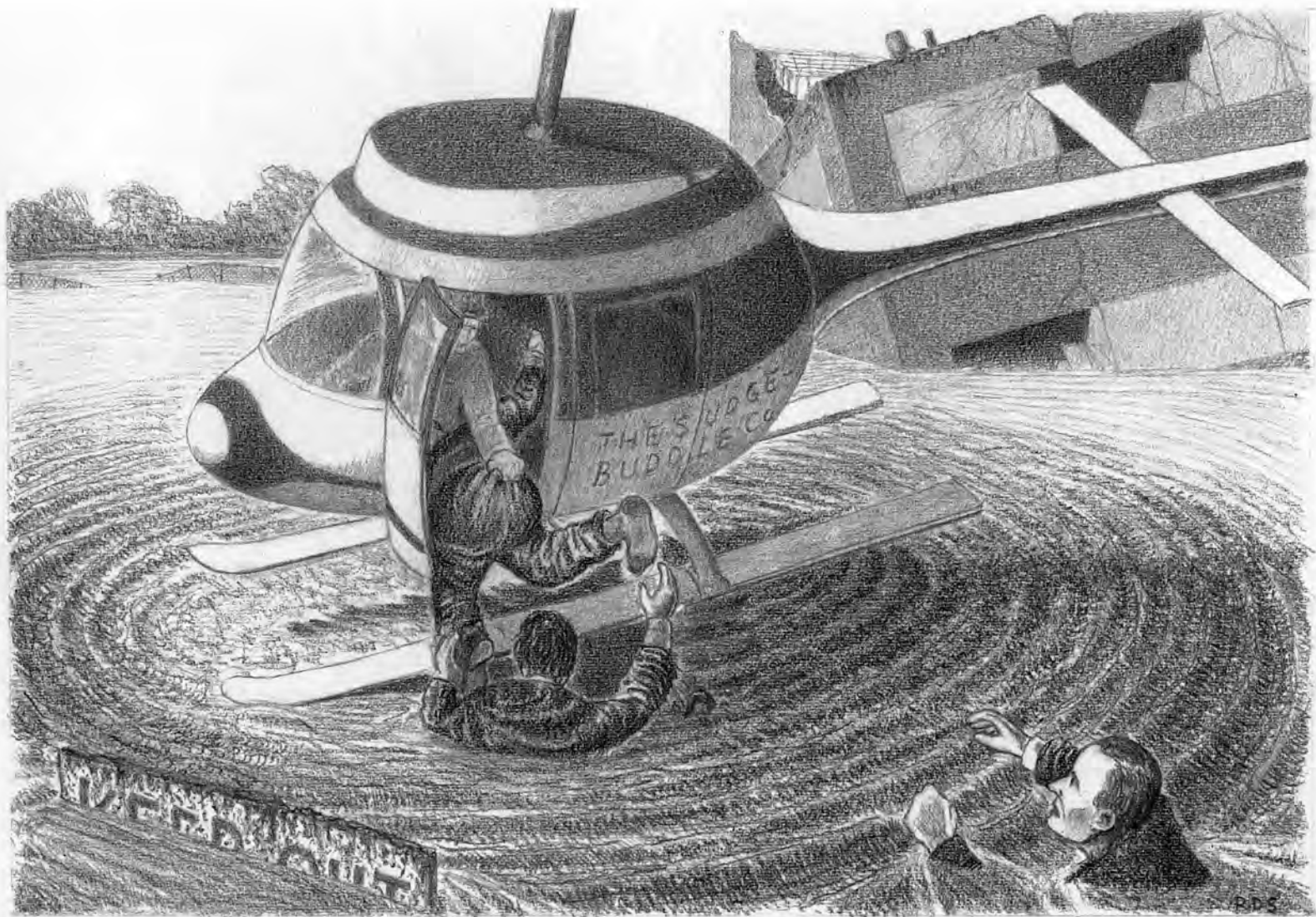
Mr. Snade stood chin-deep in water, looking up at them hopefully.

"Take it up," said Mr. Sudge to the pilot.

"But what about me?" cried Mr. Snade.

"You're on your own, Snade," said Mr. Buddle. "Start swimming." And he closed the door.

Mr. Snade stared after the helicopter as it rose high, made a sweeping turn around the tipsy smokestack, and chattered off northwest toward the city. Then he started swimming. When he reached the shore, he climbed out upon the bank beside the road and took one look back. The land on which the factory stood had sunk below the level of Little River, and now the river water was pouring onto the Sudge-Buddle property in a string of seven waterfalls. Of the administration building, only the flat roof was visible. Even to Mr. Snade's eyes it looked far less



like a roof than it looked like a barge or a raft floating on a lake. And as he watched, it too sank from sight.

Mr. Snade had left his car at the edge of the parking lot, near the gate, where he'd thought it would be safe. Now only the top of it showed above the surface of the water. Mr. Snade took off his coat, wrung the water out of it as though it were a dishrag, and put it back on. He didn't look back again, but simply started walking toward the highway, where he hoped that he could hitch a ride to Rawlinsville.

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In the attic of the schoolhouse, Arabella Raccoon put down her binoculars and turned from the window. "Well, they've gone," she said to the others in the room. One by one they went to the window and looked out.

"Little River is filling up the basin," said Cassandra Scissortail. "I'd say that our mission is accomplished."

"Well, Matthew," said Mayor Higgins, taking her turn at the window. "You'll have a nice view. A new lake across from the schoolhouse."

"Lakes are nice," said Matthew Muddie. "But I'd be content to call it just a very wide spot in Little River."

Chapter 33

IN THE WEEKS that followed Mr. Snade's departure, the factory continued to settle. By December, the place where the factory had been was indeed "just a very wide spot in Little River." There were only two reminders that a factory had ever been there. One was a short section of paved driveway across from the schoolhouse which passed through two gateposts and then slanted steeply into the water. The other was the red and white smokestack which poked out of the water halfway between the road and the far bank of Little River, only half as tall as it used to be, and leaning slightly to the southeast.

In mid-October, one week after Mr. Snade left, Thaddeus Higgins returned to Grover from his sister's home, his asthma much improved. After giving him a routine examination, Doctor Badger said with great relief: "You're reasonably healthy for a man your age, and your breathing is better than I've seen it in the last five years. It's good to have you back, Thaddeus; we missed you. And I think you'll find that Grover is a better place than when you left it."

"It's good to be back," said Thaddeus. "You can't know how hard it was for me to be gone when I wanted to be here to help. Or how much I missed you folks and worried about you, or how anxiously I waited for each letter that Estella wrote. But I'm sure you do understand when I say that the biggest part of me was always here."

"Yes," said Doctor Badger.

In January, Mayor Higgins received a letter from the law firm of Butcher, Skinner, Flesher, and Tanner informing the citizens of Grover that they had won the lawsuit against the Sudge-Buddle Company, and that the court had awarded them the full amount of the damages claimed. "This is a very large sum of money," Mr. Skinner wrote, "and it should serve in some measure to pay back the material damage and mental anguish inflicted upon your community. Needless to say, Butcher, Skinner, Flesher, and Tanner is quite pleased with the outcome. Now, regarding the portion of the award which is due to our firm for our services in your behalf . . ."

After the law firm had taken its share of the winnings, there was still a huge amount of money left—so much, in fact, that the Groverpeople were puzzled to know what to do with it. They held two town meetings to discuss the question; and at the second of these, Lucy Otter came up with an idea that immediately appealed to everyone: "Why don't we use it," she said, "to buy back all of Farmer Green's land from the Sudge-Buddle Company? Then the land would be ours, to do with as we choose. I'm sure they'd be willing to sell it. And we'd still have lots of money left over."

"But would they want to sell it to *us*?" asked Grandfather Fieldmouse. "I can

see them refusing just because they don't want *us* to have it."

"Or if they *were* willing," said Elizabeth H., "they might put a big price on it to get back from us all the money they lost in the lawsuit."

Both of these seemed to be real dangers, so they had another meeting to discuss how they might avoid them. M. Lucius Ferret suggested that it might be better not to deal with the Sudge-Buddle Company directly, but rather have some sort of third party act in their place. "For example," he said, "we could form an organization which would buy the land *for* us, with a lawyer to handle the business arrangements." It seemed a workable idea. Accordingly, they hired a lawyer friend of Victoria Groundsquirrel's and created Cherrystone Enterprises—"a group interested in recreational development"—to purchase the land.

Lucy Otter was right: the Sudge-Buddle Company was willing to sell the land—eager to, in fact. They'd been hoping that a buyer would come along, and they leaped at the chance. Yet, wanting to recover as much as possible of their lost investment (as well as the money they'd been forced to pay in damages), they asked a very high price. "Much too high," the lawyer told them; and he made them an offer of what Cherrystone Enterprises was willing to pay. It was an amount far smaller than the Company would have liked, but still far more than they could have gotten from any other buyer. "Take it or leave it," the lawyer said.

The Sudge-Buddle Company took it; the deal was completed; and all of Farmer Green's land—the wide spot in the river, the meadows, the forest, the High Country, and Cherrystone Lake—became the property of Cherrystone Enterprises. Three weeks after the sale was completed, Cherrystone Enterprises deeded the land to the Town of Grover and dissolved itself.

The wide spot in the river was named "Green's Cove." The barbed wire fence and NO TRESPASSING signs were taken down; and when spring came, the folks in Grover and the surrounding countryside found Green's Cove a delightful place to enjoy their rowboats and canoes. The sloping driveway made an excellent boat ramp.

The Groverpeople tore down the remains of Otters' old house and extended Grover Park northward to the southern shore of Green's Cove. A committee headed by Roscoe Lynx, Miss Proudie Fairblossom, and Rebecca Raccoon used some of the lawsuit money to furnish the park's new addition with sidewalks, flower beds, a fountain, the latest types of playground equipment, picnic tables, and newly planted trees.

Early in the spring, folks started work on their gardens. On the first warm days, Thorstein Raccoon was out and about, preparing the ground for his vegetables. Then came Roscoe Lynx, to replace his ruined flowers and shrubs. For a year and a half, Roscoe had hardly touched his garden. Mainly because there had been no point in doing so, with the factory spewing forth its poisons. Also, it broke his heart to watch the destruction occurring, and he simply avoided it. And last summer, of course, they had spent all their time in the tunnels. Surveying the damage, he found there was much to be done by way of

cleanup, weeding, cultivation of soil, and setting out of new plants and seeds. He figured it would take him at least two years to restore the garden to even a semblance of what it had been before. He simply started in, working long hours each day; and, as one of the jobs to be done, he began building a large wishing well on his patio.

Fergus Fisher, too, began gardening early in the spring—determined yet once again to succeed in crossing radishes with watermelons.

As the springtime warmed, other folks used some of the lawsuit money to clean up the effects of the factory's pollution, and to paint their houses. Not all of the gummy residues from the smoke would come off, but some of these patches were able to be painted over. By the end of summer, most of the buildings sparkled in new coats of paint, and the town looked almost as good as it had before the factory came. Even the wall of Simon's workshop looked fairly decent again—though to hide the worst of the black smears from his earlier painting attempt, he had been forced to paint the workshop dark grey instead of the white he would have preferred.

In May, Lafayette Lizard once again urged Roscoe Lynx to allow the *Gazette* press to publish his collected poems as a book. He reminded Roscoe that all twelve of his signed poems that had appeared in the *Gazette* poetry feature had received a favorable response from the public. "Folks *like* them," said Lafayette, "and they'd like to see more of them—all together, in one place." Roscoe said that he wanted time to think about it before he said yes or no.

When Lafayette, M. Lucius Ferret, and Miss Proudie Fairblossom came to the Old Hex Inn on the day Roscoe was to give his answer, they found him planting flower seeds in the garden.

Sitting nervously on the edge of an ornamental bench, Lafayette asked him, "What have you decided?"

Roscoe continued his seeding, gently scooping and patting the soil. "I believe you said you want to publish all three hundred seventeen of my poems?"

"That's right," said Lafayette.

"It seems like an awful lot of poems to drop on the heads of the reading public," Roscoe said. "I can't believe that people would want to read that many. Besides, they aren't all equally good: some are worse than others."

"In book form, at least all of them would be there for people to read if they wanted to," said Miss Proudie. "I think folks should have that opportunity if they wish. And as for some poems being better than others, let the readers decide which ones *they* like best."

"It'll be a very handsome book," added M. Lucius Ferret eagerly. "Fine paper, a beautiful job of printing—a thick book, with a blue cover, stamped in gold."

"A *red* cover," Lafayette corrected him. "And its title will be *The Collected Poems of Roscoe Lynx*."

Roscoe looked up from his planting and regarded the editor thoughtfully.

"All right," he said finally, "I'll let you publish them, but only on two conditions."

"What are they?" Miss Proudie asked anxiously.

"First, I don't want the cover to be red or blue. I want it to be green. Second, I don't like the title you've picked for it. It's got to be called *Poems of a Hockey Player*—by Roscoe Lynx."

Lafayette stared at him and swallowed awkwardly. "Are you serious?" he asked.

"It's that or nothing," said Roscoe, turning back to his seeds.

Frowning, Lafayette was opening his mouth to say something further, when M. Lucius on one side, and Miss Proudie on the other, roughly nudged him to be silent. He closed his mouth.

"I'm so glad you decided to publish your poems," said Miss Proudie, "to let other people share in them with you. And as M. Lucius says, it will be a beautiful book."

"I never expected 'em to be published," said Roscoe, looking up with a shy grin, as though he still couldn't believe the decision he'd just made. "I just wrote 'em for me."

"That's probably why they're so good," said M. Lucius Ferret, "and why other people like 'em so well."

In late June, Fergus Fisher became quite excited about the progress of his raddermelish experiment. "I think I've figured it out!" he told Oliphant one evening as they sat in the observatory on the roof of the Old Hex Inn. "The new plant food—Formula Five—seems to have helped; but it wasn't poor nutrition that was causing the problem." He focused the telescope on a blue star cluster in the constellation Hercules and—humming to himself—began writing in his notebook.

"Well, what *was* the problem?" Oliphant asked, when he'd paused in his writing.

"Very simple, really," said Fergus. "The raddermelish develops underground, like a radish. Always before, I'd let it *stay* underground till I thought it was ripe. But when I pulled 'em up, they'd be tough and woody and tasteless."

"Right," said Oliphant. "For the last three years."

"But," said Fergus, "the plant itself, aboveground, is a spreading vine, like watermelon. This year—just as an experiment—I dug the raddermelishes up at an early point in their development and laid them on the ground to finish ripening in the sunlight, like watermelons. It's working, Oliphant! They're getting bigger and redder every day. They're almost ripe! And they aren't tough or woody at all!"

"What do they taste like?" Oliphant asked. "Radishes, or watermelons?"

"It's too early to tell what their final flavor will be," said Fergus. "It might not be either of those, but something else altogether. We'll have to wait and see. But it won't be long."

On a hot morning in mid-July, Franklin Groundsquirrel, preparing for a visit from his niece and nephew, was shoveling fresh sand into the sandpile behind his house. It had been almost two years since Peggy and Peter had come to Grover,

and he wanted things to be as much as possible as they remembered them.

While Franklin shoveled the sand, Randy Possum lay near him on the grass, in the shade of a mulberry tree. In his sketchbook, Randy was drawing the design for a jacketed pant-suit which he planned to make as a surprise gift for his Aunt Priscilla's birthday. "That's going to be a nice-looking outfit," Franklin commented, after careful study of the drawing. "I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like it before."

"It's an original," said Randy.

"I'm sure Priscilla will be pleased with it," Franklin said, turning back to the sandpile. "Especially, because *you* made it. She's very proud of what you've accomplished. You've come a long way since learning buttonholes."

"Well, I want to show her my appreciation," said Randy. "And I can't think of any better way."

"There probably isn't one," said Franklin. And he added, "Maybe when you're finished with that, you can make *me* a new jacket. I'd like a red one, with gold buttons."

"Anytime," said Randy. "Just say when."

After Franklin finished filling the sandpile, he and Randy went around to the front of the house just as Peabody the Postman drove up and stopped at the mailbox. "Well, Franklin, I understand you've got visitors coming," said Peabody, getting out of the car and handing him his mail.

"That's right, this morning—any time now," said Franklin. "I've been working all week to get ready for them—cleaning, baking cookies, putting a new rope on the rubber tire-swing out back." Even as he spoke, he saw in the distance a blue car coming toward them down the road. "Look! I think that's them now."

"I wonder how they've changed," said Peabody. "It's been a long time since I've seen 'em—almost two years. But it was wise for you not to let 'em come last summer." He waved as the blue car approached, with Richardson Groundsquirrel at the wheel.

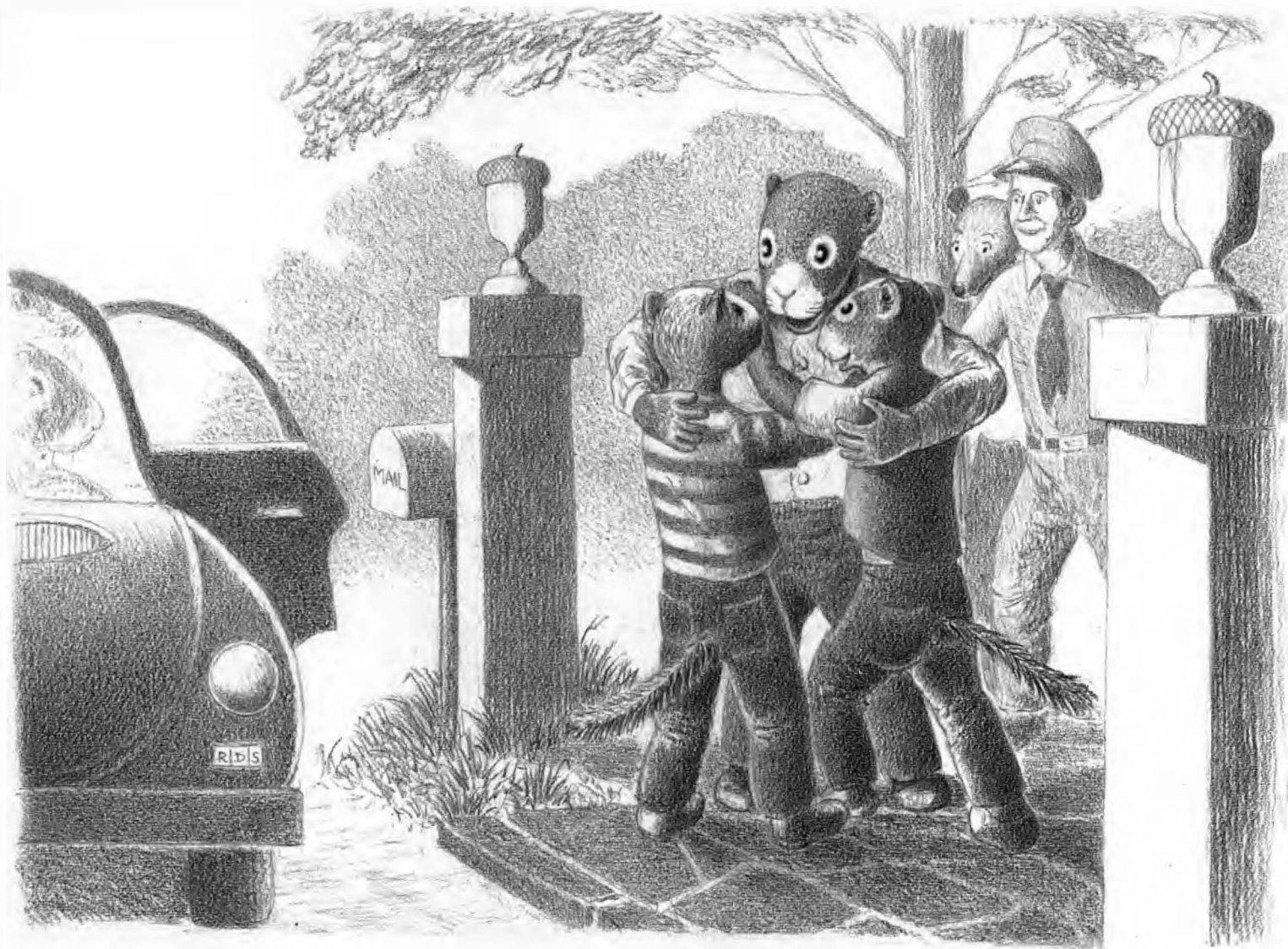
It pulled to a stop at Franklin's gate; and Peter and Peggy exploded out of the rear doors, rushed to their uncle, and hugged him hard. "Oh, it's good to have you back!" said Franklin, breathless, with his arms around them both in a tight squeeze of greeting.

"We've missed you too," said Peggy, "—and Peabody" (they both gave him a hug) "—and Randy" (he got one too) "—and Simon, and Parker, and Izzy and Prosper—"

"And M. Lucius," said Peter, "and Arabella, and Roscoe, and Priscilla, and Jamie Otter—"

"Ah!" said Franklin. "Jamie can't wait to see you. He told me to have you telephone him as soon as you got in. And Arabella is anxious to see you, too. Something about a fossil hunting expedition, I believe!"

"Look!" said Peggy, going to the mailbox. "Our sign's still here!" There, beneath Franklin's name, were the words 'AND US TOO' which they'd painted four years ago—now badly weathered and faded, but with the letters still readable.



"Well of course it is," said Franklin. "What'd you expect? You belong here, don't you?"

The Twins went running off to check on their old haunts—the sandpile, the treehouse, the swing. Victoria and Richardson Groundsquirrel, who had been standing quietly beside the car watching the reunion, now approached the others. "They could hardly wait to get here," said Victoria. "They were wondering if you'd changed any since they were here last, and were hoping you hadn't. But you have, Franklin."

"Yes, I suppose so," Franklin said thoughtfully. "In *some* ways."

"So have they," said Victoria. "You'll see. They're growing up." She gave him a hug and turned to greet the others. "Hello, Randy, Peabody. It's good to see you both."

Richardson Groundsquirrel shook hands with them warmly. "Driving through town," he remarked, "we saw that you folks have made some improvements in the landscape."

"I suppose you mean the addition to Grover Park," said Randy.

"Well," said Richardson with a smile, "I really was thinking of the new lake across from the schoolhouse."

"Green's Cove," said Peabody. "You're right. That's a *big* improvement. One that we're quite proud of."

"You should be," said Richardson.

"We're happy that you won the lawsuit against the Sudge-Buddle Company," said Victoria. "After the judgment was handed down, Mr. Skinner was bragging all over the city about how he'd won the case. He saw it as a great victory."

"Well, for him, maybe," said Randy Possum. "The money we got doesn't begin to make up for the damage. It'll be years before Little River can support life like it did before the factory came—if it ever can. And we don't yet know how the chemicals in the soil will affect our crops in the future."

"But the money did make it possible for us to improve the looks of the town, and build the park, and buy Farmer Green's land," said Peabody. "We're grateful, Victoria, for your help in finding us a lawyer to do the buying."

"So we're glad we won the lawsuit," said Franklin. "There's satisfaction in it."

"There is, indeed," said Victoria.

At three o'clock, on her way back to Grover from Maple Crossing, Arabella Raccoon, wearing her blue baseball cap, stopped by Franklin's house. She found Peter and Peggy playing with Jamie Otter in the backyard sandpile. They had built a complicated system of roads and tunnels, castles and bridges in the moist sand. Arabella was properly impressed with their engineering skill. "If you want to keep those tunnels from collapsing," she said, "you ought to put some wooden braces in them here and there. Some little sticks or twigs should do the job. Now, I've got a question for you. I'm going fossil hunting tomorrow on the limestone bluffs above Cherrystone Lake. Who wants to come along?"

She didn't seem at all surprised when they all wanted to go. "All right then," she said. "I'll pack a lunch big enough for all of us. Jamie, you bring your knapsack for a specimen bag. I'll bring mine, too, and enough rock hammers and chisels for everybody. See if you can find some newspapers at home for wrapping the specimens."

"Do you suppose *I* could find a trilobite this time?" Peter asked.

"Could be. You never know what will turn up," said Arabella. "I expect you'll find *something* interesting. No one's been hunting up there for three years; I'm sure that weathering has brought a lot of new fossils out of the cliffs in that time."

"Well, this time no Sudge-Buddle guard will chase us away," said Jamie Otter.

"That's true," said Arabella. "So why don't we plan to make a day of it—that is, stay as long as we like?"

She left them to their tunneling and went into the house, where Victoria, Richardson, and Franklin were drinking lemonade in the kitchen. Arabella was glad to have a glass of lemonade after her hot walk from Maple Crossing. She stayed for an hour, for there was a lot of catching up to do with Richardson and Victoria; then, rising to leave, she said to Franklin: "Will you be ready to play the flute tonight? Do you feel we've had enough practice on those changes in the third movement?" She was a little anxious, for *she* wasn't sure they'd had enough practice. Since the sinking of the factory, she had spent most of her spare time re-working the finished parts of the flute sonata, and had completely re-written most of the third movement. She'd finally finished it to her satisfaction a month ago, and ever since, she and Franklin had been practicing the whole sonata—in private.

"I'm ready," said Franklin, "and eager to perform."

"Good!" she said. "We'll go ahead and surprise everyone with the completed sonata." Then, with a chuckle: "I've been telling people that there'll be a big surprise tonight at the Old Hex, and have been very mysterious about it. I expect we'll have a large crowd."

On the road back to Grover, she met her mother and Priscilla Possum on their way to Maple Crossing. She asked them if they'd be at the Old Hex that evening. "I suppose we could be," said Rebecca Raccoon. "Why? Is something up?"

"There will be a surprise treat," said Arabella with a wink. And she wouldn't say more.

"Then I guess we'd better be there," said Priscilla Possum, as Arabella waved goodbye and hurried on.

They continued along the road toward Maple Crossing, chatting happily and admiring the bright wildflowers.

"I'll bet I know what Arabella meant by that surprise treat tonight!" said Priscilla. "It's going to be a chance to sample Fergus Fisher's raddermelish! He's been keeping it a secret, but Cassandra Scissortail told me that he was planning to spring it on us to get our reaction."

"Goodness knows we've been waiting long enough to get the chance!" said Rebecca. "Well, we won't spoil his surprise by letting on that we know. Oh, by the

way, Randy's really improved on his sewing, hasn't he? Last week I saw a dress he'd made for Mayor Higgins. It was a fine piece of work!"

"He's learned a lot," said Priscilla, with a note of pride in her voice. "And he's good at designing clothes as well as making them. This fall, we're going to go into business together and call ourselves: POSSUM & POSSUM: CLOTHING ORIGINALS. My mother would have been very pleased at that, and so proud of Randy—he's the third generation, continuing what she hoped would be a family tradition!"

They came to the pasture which contained Parker Packrat's junk sculpture. Above them on the scaffold, they could see Parker at work on the Fourth Level. He greeted them with a wave of his polishing cloth.

"How's it going?" they asked him. Since the sinking of the factory, he had devoted most of his time to the sculpture, cleansing and polishing, scraping off the chemical corrosion as well as he could, working systematically from the top down. Now, near the bottom, he was almost finished with the restoration.

"It's going pretty well," he answered.

"Are you going to be at the Old Hex Inn tonight?" Rebecca called up. "Fergus is going to surprise us with a taste of radderdelish!"

"So that's what he's been so secret about!" said Parker. "Just a minute; I'll come down."

He vanished into an opening, came clattering down the inside stairway, and emerged beside them.

"Do you feel you've been able to repair the damage to the sculpture?" Priscilla asked. "You've been working on it for a long time now."

"I've done about all I can to get it back the way it was before the pollution started," Parker said, wiping his hands on the cloth. "It'll never be the same as it was, of course. The acids in the smoke permanently corroded some of the shiny surfaces; and some of the very best items will always be black because of the gummy particles." He looked upward, squinting his eyes. "The piano, for instance—badly damaged. And the porch swing, and the typewriters. And the marble balustrade—oh, that took a beating! *Some* of the metal surfaces came through all right with lots of scrubbing. Some didn't. Generally, the wood, rubber, and plastic components didn't fare well at all."

They listened with sympathetic interest as he ticked off the damages on his fingers. He finished by saying, "The easiest to clean were those made of glass, or those with enameled surfaces—the bathtubs, for instance, some of the bottles, and Izzy's old refrigerator. I've done what I can. Now I've got to go on with the building." He pointed to a large pile of assorted materials collected at the base of the sculpture. Priscilla saw her mother's old sewing machine among them, still wearing the canvas slipcover she'd made for it. It had been moved in close to the foot of the sculpture, near the pulley-rope.

"Where are you going to put my sewing machine?" she asked him.

His eyes brightened. "I'm glad you asked. It'll be on the Twentieth Level, up where I'm working now. I'm going to raise it up the first thing tomorrow morning. Here, step back a little, and I'll show you." They moved across the



grass, and Parker pointed high, high up the side of the sculpture. "There! Do you see it? The small empty space between the blue bicycle and the green picnic table, right above the front door of Otters' old house." Straining their eyes in the bright sunlight, they thought they saw the spot. At least they told Parker they did. Priscilla was sure that she could make out the picnic table.

"It wasn't easy to decide where to put it," said Parker. "I wanted it to have a special place, yet one where it would work out to best advantage."

"I want it to be where it pleases you most," said Priscilla. "That will please me."

Parker eagerly pointed to other items in the pile at the base of the sculpture. "Here," he said with a proud smile, "is the section of pipe I cut from the pipeline under the Sudge-Buddle factory. It deserves a special place, too. It's going to be on the Twentieth Level also—right near your sewing machine, in fact."

"I consider that an honor," said Priscilla.

"So do I," said Parker, "—for the pipe." He pointed out other objects. "I found some pretty good items exploring the ruins of the pumphouse at Cherrystone Lake a couple of months ago. A large quantity of chain-link fence nicely mangled by the bulldozer. Some pressure gauges, a doorknob, and several parts of the instrument panel with a variety of switches and a bank of colorful push-buttons." He paused, admiring the pumphouse treasures. "For awhile," he continued, "I was really angry with Prosper for dumping all the brass valve wheels into the Lake. Then I came to see it was a fitting place for them. But I wish he had saved me *one* at least."

"It was a busy night," said Rebecca Raccoon. "He probably didn't stop to think how much you'd like to have them. Have you been down to see what you could find at Green's Cove?"

"Oh, yes," said Parker quickly. "Right after the settling stopped. I took a boat out to see what might be picked up. But there wasn't much at all. Everything I found is in this pile. A desk drawer which was floating in the water, ten NO TRESPASSING signs—more than I really need—a lot of barbed wire. I was hoping that some of the machinery might still be around, but all of it had sunk."

"That must have been a disappointment," said Rebecca.

"Well, it was," he nodded. "But one that I've adjusted to quite easily," he added with a smile.

Chapter 34

ON THAT SAME AFTERNOON, Bascom and Hilda Badger were taking a stroll through Flat Meadow, enjoying each other's company, when they came across Elizabeth H. and Farmer Ben. She was sitting before an easel painting a picture. He was taking a nap in the shade of a small spruce tree, with an open book on the ground beside him. Seeing them approach, Elizabeth H. waved her brush and called out, "Come join us!" Farmer Ben roused himself and sat up drowsily with a little yawn.

Doctor Badger looked at the painting over Elizabeth H.'s shoulder. It was a picture of the landscape she was facing: a view northward across the meadow toward a clump of stately birch trees. To the right of the trees was the dark green expanse of the Chickalooga Forest. To the left was Little River and Green's Cove, blue and placid, with the tilted red and white smokestack standing in its center. Directly ahead of Elizabeth H., but not included in her painting, was the Sudge-Buddle pipeline, perched on its trestles, angling down from the High Country across the meadow to vanish into the smooth waters of Green's Cove. (In April, Parker had cut the pipeline at the upper end as well, just below the pumphouse, and Simon Skunk had plugged the opening with an oak log. To make sure that there never would be any leaks, Oscar Otter and Tim Turtle had dived into the Lake to check the intake opening at the other end. They had been happy to report that the steel cap Mr. Snade had ordered placed over the opening was there to stay.)

"It's an attractive picture," Doctor Badger said. "Very restful, somehow."

"But you didn't paint in the pipeline," said Hilda Badger. "You just left it out completely."

"I saw no reason to put it in," said Elizabeth H. "It doesn't add anything to the landscape, does it?"

They had to agree that it didn't.

"But you did put in the smokestack," said Hilda.

"Well, yes, I thought I should. It's a part of Green's Cove in a way that the pipeline isn't part of Flat Meadow. If you know what I mean."

They understood perfectly.

"What are the chances for a peach crop this year?" Doctor Badger asked Farmer Ben.

"We have our fingers crossed," he answered. "It looks as though there'll be some sort of crop worth picking. But there aren't nearly so many peaches as there used to be. And the quality certainly won't be up to the old standard."

"But we're confident enough of something to pick that we've bought some new jars for canning," said Elizabeth H., making three delicate brushstrokes.

"As always, the proof will be in the eating," said Farmer Ben. "And I'm not saying much till I taste 'em. But we're setting out some *new* peach trees to see how they'll do."

Izzy the Witch and Prosper the Cat were walking toward them along the pipeline from the direction of the forest. Izzy led the way carrying her wicker basket. Prosper paced slowly behind with his gold-headed walking stick.

"Hello, Izzy," called Hilda Badger. "How are you, Prosper?"

"As well as usual," said Prosper.

"Are you folks going to the Old Hex Inn tonight?" Elizabeth H. asked. "The word is, that Fergus will be surprising us with a taste of raddermelish. But he's kept it a secret, and we're not supposed to let on that we know."

"We're planning to be there," said Hilda Badger.

"We hadn't heard about it," said Izzy, "but we'll certainly want to be there. That means we'll have to hurry with our work, Prosper. We're out gathering herbs," she explained to the others. "I've used a lot this year, and we were all so busy last summer that I didn't get a chance to collect any." Her voice trailed off as she stared at Doctor Badger's feet. "Doctor Badger," she cried sharply, "don't you realize that you're standing on the best patch of spleenwort in the district?"

Doctor Badger looked at her blankly, gurgled "Spleenwort?", and glanced down at his shoes. Confused, he quickly stepped backward. "I'm sorry," he said in abrupt apology. "I didn't know." Then, remembering himself, he cleared his throat and declared stiffly, "I'm afraid I don't know much about *herbs*."

"Well, you ought to," said Izzy. "Then you'd know better than to go walking around on spleenwort. It's very hard to find in these parts."

Doctor Badger drew himself up. "I've never found that I *needed* to know about herbs. They're all bound up with mythology and superstition. The plants all have such silly folk names. Spleenwort! A ridiculous name—"

"Well, I'd rather call it 'spleenwort' than have to use its scientific name," said Izzy.

"It's scientific name!" snorted Doctor Badger. "What's *that*?"

"*Asplenium ceterach*," said Prosper, with half closed eyes.

"Now *that* sounds silly, don't you think?" said Izzy.

"'Spleenwort' *is* better," said Elizabeth H., without looking up from her painting.

"Definitely," said Farmer Ben.

Amused at her husband's irritation, Hilda Badger whispered, "Now, Bascom, no one tells you how to do *your* work. And you might as well know, there are some things in 'modern medicine', as you call it, that seem pretty ridiculous to *me*."

Doctor Badger almost responded to this, but thought better of it, and said nothing. Izzy went on, "As I was saying, I need a big supply of herbs to replenish my stock. I'm very low on eyebright and periwinkle. The Sudge-Buddle people destroyed the best stand of eyebright in the district when they built the pipeline. But I've found some very fine patches of yarrow and meadow saffron this spring.



RDS

So that's some consolation." She winked at Doctor Badger and chanted softly:

"Sticklewort and feverfew
Mixed with fennel's yellow flower
Makes a health-fulfilling brew
That gives a doctor sovereign power."

"It's time to go, Izzy," Prosper said quietly. "The sun is getting westerly."

"You're right," she nodded. "See you again," she said to the others. And then she and Prosper started off across the meadow, side by side, the basket between them.

Doctor Badger watched them go, all the while turning the little rhyme over and over in his head. "Sticklewort and fennel—" he muttered under his breath, "—yellow feverfew—how does it go? Oh, balderdash! Fuddlesome hanky-panky!"

At seven-thirty that evening, Arabella Raccoon tucked the musical score of the finished flute sonata under her arm and left her apartment. She was breathless with nervous anticipation. For three years, off and on, she'd been working on the sonata, and at times it had seemed that it never *would* be completed. But once the Sudge-Buddle factory was no longer a problem, she'd been able to devote most of her spare time to the third movement, and in three months had polished it off. Rather brilliantly, she thought.

Descending the stairs from her room, Arabella was amazed and delighted to see how many people had come to the Old Hex Inn. The public rooms were crowded, the air abuzz with loud conversation. "My goodness," she said to herself, "I didn't expect *this* many!" And she was a little puzzled at the carnival mood of the crowd—the excitement, the restless movement, the bustling air of anticipation.

She didn't know that Fergus Fisher had also planned a surprise for the evening. Fergus hadn't invited anyone, but had simply thought that he would share the final fruits of his experiment with whatever folks were present. Wanting them to be surprised, he'd pretty much kept his plan to himself, and only told Oliphant, Roscoe Lynx, Miss Proudie, and Cassandra Scissortail.

Fergus, therefore, was even more amazed than Arabella when he saw the excited crowd in the public rooms. Somehow, the word must have spread all over town! He knew that his secret was out, for wherever he looked, he saw folks watching him with expectant smiles. Fergus hurried back to his garden patch and picked four additional raddermelishes to go with the two he had harvested that afternoon.

While Arabella and Franklin took one last look at their music, Fergus and Roscoe sliced raddermelishes in the kitchen. Watching them nervously, Oliphant asked: "Do you think there'll be enough to go around?"

"There should be," said Roscoe, "if we keep the slices small. Hum! They're red

inside as well as outside! I thought they'd be white, like radishes."

"I didn't know what to expect when they were fully ripe," said Fergus. "So I just decided to wait and see."

They put the sliced raddermelishes on a wheeled serving table, covered them with a tablecloth, and started for the public rooms.

Arabella patted Franklin on the shoulder. "We're as ready as we'll ever be," she said. And while he went to get his flute, she went to the piano, seated herself, and struck a loud D-major chord to get the crowd's attention. The buzz of conversation stopped at once, and everyone looked at her.

"Tonight we've got a surprise for you!" she announced. "A real treat!"

At that moment, Fergus wheeled the covered table in from the kitchen, and everybody cheered. "Speech!" cried Randy Possum. "Yea, Fergus!" shouted Peabody.

A little embarrassed, but beaming with appreciation, Fergus raised his hand to quiet the crowd. "Somehow," he said, "you folks seem to have learned about my little surprise."

Arabella and Franklin exchanged blank looks.

"I'm happy to report that I've finally succeeded in crossing radishes with watermelons," Fergus said. "I'm pleased to see you so interested in the outcome of the project, and I want to thank you for the support you've given me through four fruitless years." The crowd burst into frenzied applause, and Fergus whipped away the tablecloth to reveal the bright red slices neatly arranged on white serving platters.

"The flavor's quite good," he said. "Or so I found it. But maybe that's something you'll have to decide for yourselves. At any rate, Oliphant and I ate a whole one earlier this afternoon."

"It was delicious," Oliphant assured the crowd. "With no harmful after-effects."

"Please try some raddermelish!" Fergus concluded. "But be careful of the seeds. They're hot."

People surged forward and formed a line at the serving table. Arabella Raccoon sat on the piano bench, looking at Franklin as he stood fingering his flute. Then she shrugged her shoulders, and he shrugged his, and they both went to sample the raddermelish.

Peter and Peggy Groundsquirrel and Jamie Otter took their slices to the side door. Peggy whispered, "I suppose you noticed that when Fergus came in, Uncle Franklin was just getting ready to play the flute."

"Then I'm glad Fergus came in when he did," said Peter.

"Why don't we eat our raddermelish out in the garden?" Jamie Otter suggested. And they went out the side door into the flower-scented darkness.

Fergus watched anxiously for people's reactions to the taste of raddermelish. Some ate theirs quickly, obviously enjoying the flavor. Others nibbled theirs more cautiously. Sheriff Badger ate his *too* fast, and got the hiccups. Seeing this,

Tonia Turtle ate hers very, very slowly. By and large, people's reactions were favorable, and Fergus was relieved. Thaddeus Higgins declared that he was ready for a second slice.

"It's very good," said Matthew Muddie. "Refreshingly different," said Lucy Otter. "Not like anything I've tasted before," said Mayor Higgins. And indeed, the flavor was not unpleasant: as folks talked with one another and compared their impressions, they all agreed that the taste was a combination of the flavors of radishes and watermelons. Which was not so surprising, after all.

"It would be excellent served ice-cold at summer picnics," declared Simon Skunk.

"Or hot," said Oscar Otter, "as a filling for popovers and pies."

"It would be good in salads," said Miss Proudie Fairblossom.

"Or done up as jam or preserves," said Elizabeth H.

"Or pickled!" said Priscilla Possum.

"I'll bet it would cook up like squash," said Thorstein Raccoon. "Have you tried cooking it, Fergus?"

"No," said Fergus. "That hadn't occurred to me. But we ought to try it: baked, boiled, steamed, fried, and toasted with cheese. Roscoe, would you like to try cooking it a variety of ways?"

"Sure," said Roscoe.

"Then I'll pick some more tomorrow," said Fergus.

"But the seeds *are* hot!" cried Izzy, rushing past him to get herself a mug of cold honey brew.

"Well, I warned you," said Fergus. Then he turned to Oliphant and said thoughtfully, "Do you suppose we could develop a variety with non-hot seeds?"

"We can try," said Oliphant.

Well satisfied with the raddermelish, Arabella Raccoon and Franklin Groundsquirrel returned to the piano. Once again, Arabella struck a loud D-major chord to get everyone's attention. When they had grown quiet and were watching her expectantly, she announced: "It's a night *full* of surprises! Here's *another* treat! Franklin and I are going to play the finished version of the flute sonata we've been working on for the last three years. There've been some major changes in the third movement, so I'm sure you'll find the piece quite different from anything you've heard before."

In the stunned silence that followed her announcement, Franklin bowed and took his position at the music rack. He brought the silver flute to his lips. Tapping time with her foot, Arabella gave a nod with her head and swung into the introduction. Franklin caught his cue and began playing.

It had been a long time since folks had heard Franklin play. It quickly became apparent that, during that time, his playing had not improved. Not one bit. Roscoe Lynx reached for his ear-plugs.

Again the hair-raising squawks! The shrill twitterings and ear-tingling shrieks! The agonized gaspings and nerve-jangling squeals!

Miss Proudie began fanning her face with a magazine. Grandfather Fieldmouse leaned on his elbows and covered his ears. Priscilla Possum tried to

focus all her attention on the purple sweater she was knitting for Matthew Muddie. Tim Turtle pulled his head into his shell. Parker Packrat retreated behind a potted fern. Prosper sat with his eyes closed, his face calm and serene. Sheriff Badger got the hiccups again. Lafayette Lizard just stared at the wall.

When the first movement ended, a great sigh went up, as though they all had been holding their breaths. Thaddeus Higgins and Lucy Otter almost ran to the serving counter to get more honey brew.

The second movement was quieter, and—in other circumstances—would probably have been quite beautiful. Just how beautiful it might have been was impossible to tell in *these* circumstances. Knowing Arabella's skill in composition and the care she took in writing her music, they assumed that she had understood what she was doing. Franklin's fluting, however, obscured whatever music there might have been.



"I'd like to see the score," Tonia Turtle whispered to M. Lucius Ferret, "so I'd know what it is we're supposed to be hearing."

"That *would* be interesting," he whispered back.

"Quiet, you two," hissed Mayor Higgins. "With all that talking, how do you expect us to be able to enjoy the concert?"

At this, Elizabeth H. groaned.

The third movement was the longest and loudest of the three. Even Izzy, who had enjoyed the rest of it enormously, found this section troublesome: not only impossible to understand, but impossible to like. In fact, it came within a gnat's

whisker of being unbearable. She turned to Farmer Ben, who sat huddled into himself with his hat pulled down over his ears. "Don't you think this movement seems rather long?" she asked.

"Oh, rather long," he answered, not looking up. "Long. Oh, yes. Rather."

Ambrose Fieldmouse whispered into Hilda Badger's ear: "I wish Fergus would go upstairs to his laboratory. What we need right now is an explosion!"

But no explosion came; and, long though it was, the sonata finally did come to an end. With a final flourish, three crashing chords, and a flurry of frenzied shrieks, the performance was over!

To show their appreciation, the crowd burst into thunderous clapping. Oscar Otter and Doctor Badger cheered. Flushed and beaming, Franklin and Arabella bowed, shook hands with each other, and bowed again. Everyone was in agreement. Never before had they heard such music. A stunning piece! In a class by itself! Simply overwhelming! Several persons said that it would certainly take more than one hearing to get out of it everything that was in it. "We can play it for you again," Franklin said eagerly. "Can't we, Arabella?"

But noting the alarm in the eyes of their friends, Arabella said quickly, "Well, I'm a little tired, Franklin. But some other time, of course!" She, too, was glad the sonata was over. Franklin nodded, smiling happily, and put his flute into its case. Everyone breathed easier.

Having put away his ear-plugs, Roscoe Lynx spoke to Arabella. "Now that you've finished writing the flute sonata, will you begin composing the Fantasy for Piano and Harp we've talked about?"

"I've already been thinking about it," she said. "I see it as a set of variations on an old Norwegian sailors' song. You know: the one that goes 'Dum dum de dah, dum de dah, dum de dah.'"

"Oh, that's fine!" said Roscoe happily.

Simon Skunk set down his empty mug on the serving counter and looked about the room. His friends were busily engaged in various pursuits, enjoying themselves and each other. Some were playing chess or checkers, or throwing darts; Elizabeth H. was talking peaches with an interested group; Lafayette Lizard and Rebecca Raccoon had taken over a corner table to write an editorial for the *Grover Gazette*. At the piano, Tonia Turtle was examining Arabella's musical score with Ambrose Fieldmouse and Cassandra Scissortail to see just what they *should* have been hearing. Near the fireplace, Scooper Singebottom and Summerfield Scissortail were sharing a bowl of popcorn with Miss Proudie Fairblossom and Priscilla Possum, who continued to knit.

Simon felt a sense of peace and contentment. He motioned to M. Lucius Ferret, who came to join him; and together they walked out the side door into the garden.

The night air was warm and filled with exciting summer smells. Close at hand, crickets were chirping; and from farther away, out of sight in the darkness among the shrubs and winding paths, came the voices and laughter of the Groundsquirrel Twins and Jamie Otter playing hide-and-seek.

"It's been an interesting evening," said Simon Skunk.

"Yes, it has," M. Lucius agreed. "Not as interesting, perhaps, as *some* we've had, but far more interesting than many others."

Their feet crunched softly on the gravel path. The half-moon, high above a bank of clouds, lighted their way among the flower beds and hedges. "I wanted to talk to you," said Simon after a long pause, "about something which has come to be important to me." He paused again, and M. Lucius waited.

"I feel the need," he continued, "to broaden myself, to learn something new. Something different, that I've never tried before. Not to make a new beginning, you understand, but to take a new direction."

"I think I know your feeling," said M. Lucius Ferret.

"I've been thinking that I'd like to study architecture. Do you have any books in your shop that could get me started?"

"Three," said M. Lucius. "And then many others for later on."

They rounded a bend in the path and came upon Parker Packrat sitting on a bench in the moonlight.

"Hello, fellows," Parker said. "After the flute sonata, I came out here to get some fresh air and do a little thinking. About making the best use of NO TRESPASSING signs on the Twenty-first Level."

"I hope we didn't disturb you," said M. Lucius.

"No, I'd worked it out," said Parker. "But I had to get it settled tonight, since I'll be finishing the Twentieth Level tomorrow."

"I recall when you first started the sculpture," said M. Lucius Ferret. "You said, 'Here's the meadow, and it needs something in it—'"

"—to pleasure the eye and lift the spirit," Parker said. He smiled broadly. "I'm surprised you recall my saying it."

"Oh, I tend to remember things like that," said M. Lucius.

"So do I," said Parker. "And saying it got me started. I began collecting materials and laying the foundation."

"In many ways I envy you," M. Lucius said thoughtfully. "To be up and doing in the light and air, climbing higher and higher, always looking upward. Sometimes I wish I could do that too. But it's just not in me. I'm happiest on the ground, sitting in my dark little shop, surrounded by my dusty old books."

"But you've done a great deal of exploring there," said Parker, "and seen more than most of us."

"Perhaps," said M. Lucius. "But I question whether I've seen more than you."

Peggy Groundsquirrel came running past them. "This time Jamie Otter's 'It,'" she said breathlessly. "If he asks you where I am, don't tell him you saw me come this way."

"We won't say a word," said M. Lucius.

She vanished into the shadows. They listened to the crickets chirping.

Then Simon Skunk said, "Parker, what's it like being up there on your scaffold, high above the highest trees, standing on the sculpture you've built?"

"Hmmm!" said Parker in surprise. "Most people don't ask that question. Let me think about it." He sat silent for a moment, and then said simply, "It's good. It's like a mug of cold honey brew on an August afternoon. Or a crackling

woodfire during a December snow. It's freedom, and responsibility. It's knowing that I've done what I can, and done my best, and still have more to do." He paused, searching for the right words. "When I'm on the scaffold, below me is all I've done before. Beside me, what I'm doing now, this moment. And above me, in the sunlight, is the clear blue sky."

They were silent, each with his own thoughts. Then Simon Skunk nodded, and moved his toe in the gravel. "You've reached the Twentieth Level," he said. "That's very high. When you're working, we can hardly see you from the ground."

"I have no trouble seeing you," said Parker.

"How much farther do you plan to go?" asked M. Lucius quietly.

"Why, I've never thought about it," said Parker, surprised and pondering the question. "I'm always finding new materials to add. And each new item needs its own special place. How much farther? I just can't say. Except—as far as I can."

In the distance, Jamie Otter called out, "One, two, three! Here I come, ready or not!"

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