

Bypass

Old Road

Control Cabin

Workshops

Stores

BLINKERS WINK

LARKIN-IN-THE-PARK

COWSLIP DOWN

MOULDY MOORINGS

SPOOKS SPINNEY

Hickey Burr's Abode

Gas pers Gap

TRAMPLEDON

Wheezing-on-the-Hill

LURKIN-LONG-THE-LAKE

Holly Hocks Halt

Bentwhistle Tunnel

the unworked land

WYCH-WOOD-END

more unworked land

Golf Course

Wych Elm Wood

FOOTPRINTS IN THE DEW

A. J. Main

Quipu Limited

Published by Quipu Limited

England

© A. J. Main 2010

**The right of A. J. Main to be identified as the author and illustrator
of this work is asserted in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.**

**This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.**

All rights reserved.

**This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part or stored in a
retrieval system, or transmitted in any form mechanical, electronic,
photocopying or otherwise without the prior consent of the Publisher.**

ISBN 978-0-9566896-0-3

<http://www.footprintsinthedew.co.uk>

Typeset in 12 point New Century Schoolbook

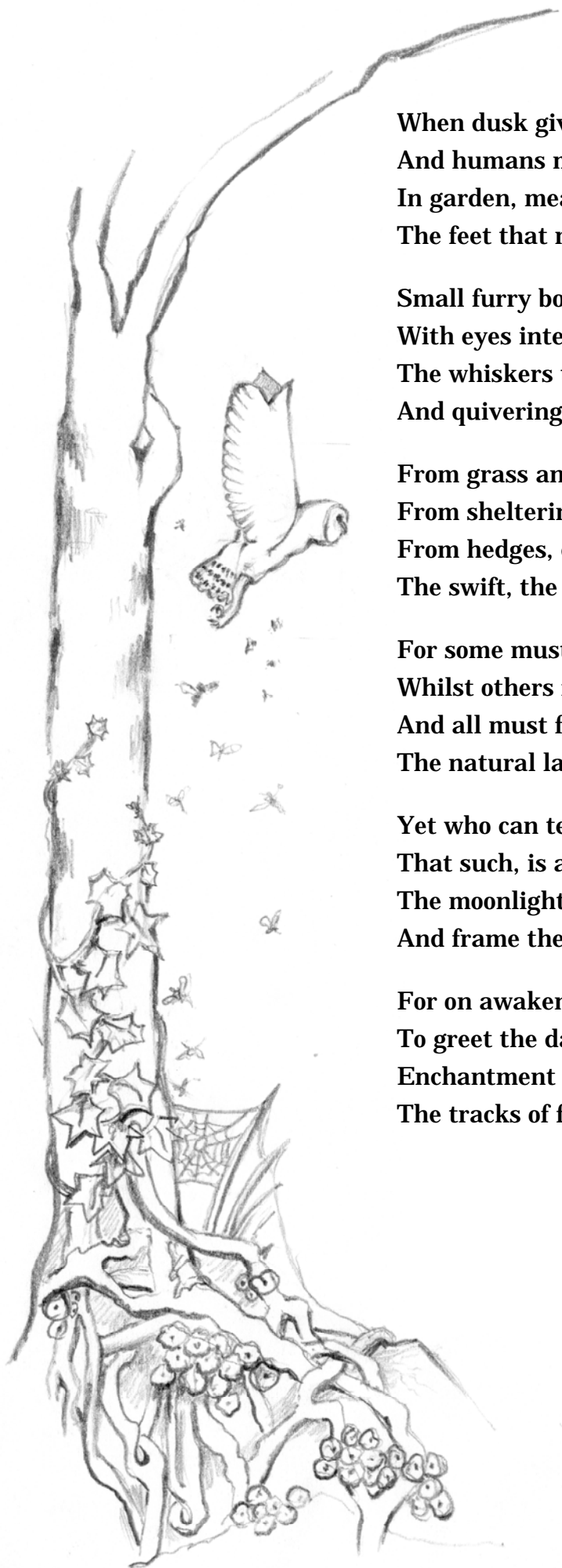
PRINTED IN ENGLAND

Illustrations by the Author

Contents

Chapter 1	Footfast– Still Fancy Free -----	2
Chapter 2	Aquabatics -----	12
Chapter 3	Ants In -----	21
Chapter 4 And Out of His Pants-----	30
Chapter 5	Hubble– Bubble -----	42
Chapter 6	Kith and Kin-----	50
Chapter 7	“The Best Laid Schemes o’ Mice.....” -----	62
Chapter 8	“.....Gang Aft A-Gley” -----	73
Chapter 9	Whither Shall I Wander -----	86
Chapter 10	HIBERHULLABALLOOCINATION-----	96
	Map-----	107

**For my husband and son who are always there for me
and
Wendy and Dr. Miguda who stood by me in my hour of need**



When dusk gives way to downy dark
And humans mostly are abed,
In garden, meadow, field and park
The feet that roam have lighter tread.

Small furry bodies warm and quick,
With eyes intent, so wide, so bright,
The whiskers twitching, ears aprick,
And quivering tails, are one with night.

From grass and stone the lesser creep,
From sheltering trees the greater fly,
From hedges, ditches, walls there leap
The swift, the slow, the scampering fry.

For some must hunt to find their fare,
Whilst others flee to stay alive,
And all must find a mate to pair,
The natural law: Live to Survive.

Yet who can tell, though it may seem
That such, is all their lives must be.
The moonlight magic's ours, to dream
And frame their world in fantasy.

For on awakening as we must
To greet the day that dawns anew,
Enchantment dwells though there be just
The tracks of footprints in the dew.

A J Main.

Chapter 1

Footfast– Still Fancy Free

It began with a pair of feet. They had come very far that night, they were tired and they ached. Hard leathery feet they were, but they ached. If they hadn't the sequence of events that followed might never have happened, or if events have to be used up like ice-cream (before it melts), they would have happened to someone else, somewhere else, some other time. The owner of the feet, a thick-set rustic looking fellow, peered down at them in the dark, wiggled them a little to test how they were getting on, sniffed, rested and thought. He sat beside the new by-pass being built round the town of Notting Cross. This had been his territory. He had worked it. It had supported him until the coming of the bull-dozers, the pile-drivers, cement mixers and the rest, had driven him farther out into alien country. Who would have thought of a road coming through here? Always a hitch! That made him chuckle for he was H I T C H. Hitch Hog. The name suited him, hitch being another name for a hedge, and because he hitched about the countryside a great deal, hitching himself together as he went.

Following the chuckle he drew in his breath as he lifted his gaze to the sky. The blinds of darkness that protected the little creatures going about their affairs, were lifting. A new day was beginning as every feathered throat gave voice in song, bursting forth in the dawn chorus.

It would not be long before light would be everywhere. People would be getting up and their business beginning. Smaller folk would be seeking a resting place, a hidey-hole, until it was safe to venture forth again under the cover of friendly darkness.

Hitch stirred on the strip of gritty, hard beaten earth. He felt annoyed with his feet. They ought to be more considerate than to make themselves felt at this time. He needed all his concentration at the other end of him. There was so much on his mind. The decision he had to make was a difficult one. Should he go on, or go back and take his chance among



the difficulties and dangers he had hoped to leave behind? The pine forests that men had planted were cold and dark places. He couldn't scratch a living there! Many hedges had been dug out to make bigger fields, so numbers of homes were no more. Finding food might not be difficult, but it was so likely to be poisoned. Who could know what sprays the farmers used?

Now if he went forward he would find shelter more easily in the many back-gardens, hedges, verges, homely scrub, park and golf-course rough. There was still some risk of poison, but it was a smaller risk. Why hesitate then? One very good reason. The WAY to the better life lay before him; a frightening maze of box-like sections with steep sides and dusty gritty wire-mesh covered bottoms that was the unfinished by-pass. It would be all too easy to lose the way or even break a leg. Then after that there was still the old roads to cross.

He stood up, a rugged little figure and faced the roadway. His aching feet had decided him. It was better to try to overcome that which lay in his path than 'slog' all that way back. Along the side of the road he went looking for a place where he could climb down. There seemed to be none. He must have missed some likely one, surely? Back he toiled. It was quite light now. In fact, men already busy with their machines were taking their breakfast-break. He must find a place quickly if he was to cross in any safety. Ah! That stretch there looked likely. Funny he hadn't noticed it before. He was not to know that 'it' had not been there when he had passed. Indeed, men had been very busy.

Gripping the edge of the curbing stone he gingerly lowered himself. He travelled light; his worldly goods stowed about his person. He had toyed with the idea of using a polythene bag that he had found in a hedgerow where some thoughtless, untidy picnicker had left it. It would keep his possessions dry and in order while at the same time it would prevent some unfortunate cow from eating it. Cows, he well knew, were often lackadaisical creatures in their eating habits and the polythene could cause acute stomach-ache, maybe even death. It was certainly something to be treated with caution; he had even heard of a fellow hedgehog who had squeezed into one, using it as a sleeping bag. His sleep may well have been a good deal longer than he had bargained for if there

had not been a human on hand to help him out of it! So in the end, being wiser, Hitch had left well alone.

Among his belongings he carried a certain item, though he was shy of mentioning it. Fortunately he hardly ever had to use it. Having it there made him feel safer at least, just in case of trouble; a small stink bomb. It so overcame his enemy that Hitch gained time to make the next move.

Perhaps the thing which gave him most confidence was his hair. He wore it very long down his back and dressed in spiky fashion. Being shy, except with his own kind, he could be private behind it. In time of trouble he could put it to very good use. There might be trouble ahead now but he'd risk that. He was a born optimist.

Down over the curb now, he peered at the stretch before him. It reached for quite some way and looked level; this was very much better than he had even hoped. So between relief at finding the way easier than expected and the fact that his feet were troublesome, he did not hesitate but set off. Sniffing the air though with his usual huffily snuffle as he went, in a little while he noticed, beside their knawing ache, an odd feeling in his feet. What was the matter with them now? They were behaving in a manner quite unknown to him. With each step they grew heavier and heavier until at last he was forced to stop. He stood rooted to the spot so to speak and quite at a loss. He had a habit of saying when surprised: 'Well shake my spines!' or when angry: 'Well sharpen my spikes!' At this moment he was speechless. The full terror of it burst upon him. Was he to stay like this forever? The rest of him felt as cold and heavy as his feet. He strained to be free but it was useless. Nothing could be worse than this he thought, until he heard human voices. Friend or foe? He almost died of fright. It was in this state that he was found by the workmen when they returned from their break.

"Now who's thrown an o1' loo-brush on my nice new stretch o' concrete?" exclaimed a voice.

"That's no brush, look, it's an 'edge'og," came a second voice.

"Why so it is," agreed the first speaker. "What's he doing there besides making his mark?"

“Tryin’ to get across I shouldn’t wonder, but the cement’s collectin’ on ’is feet and settin’,” rejoined his mate.

“Poor little perisher,” said the first man sympathetically, “that would get anyone bogged down. Ha! Ha! Just you hang on there a minute an’ I’ll have you out in a jiffy.”

By this time, Hitch was becoming used to his fright and beginning to feel cross.

“Hang on, indeed! I’ve ‘put both feet in it’, so I’m ‘stuck in,’” he fretted.

Presently the man returned carrying a long plank and a piece of sacking. Carefully, so as not to touch the concrete, he laid the plank from the curbing stone to the edge of the wooden mould. He walked along the plank and reaching out to his full arms length he laid the sacking gently around Hitch and lifted him clear of the quickly setting mass that trapped him.

“Funny little geyser,” commented the second workman looking at Hitch with interest. “Always so independent too. Must ’ave been pretty worryin’ ’avin’ somethin’ like that ’appen to yer.”

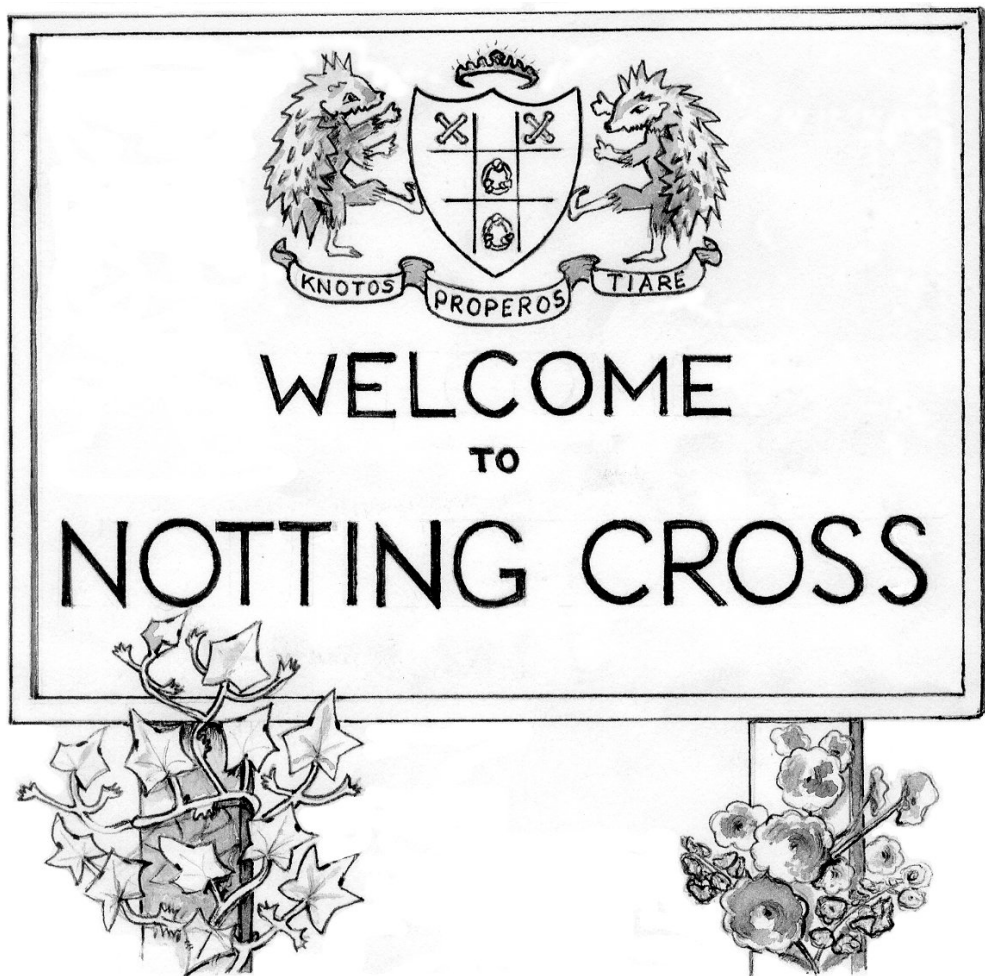
Hitch warmed to them both. He no longer felt the hurt to his pride. It could have happened to anyone and so he recovered himself without fuss or theatricals.

“Look the cement crumbles away easily enough now,” his rescuer remarked as he gently pulled it away and brushed off the last of the powdery crumbs. “No harm done. Wonder where he was going?”

“eadin’ for the golf course or the model village I’d say, by the looks of ’is trail,” volunteered the other man. “e’s still got to cross the main Nottin’ Cross road, then ’e’ll be down across the fields an’ along by the lake.”

Still holding Hitch in the sacking, his rescuer nodded agreement as he answered.

“Better put him across the road then, or like as not he’ll be hit by a car – reg’lar death trap that bit o’ road.”



Hitch was overjoyed to hear this; what unexpected luck. Across the clutter made by the road builders and the strip dividing the by-pass from the old road, they went. Over the macadam ribbon with its hooting, screeching, hurtling daymare of traffic to the safety of the roadside ditch he was carried. There he felt himself lowered to friendly sheltering scrub and bramble.

“There you are ol’ lad. Rest up a bit, you’re on the right side now. Just follow your snout an’ I reckon you’ll be O.K. Good luck,” and the man was gone.

Limping a little but light of heart, Hitch trundled along the ditch until he came to a spot where he could look down across the countryside. Leaning



against a white painted post he looked about him. What he could only see hazily, his nose and ears brought into keen focus. This was hedgehog country. The sign above him left him in no doubt of that. Nodding ivy twining the post, reaching for sun and air, whispered the message it found on the board. WELCOME TO NOTTING CROSS. Supporting the 'Noughts and Crosses' badge of the town were two hedgehogs RAMPANT. Noughts and knots, crosses and ties, hitches and hogs; it was all quite plain to him.

The townsfolk were self-respecting people. Being so tidy in everything they took pride in their motto— KNOTOS PROPEROS TIARE— which means of course 'Tie proper knots'. Anything more fitting would be hard to find you'd agree. However it must be confessed that some; those in fact who had played noughts and crosses during Latin lessons, translated the motto as 'Get proper knotted with your tiara'. Hitch was no scholar and knew no Latin, so he did not know that Pliny, the Roman naturalist, had met some of his ancestors as much as two thousand years ago. He remembered clearly though, the tales his Granny had told him of escapes from being rolled up in clay to be baked and then eaten by gypsies. She had known all sorts of weird and wonderful things too— how to make the milk curdle to make cheese using the flowers of that little plant there, Lady's Bedstraw. She knew the cures for all one's ills that could be made from the purple Self-Heal. Thoughts like these whiled away some of the hours as he rested among the Pennywort, Goat's Beard and Scarlet Pimpernel, waiting for dusk. Otherwise he slept or dozily studied the fields before him, without thought or care of passing cars. The meadow that fell away directly before him stretched golden with buttercups dancing in the arms of the soft summer breeze. From it a lark rose pouring out its paeon of praise that a blackbird in a nearby oak matched with a cadence of liquid notes. Below the meadow the land stretched green to tangles of trees and shrubs, their roots overlain with coverlets of monkey-musk and cushions of king-cups with yellow iris fringing the waters of the lake. The lake itself was a long mirror-like sliver of sapphire blue framed in the secret shadow of the trees. Beyond the lake and Wych Elm Wood to the left lay the rolling, mounded, sand-pitted golf course and far to the right, the town. Many back gardens made up a patchwork that was herringbone-stitched with fences and embroidered with flowers. Some were decorated gaily with flags of

washing fluttering in strings or flying around on whirligigs. On summer Saturdays and Sundays the air was loud with the echoing chatter and whirring of lawn mowers and heavy with the scent of new-mown grass.

Directly beyond the lake and between the town and the golf course lay a small world that was the delight of children (of all ages). It was a world in miniature, laid out to scale in every detail; complete with Lilliputian houses, churches and shops. Railways and roads joined the villages and towns and linked them with Industry. All was there to delight the visitor from Easter to Summer's end and to provide help for charities from the takings at the gate. It was to this pleasing mini-land called Knotty Cot that Hitch was bound.

The golden day slipped by taking with it the weary soreness from Hitch's feet, leaving them fresh with the itch to feel familiar ground again. Mothy dusk gave way to moon-silvered dark. It was time to go. Keeping to the path that followed the hedges still hazy with the white of hedge parsley, down the sleepy meadow and over the drowsy fields he went, murmuring a snuffling-huffing song to himself. He felt content and it showed in his quiet manner and strolling walk. Not far to the lake now. Suddenly this mood was shattered as his nose damped and his ears pricked to sense F O X.

"Well shake my spines!" he snorted.

A fox in this district was certainly quite a surprise, but there, the changes in the countryside had upset and displaced many beside himself. Although Hitch was not usually a fast mover, when there was need he could run with the best. The fox was still some way off and he decided to try to keep himself at that distance. With legs outstretched to the full he cleared the ground at surprising speed. It was not enough however; the fox was obviously gaining on him. He chided himself; there was no need to lose his dignity and flee. He turned, set his ground and prepared his defences. In next to no time at all he was an armoury of quivering spears. With a final bound the fox was upon him. Then just as hastily he drew off and nursed a tender nose. Weighing matters and gauging distances it seemed that his best plan was to roll Hitch along and into the water and as he attempted to swim away, attack. At the first fumbling pat from the fox glove (paws can be tender too), Hitch guessed the plan. There was only



one thing to do. To get away he must use his last line of defence. He did not like making himself disagreeable. A distant foreign cousin of his, Skunk, made a habit of it and who would want the name he had? This however was a matter of life and death. Taking a quick movement he hurled his stink-bomb at that elegant red fur coat and ran.

The fox leapt back, furious and indignant. Failure and anger made him rude.

“You– Pincushion, Conkercase, Claybake!” he snapped in a high pitch. Then as the choking smell rose again to his nose and Hitch went further away, he screamed, beside himself with rage and disappointment.

“You

S-T-I-C-K-L-Y P-R-I-N-K-E-R, oh no, you S-T-R-I-C-K-L-Y P-I-N-K-E-R..... oh!.....” He managed to get it right at the third attempt. “You - P-R-I-C-K---L--Y S--T--I---N but by then Hitch was out of earshot.

Chapter 2

Aquabatics

The pale gold locket of a moon hung in the purple-blue night. Silhouetted against it stood the tall sentinel trees, Silver Birch and Beech, arms outstretched, clothed in dusky verdant leaves. Their satin-barked shafts slid smoothly down to be lost in the tangle of shrub and flower that breathed a honeyed fragrance on the warm air. Ferns and blossoms blended with shadows, pressing closely the lichen-coated and moss-covered stones and earthen banks of the lake. Reeds and rushes laced its shallows and water-lilies rode out upon its deeps. From the platform that the lily-pads made rose the pulsing beat of music. The frogs were making a night of it.

A pair of old toads living in retirement in dark damp stone lodgings sheltered by a craggy outcrop, wagged their heads and blew out their cheeks in agreement.

“Disgusting noise those frogs are making tonight,” grumbled one.

“Deafening,” agreed her husband, moving round a toadstool in his way. “Having a Frok Fête.”

“Water-hop’s more like it. End of the Season you know, so they are having one last spree. It’s funny how some have to gather and make so much noise about everything they do. We never did. They’ll be off then having found homes for their families. I said to one, only the other night, you’re having a busy spell. You must be anxious too. So many dangers these times, you want to be sure your tadpoles know what’s what. But there, I expect they’ll be filling their heads with a lot of fairy tales; the kind where frogs are turned into human princes and princesses, ending happily with the change back. Much wiser they’d be, learning just plain common sense things, which is all they’ll need. Do you know what she replied?”

“Well, living in another world sometimes makes it easier to get along in this one.”

“Oh my goodness; hark at them now,” this as the throb of music grew louder.

“Deafening,” agreed her mate again. “Still my dear, you know it could be much worse. It could be one of those Pop Festivals you hear about, that go on for nights and nights.”

Birds asleep in the high Elm trees, heard the music, roused, tucked their offspring more firmly under their down quilts, fluffed up their own feather sleeping bags and snuggled their beaks well down. They needed their sleep, to be about bright and early next day. When winter winds blew keenly through bare branches the skyward flats of Birdsville would show empty and forlorn with notices ‘To Let’. Just now, full, busy and overflowing was life in the nests.

The moorhen on her houseboat nest chided her young, “Go to sleep. Go to sleep.”

Fish, silver and gold, came up goggle-eyed, open-mouthed to watch and listen. They poked their heads through the cluster of bubbles that had preceded them, wearing them like glass beads to add dazzle to the party.

It was quite a sight. The overlapping circlets of the leaves floated like tethered rafts. Strings of tiny fireflies flitting and dancing, weaving and bobbing, flashing and sparking, lit the scene. Here and there they streaked like comets in their excitement. Gathered on the pads were the frogs. All shapes and sizes they were, gay in colours from bluest-green yellowest-green with black and clear yellow; splashed, flecked, flocked and laced in shimmering patterns and roped with beads. They twitched, turned and twisted to the compelling rhythm. Some seemed bewitched, leaping in to tread the water with a light fantastic toe. Their delight reached its height when a group ‘The Pondweeds’ appeared. Reaching their heads together and plucking at the strings of their guitars the three males of the group sang an accompaniment to the female singer. She excited and united her audience with her charm and a folk song. With a shake now and then of her little tambourine she sang in thrilling tones:—

I'd like to make
Each pond and lake
A pool of crystal dew.
Sunfill the days,
Grow lily ways
And dream a dream with you.

The world would be
For you and me
A water-lily pad,
Where we would find
A peace of mind
And be forever glad.

With all so good
Why then we should
In happiness abound.
From such a store
Throw wide the door
And spread it all around.

“Got a lovely voice,” said one frog to another as they queued for refreshments at a stall under the bank. A dock-leaf awning sheltered some seats and a bill of fare on the moss lawn that sloped to the water's edge. It belonged to a chandler's shop which had a small yard attached for boat building.

The owner was a ship-wright who had been nicknamed 'Shippy' because of his trade. He was a water-shrew by the name of Shrewsbury, as the sign above the door and old fashioned green-bottle-glass window, announced. Shrewsbury's Shore-line Store, selling everything for the aquatic life from a needle to an anchor.

Many said he had come there to get away from his wife who lived up to her name. She was always scolding.

“Shrewsbury don't shilly-shally!” she nagged, showing sharp little teeth.

He liked shilly-shallying now and then. It meant he could chatter shrilly with the customers in the shop or out in the boat yard, when serving fast food.

Often she snapped that he was silly; not like other shrews; no frog would last ten seconds near them! He supposed this was all true for he did like to 'Live and let Live'. Perhaps he would not have survived anywhere else, for here besides making a living from diving and fishing there was salvaging of scraps left by picnickers. Some said he had not run away from his wife, but had forgotten her somewhere. He was a bit forgetful and tied a knot in his tail at times to remind himself of things; an instant memo-pad he couldn't lose.

The smell of wax, oilskin, rope and all that go to make up that very special smell of the chandler's was homely to him. So too was the dim little store linked by a passage to living-room and store-rooms, far inside. He wouldn't change a bit of it, which was well, for the old world nature of the place was good for trade. Perhaps he knew this. Others thought he did, for a rather cheeky frog asked a friend:

"Should you say Shippy Shrewsbury's a shrewd or silly shrew, Sam?"

With the end of the song there came an interval in the programme for all to get second wind, sup and make ready for the next part of the romp. It was during this lull that Hitch arrived at the lake's edge having made good his escape from the fox. Wading into the water he struck out strongly for the opposite bank where there was a shingly beach near the mouth of a small stream. His way lay up the steep terraces where the stream plunged headlong in tiny waterfalls. This was a place that gave pleasure to many local people and children played there.

Hitch was a good swimmer. It was a fair distance that he had to go even though the lake narrowed here in the middle of its length. Some way from shore he noticed a great deal of hubbub ahead of him. Not wanting to delay, he changed course a little to avoid it. It was not to be. A slight error in judgement and he had hitched his foot in the anchoring line of a lily-pad. The stem held. Hitch floundered, wildly threshing the water and pandemonium broke loose. In a moment he was surrounded, ducked and dazed by bodies flying in all directions.



“Well...shake...my...spines!” he gasped each time he rose free of the water.

Platforms rocked, knocking into each other. Heads speared the water. It was difficult to tell whose legs were whose. Tempers were frayed. There was much pushing, shoving, clinging and shouting:

“Mind!” “Help!” “Hold on to me!” “Don’t d..o..o..o that!”

A caterpillar of the Tortoiseshell Butterfly family swinging from a sallow leaf on the end of his nylon-strong rope so as not to miss anything, was overcome by all the excitement. Losing his balance he fell with a ‘whoosh’ down the back of the neck of a frog. She had climbed with difficulty on to one of two alder-tree roots which poked from the water like knees from the bath. His sudden arrival quite upset her.

A hairy may-bug blundering by ‘rubbernecking’ collided with an oak-apple and gave herself a headache for the rest of the night.

Hitch withdrew from the uproar and swam steadily for the bank. There seemed to be something else that was odd, he thought. By now he should have felt the gentle influx of water from the stream. There was none, only a splash of water falling. How could he know that children playing there for a few days before, had built a little dam with a plank, some branches, leaves and mud, to make a basin of water on which to sail toy boats? He first knew of the dam when he tangled with one of the branches. Becoming irritated by so many surprising mishaps he wrenched free, rasping as he did so, “Sharpen my spikes!” One idea only was in his mind; to reach that beach. He was soon away.

Mud washed from the dislodged branch. Slowly the others making up the dam gave way. The weight of the water behind them swept the rest of the frail barrier aside as it broke into the lake in a tidal wave.

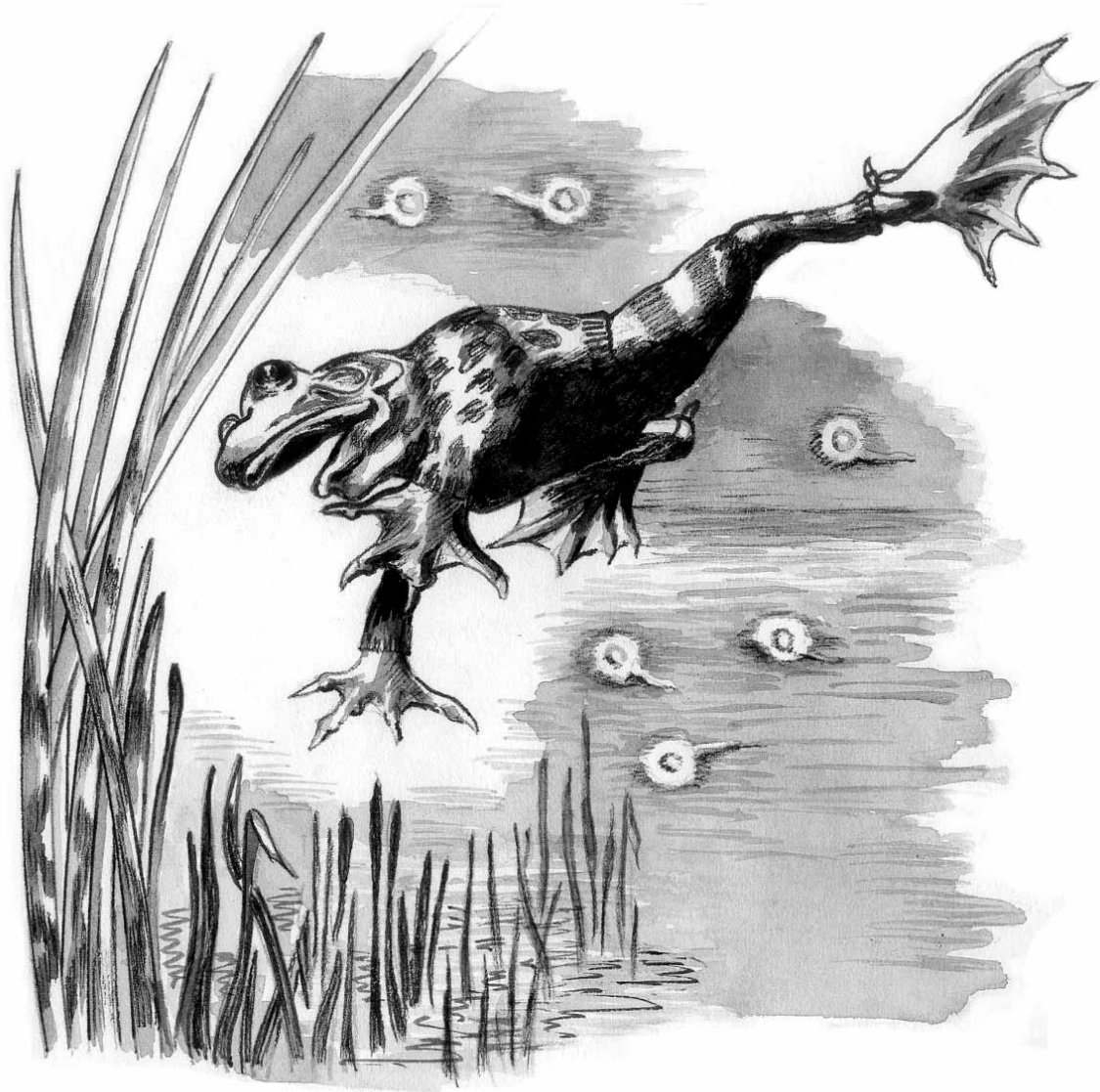
This last part was felt on the opposite shore as much as the first part had been in the middle of the lake. A rash of snails that had sprung up in the usual caravan holiday-camp manner left the enjoyment of their leaf-salads, rushed inside and slammed their doors.

Shippy Shrewsbury was not lacking in courage and mostly gave a good account of himself, but when that wave swept down upon his bank he was quite unnerved. Full and hard it came, smack, swap, right into his

little shop and premises. It lifted everything. On the ebb it swept all out, leaving some stranded, broken, on the beach and taking the rest with it back into the lake. Wringing his hands, chattering and hiccupping with dismay he sat down upon a log near one of his upturned boats and took his head in his hands. At that moment he thought all was lost. Later he was to look round at the fresh whitewash and restocking, all neat and tidy again, and note with satisfaction the improvements he had made. It had been the chance to begin afresh.



The same wave carried many of the frogs and left them stranded, clinging to the reeds like punters whose punts had slipped away beneath. One even found his head stuck between two rushes from which his friends struggled to free him. They pulled so hard on his back legs, while trying to bow the unyielding rushes that he appeared to stretch like a rubber band. Having no neck to speak of and a slippery skin, the smooth stems of the rushes could no longer keep their hold upon him. As they were eased apart, without warning his head came free like a cork from a bottle, catapulting him farther back than from where he had come. Quite likely he broke the record for the longest jump in those parts, if anyone had thought of it at the time. It wasn't measured though, nor was it a proper meeting. 'Leap-frog', twitted some on hearing of it. All that the leaper



could recall was the moment he left his lily-pad that had suddenly become a surging surf board.

Arriving at last at the bank Hitch heaved himself out and up the shingle. What a bother he had almost been tangled in out there. Not for a moment did he grasp that he had been the cause. Had he been told of the wreck, ruin and riot that he had left in his wake, he would have been surprised. That he was at fault he would have flatly denied. He well knew that innocent passers-by could be held guilty by just being there. How many times had he been blamed for robbing cows of milk or poaching eggs from hens? It would certainly be difficult to believe that one fettered foot could cause such a hullabaloo.

Dawn was very near. Drying himself out, he looked about for a shake-down. It was not long before he was asleep, warmly bunked in dry leaves under protecting clumps of bitterdock and fern. He was used to camping out and sleeping rough.

Evening found him up and about. After a hasty snack he was ready to climb the steep terraces to the near boundary of Knotty Cot. In the pearly moonlight blurry-bloom ran riot. All was fairy-like; magical. The little warm night breezes kept him company, though they were here, there and everywhere. They whispered secrets to the flower-inflated hummocks of candy-tuft, played hide-and-seek with the bushes and tag with the uprush of broom. Hitch moved steadily up. He tramped the winding parts, shuffled the steeps, waddling when weary and half of a mind to stop. Patience was rewarded though as the sun slipped from veils of blush-pink and lilac cloud; honey pale at first; then dazzling gold. He breasted the last steep rise. Finding a quiet nook under a bent tree-stump, screened by nodding grasses, he slept.

Chapter 3

Ants In

Hitch woke in the afternoon with a sharp-set hunger. Pushing along at such a quick pace since leaving the wide country had not given him time to find more than a bite or two. He always 'lived off the land' when travelling. Though often skimpy, what there was, was tasty. To follow his meat he liked the juicy berries; wild strawberries and blackberries that grew in the hedges. Until he could settle he must make do with what he could come by. Something was making little signals to his nose now; tantalizing signals, come- in- this- direction- and- find- me, sort of signals. They must have been there all the time but he had been much too weary, from his long hard climb from the lake to notice them until now. Obeying the commands he found a store of nuts forgotten by some busy squirrel. How grateful he felt, that squirrels were so thrifty. The stockpile was not new, so he did not feel guilty about taking them. It was not likely that they would be needed now. Feeling refreshed he felt in no mood to go back to sleep. Taking things quietly he could continue on his way with a pocketful of acorns. He would attract no attention for no one was about.

While he slept the morning had been warm and loud with all the usual sounds of late spring and early summer. Sometime after noon, it had grown quiet and as still as the holding of one's breath. A cool grey-blue shadow masked the sky. Cold and sharp, a light shower of rain pattered the leaves and buffeted the grasses. Then as suddenly as it had come the shadow lightened and disappeared, leaving only a wispy lace of cloud. From the gauzy blue of the fresh-washed sky, the sun shone down. Earth that had been dry and thirsty gave thanks and a mulchy scent arose.

Amazingly new and sweet the world had become as Hitch went on his way. Compared to the night before the going was easy. His progress though was slow, for there was so much to linger over along the path. There were new things to inspect and many old familiar things to delight

him. Now and then he roamed from the way to look out over Knotty Cot, retraced his steps to the point where he had left it, only to leave it yet again a little further on, to explore. With the waning of the afternoon he began to feel hungry and remembering the acorns he carried he looked about for a likely spot to take a rest and eat them. To the side of the track between the gnarled roots of a beech tree he found an inviting looking, grass-fringed, dry-leaf covered heap. He would sit there and turn over in his mind an idea that had come to him on one of his little trips from the path. So it was that he stretched his legs with pleasure, but a whole colony was put into a state of panic.

That comfortable looking resting place was in fact a roof. A great dome arched over a well-planned, orderly world. It was huge compared to the tiny Meadow Ants who had built it, or the Red Ants who shared it. The whole province was threaded by highways, tastefully screened. They made it easy to travel without delay. The architecture was the best of its kind. Chambers and halls were lofty and spacious. Vaulted ceilings, arches and galleries were supported on graceful pillars. Elegant stairways wound from one level to another. Paved walkways linked courtyards from which there were fine views. No matter whether it was the royal apartments and nurseries; common-rooms and kitchens; or the cellars which housed the store-rooms and the milking-parlours where the herds of greenfly cattle were kept; all were fashioned with the same care.

It was a queen who sat at the head of this state. Those she ruled were almost all females and they devoted themselves to serving the sisterhood. The few males that there were, lounged about, idle. They did nothing until they spread their wings to woo and wed the princesses at Swarm Time.

Now this was a very special day. A splendid air-show took place. Whatever their office or trade, all the ants were granted a holiday. Great was the excitement as they crowded out to watch the display: the stunts and the fly-past of their winged fellows. Scrambling for the best places to gain a good view, they climbed anything and everything in the neighbourhood. Others at the runways and launching sites put heart into the timid and cheered the daring ones. It was a time ringed on the ant calendar, looked forward to and talked of long afterwards.

At all other times they toiled without let or hindrance. The Queen's attendants waited upon her, pampering her. In every fad, every whim, they humoured her. The nursemaids bathed and fed their charges. Whether it was royal or not, each one was tended and cherished. Cocooned in baby-wraps the mites were moved from nursery to nursery to make sure that everything was right for them: that they were neither too hot nor too cold. When they were old enough they were carried in their cots and placed in rows in the sunshine and fresh air as all babies should be. The chambermaids who waited on the guests, be the boarders caterpillars or beetles, gave them the sort of attention found in a 'five star' hotel. A satisfied client would pay the bill with sweetness. From the most skilled journey-women to the raw young apprentices just learning their trade, all went steadily about their tasks. Kitchens were filled with warmth and bustle; store-rooms and corridors drummed with feet as goods were hauled in or pulled out; while in the milking-parlours a sweet smell as of vanilla, hung in the air over the greenfly as they were milked, or the sound of their sucking-the-sap filled the air like cows chewing-the-cud.

To protect this busy world they recruited an army. It was mostly for defence though it did go off on campaigns sometimes. There was no room in the army for weaklings; every soldier must be fit from top to toe. Soldiers must never think for themselves it is true: they must always do as they are ordered, but this did not come hard. An ant learned early, whether she was in the army or not, that if she broke the rules she was a dead ant. If she died without breaking the rules then she had done her duty. The colony's survival was the thing!

It could be a ticklish thing to tell soldiers from their fellows, in the larger world, save that they wore helmets. Otherwise their dress was the same, quite plain. Now if they were silent also, it gave them the advantage. Many ants could be taken to be just one ant if sighted singly at different times. Then would come the discovery that they were everywhere, in everything, especially where they were not wanted. So when they went out into the big world, a tablet over each door warned that they should take no risks. It prompted them to appear as 'A PLAIN MUTE'. For hidden in that was the key to their success they knew, though you or I might stand on our heads to find it. (ÆLV'UQINVAW). To keep in touch with each other they carried Pant-Coms (Portable Ant

Communication Sets) so small they went unnoticed. This superior design worked on vibrations and odour trails and could only be picked up by the ants' special antennae. Other insects' simpler types might look the same, though they were set at a different angle, but they were in a lesser class. If all other tactics failed and they were in a tight corner, the ants carried acid to throw at the enemy.

A council managed the state's affairs. Everyone took her turn to serve and when her spell of duty was over returned to her normal tasks.

Hitch sat there, happy to take his weight from his legs. Meanwhile under him ceilings and walls of upper chambers caved in and crumbled. The panic followed.

"Nursemaids, rescue your charges. Evacuate those rooms. send out the guard."

The army rushed out in haste and in helmets. When the queen heard of the disaster she immediately sent for her chief minister, a very able body.

"What's all this, what's all this, why has it happened?" she demanded in a peevish tone as if she held the minister personally responsible for the whole mischance.

"Everything is being brought under control, your majesty," she was hastily assured.

"Brought! Brought! It should never have 'gone out' of control," the queen rasped. "What's the use of having ministers if they don't administer?"

She ignored the fact that sometimes one is powerless.

"Just so, ma'am, but we do our best," the minister countered.

"Then it's not good enough. I can see that I shall have to take a hand. When I think of what I have managed with just one pair...!" She chose to ignore that she had twice as many feet.

"We did not wish to trouble you ma'am," she was soothed.

The last thing they wanted was to involve the queen. She was very old and absent minded: she never could remember in which hand to hold



her sceptre. More than this though she had grown stupid. Much of the time they managed her. So long as they kept her well fed and waited upon she coped, keeping up a supply of workers and producing the necessary number of princesses with enough suitors to keep the line going. She had founded the queendom many years before and was mostly content now to leave it to her ministers to manage. From time to time however, as now, she interfered. Then if crossed she became obstinate and argued. Losing the argument she would suddenly shout:

“Logic, that’s what’s needed. Logic!”

By this time, however, she would be quite muddled herself. The simplest acts of attempting to reason always led her to the most remarkable conclusions. For instance in an absent minded moment, she had demanded of one of her maids just when she was to have her breakfast and the surprised maid had shown her the empty dishes she was carrying away.

“Dear, dear,” remarked the queen, “I am absent minded
Geniuses are absent minded,
I am a genius.”

“Her and her silly gisms,” murmured the maid under her breath.

The queen, too busy producing the heirs and workers had never studied English; that was for the advisors who in turn never thought to explain a ‘syllogism’. So how was she to know it shows when a conclusion is stupid, however argued?

To return to the minister standing before the queen; she bowed her head and said:

“If that is all ma’am?”

“It isn’t all,” snapped the queen, not at all sure of what else she wanted to say, but feeling that something should follow this. Then inspired she ordered:

“Call out the guard.”

This we know had been done already, but the wise minister could see that it was best to humour her further.

“You are wise. We all bow to your majesty. Your’s is the crowned head,” she appeased, but her choice of words was unlucky.

Surprised at getting her own way so easily the queen was determined to have the last word. Seizing on the last piece of flattery she replied at random but with spirit:

**“All heads have crowns,
You have no crown,
Therefore you have no head.”**

But even she could see that there was something wrong with this and hastily added, her wits partly returning to her for a moment:

“Er... for royal matters.”

The minister bowed again, but privately she thought, “I can use that kind of logic:

**Grasshoppers are obstinate, vain and foolish,
You are obstinate, vain, and foolish,
You are a grasshopper.”**

Now this for an ant, was the lowest opinion to have of anyone, but ever loyal she said nothing.

Meanwhile Hitch made himself more comfortable. So well had the ants done their job of camouflage, and so busy was he with his own thoughts, that he had no idea of the damage he was doing. He munched his acorns. Even when climbing the terraces he had had no plans other than to reach these parts. It was the sight of Knotty Cot that had given him this idea he had now. There were two parts to it. The first part was that he should visit his daughter Holly and her little family who lived in one of the model houses in Knotty Cot village near the farther boundary. He had never seen his grandchildren. News of them had reached him a little while after they had been born. Messages were passed along from one to another. The second part of the idea was, for one generally content to amble along with many halts to search into wayside matters, unusual to say the least of it. He would go by model railway train. The more he thought about it, the more he liked it. He had been travelling for some time now. Holly’s was a long way from here, over country that could be wearisome. To make the village as life-like as possible, much had been

crowded together; hedges and fences, ditches and embankments, railways and waterways, to name only the more important. On foot it would be more like an obstacle race than a cross-country run.

While Hitch pondered, the army ants arrived to find the cause of their troubles and remove it. They set about their business in their usually orderly fashion. Sightings were taken and plans quickly mapped out to climb and survey. The task was begun. Companies were sent to spread out and then advance secretly upon the hostile body. Some came from behind and up over the domed roof and others from the sides. The officer commanding rallied her troops:

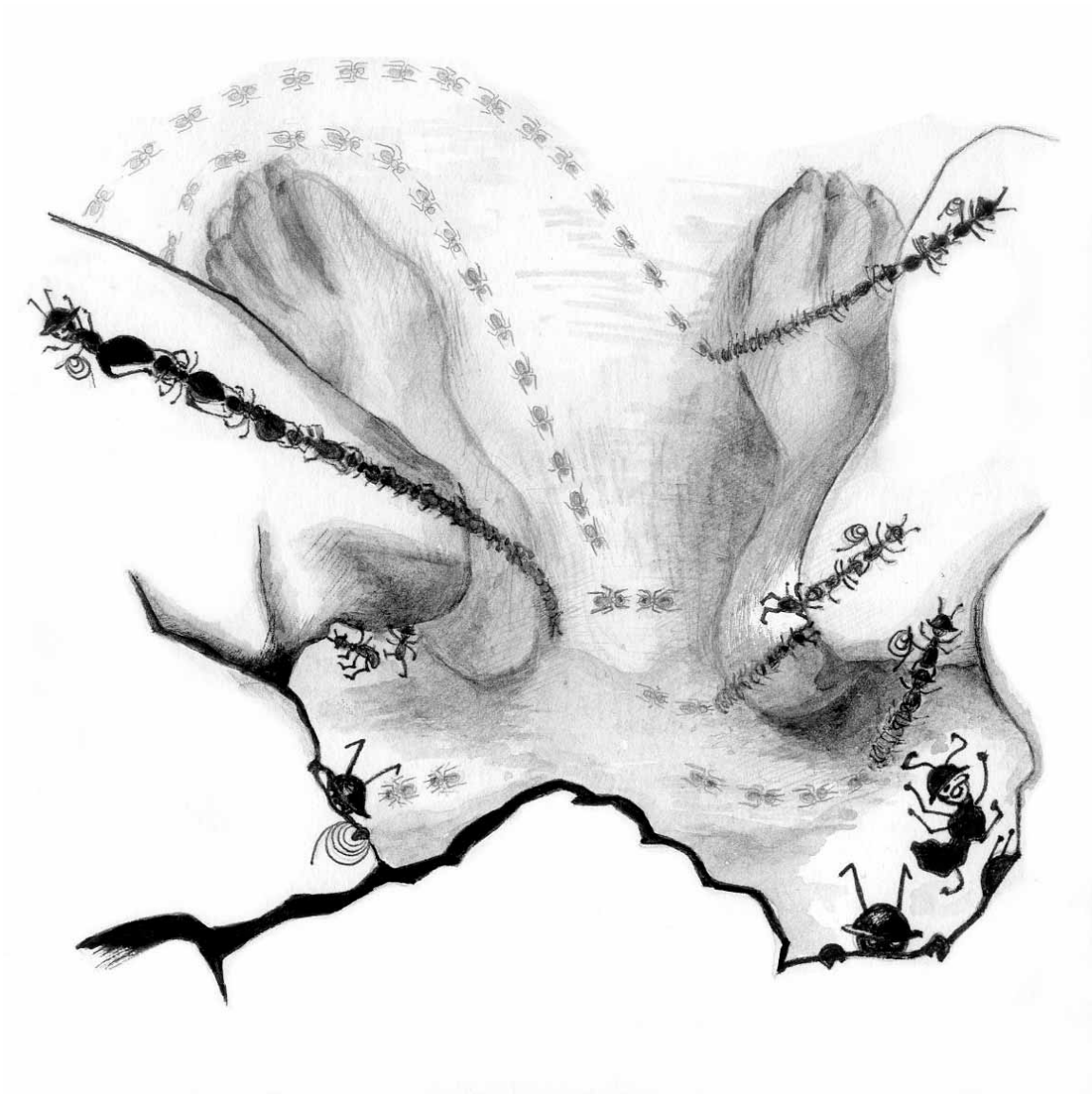
“I want volunteers! ... C Company forward march.”

Whereupon they struggled to scale the precipices of Hitch's feet and legs without him knowing. At their touch however, he flexed his feet and without their helmets there would have been many sore heads. They were recalled. This would not do. Next must be tried the ladder tactic. Flexing her muscles, the strongest ant braced herself and a second ant climbed nimbly upon her shoulders; when a third took her place on the shoulders of the second; the fourth on the third. One after another they made the 'ladder' until they reached their goal. It went very well save for minor mishaps. Someone's foot slipping caused the 'ladder' to waver about in the air like a teetering clothes-line prop in a high wind. Another finding the toe of her comrade above planted firmly in her mouth, forgot herself and bit it.

A very large part of the force was soon in places that offered any hold whatsoever in the lower half of Hitch's covering. It was clear to everyone 'what' had to be removed, but 'how' was a different matter. Ordering their troops to stay where they were the commanders went down to put their heads together and compare notes.

Hitch finished his last acorn at the same time as he made up his mind. That was it; best foot forward to the nearest station, Lurkin-Long-the-Lake. He rose.

The army commanders were delighted, dazed and dismayed all at once. Their difficulty was solved. More, it had quite disappeared, but with



it most of the army also. They gazed up into the empty blue. Oh where were they now; what dedication to duty!

Chapter 4

..... And Out of His Pants

The afternoon had become a fine warm evening by the time Hitch squeezed through a gap in the boundary fence just large enough to let him pass. He looked about him hoping to find that things had not changed since last he had been here. If that were so, Lurkin-Long-the-Lake still would be a goods depot. There he hoped he would find a goods van. Carriages may be all very well for those smart painted plastic and metal dolls that went endlessly round, day long, but he would find it impossible to squeeze into one. He was not ashamed to go 'goods' and any way for him it would be a comfortable ride.

Just as he remembered it, some way off, he could see the station. There too lay the path towards it as of old. He thrilled. Now memories fairly rushed upon him. Nothing seemed to have changed. By scenting the grasses he found his way along. A lesser path slipping off to his left made him pause. From that direction there came, borne as on a shallow breath, a feeling of excitement. It seemed to take a hold upon his nose which dampened. His stepping towards the turning made the summons stronger. He reached forward his head and it seemed that he was drawn as if by a magnet. It was the call of tribe. Whom would he find: stranger, relative or friend?

A thicket hemmed the path's end. Bracken and the sinewy stems of bramble and wild rose made dense with clumps of last year's grasses formed the walls of a humble dwelling place. To give it roof, the quick-green leaves grew in plenty. There, taking his ease, Hitch found one he had not seen since he was a young hog. The form was larger and bulkier than in those times. A face much furrowed, the general movements now slower, told of the passage of time. What had not changed was the waggish humour still in the old, old eyes, that had saved him in many a scrape in his harum-scarum youth.



They gazed at each other; remembering; making sure. Hitch exclaimed with mounting pleasure:

“H-i-c-k-e-y B-u-r-r!”

A slightly gruff, wheezy voice returned:

“I do believe it’s young Hitch. What be you doing in these parts, now? Come, come, sit you down. It’s a long time since I’ve had the pleasure of a chat with anyone. I don’t go very far nowadays. ‘The hunter home from the hill’, you understand? I’m content.”

Hitch sat down gladly. Much of his time, like the rest of his kind, he spent alone. Fending for himself was as natural as breathing. To meet with a fellow was a treat. They exchanged news with relish.

He told of his reasons for moving out to the wide country. Men had come to build the by-pass and soon everything was changed. So he had gone to places he had visited only briefly before, to settle and make a new life.

“Only they’ve changed too. Board and lodging’s hard to find. River’s choked. Used to be such deep water ’til the humans took so much, weed was kept properly in its place. Now the weed’s taking over. Fair vexes the salmon that can make it upstream. Sea or river, they say, are not what they used to be.”

Hickey’s eyes lost their twinkle for a moment as Hitch went on;

“Yes quiet backwater it was. Now heavy machines shake the very ground, ’til you’re fair dizzy. Venturing out, you risk your life. If you’re not knocked down as like as not you’ll come by food that’s poisoned. Don’t know how the badgers put up with it all. You have to hand it to ’em. Raise whole families out there, they do. One such I used to see, many a night, strung out one behind the other on dormitory fatigues; Mrs. Brock in front and all the little Brocks afollowing her with their bed-bundles. Other times there’d be Mr. Brock on sunny mornings, airing the bed-clothes in the forecourt. Fair put out he was sometimes, with all the humans’ comings and goings. Yet stick it out they all do. Heard of one that was moved out even before my time; ’twas a motorway acomin’ in then. Moved right back in under it, soon as he found a place where he could dig. Wasn’t a patch on the old natural rock though, I heard. Mind this was rumour. Keep m’ distance always, you understand; you know how badgers can be towards us?”

Hickey Burr nodded:

“Always been like that. Depends on how hard times be. S’pose we be all alike, come to that. Humans be bigger problem though, like you say. Build all over everything don’t they? Their suburbs creep like fungus. Fill the air with their nasty fumes. Change everything. Nobody stands a chance ag’in ’em.” He warmed to his theme. “Too many of ’em for their own good. Though I’ve heard, some say now, ‘Two will do in any family!’”

It was Hitch’s turn to nod agreement, but at the same time he looked a trifle embarrassed:

“We go in for fair sized families,” he reflected. “If...”

“Good thing too,” he was interrupted, “or there wouldn’t be any of us left, the way things are.” The glint came back into Hickey’s eye. “As it used to be said, you can’t always tell sometimes what’s least expected most and a few more scallywags like me might live to my age!”

Hitch chuckled:

“Oh I hope so.” He paused in thought and then confided: “Talking of families, I’m on m’ way to see m’ daughter Holly and her family.” With studied carelessness he added: “Thought I might take a train.”

Hickey Burr regarded his visitor with a mixture of amused delight and some hesitation.

“How long since you be in the park? There be a few changes of late. But there...nothing really that’s likely to set you in check. Not likely you’ll get lost, I know. Place is well signposted I hear, so the humans can wander and enjoy themselves as they please. Haven’t been far this year as I said, but there’s never a shortage of news. There be plenty of newsmongers both above and below ground in the model village. Model village! ... Funny how everybody calls it that, when there be a town and several villages all connected by roads and railway.”

“When I was here,” rejoined Hitch, “people came in at the gate near the workshops and the park-owner’s house. Used to be an odd job and handy-man the gardeners and men in the workshops called ‘Old Harry’. Kept his brooms and such in the Stores where they stored the seed, and tools and the like.”

“Still here,” he was assured. “They’ve built a tea-shop next to the Stores. Enlarged the Engine Shed, too and keep all the steam engines in there when they aren’t running. Come out on to the turntable and off on the main line. That goes right the way round the outer part of the park and has branch lines. The Carriage Shed hasn’t needed any alterations, I heard; only the place where they’ve the controls of the trains. The ‘Cabin’ they call that.”

“Blinkers Wink was the name of the town. Is that the same?” enquired Hitch.



“Bit bigger; biggest collection of buildings there is. The little houses be very pretty. Next to the Town Hall there’s a fire-station. They even tried having the fire-engines coming out with their bells ringing but it never worked properly, so they gave it up. Oh, ar! And the little ol’ factory for makin’ carriages ’as an ’ooter. That does work, with the little plastic men comin’ out and into the canteen when it goes. Every quarter of an hour the church clock chimes and the organ plays inside the church. All been done with some kind of thing called a ... what was it? ... Oh I don’t know ... anyway, some kind of machine that sends out noises, whatever it might be. There’s another along at the next village, Larkin-in-the-Park that has a peal of bells. Coming along the line this way, the next station is the one near here. Expect that’s where you’re heading, Lurkin-Long-the-Lake, isn’t it?”

Hitch nodded:

“Saw it in the distance before I branched off to find you. Still a goods depot, I hope?”

“That’s right. You won’t go far wrong there. Same as it always was. Which way do you travel, through Wych-Wood-End by Wych-Elm-Wood?”

Hitch had not yet decided:

“It’ll depend upon what choice I have at Lurkin-Long-the-Lake.”

“Well certainly going by train, you’ll miss that climb up the hill above Wych-Wood-End station and over to Bentwhistle Tunnel and Holly Hocks Halt.”

“Does the line still run up to the Spinney from Bentwhistle Tunnel?” Hitch wanted to know.

“Ah yes, up through Wheezing-on-the-Hill and Gaspers Gap, but it’s not called just ‘the Spinney’ now,” chuckled Hickey Burr. “They had a Very Important Visitor who was much taken with those model petrified trees that they put up there to give it more character. Said their weird twisty bare limbs were fascinating. After dark they must look like bony, clutching fingers; witch’s work. A groundsman said it was a pity then, the visitors missed the thrill. The park was always closed before the glow-worms were snuffing out those slithering sly-boot snails. Glow-worms made an eerie sight at night and it was a regular haunt of theirs.

“Ah HAUNT,’ said the V. I. V. “Spooks Spinney!”

“Been called that ever since.”

Hitch grinned.

“Used to be a good view of that shallow lake with the model steamers and all kinds of craft on it, from there,” he commented.

“Still is. Mouldy Moorings hasn’t changed much either, save that there’s a public address system in the station. Heard it just once, last time I was out as far as that: a while back. Gave me quite a turn. Nobody about so far as I could see; then:

“The next train for Blinkers Wink, Cowslip Down and Trampledon, will be from Lurkin-Long-the-Lake and Larkin-in-the-Park.”

Reminded of Lurkin-Long-the-Lake Hitch was also reminded of the time. If he was to find his goods van and be safely aboard his train when it started, he must be going. He could not afford to miss it as it would be the last goods train of the day.

Sadly he said goodbye to Hickey Burr. Equally sad, the old hedgehog watched his younger friend set off on his journey again. He turned again to rest, this time with much to mull over and ponder.

Hitch approached the goods depot from the back, came round its wall, up the ramp to the platform and along its length. Once through the double doors of the shed he eased into the van there and settled himself as comfortably as he could. There was still a while to wait he discovered. Time passed. He was beginning to feel slightly cramped and bored, the way we have all felt at some time when waiting, however patiently, for something to begin.



Added to this was another odd feeling: some kind of tickliness about the lower half of his person. He had felt it while talking to Hickey Burr, but a quick hitch or two had rid him of it. He hitched again now. The feeling stopped. The train started.

The black, puffing, noisy tank engine eased the train along the siding and out towards the headshunt and main line. As it crossed the points the tickling sensation began again. Something had to be done about this, before it could drive him as mad as a March hare. Hedgehogs are such private beings that their garb tends to go unnoticed. Hitch was very much aware of his at this moment. The best thing to do was to shake out, outside, whatever was in them. He slid open the door, held them out through it and had barely time to note that it was the army of ants who had caused the trouble, when W O O S H , a passenger express hurtled by at what seemed lightning speed. All was gone including the ants. Hitch fell back in the van and gasped. What a fix! It changed everything. He could not go to Holly's like this. Recover his belongings he must, but how? Where were they? Well yes, on the front of an engine; but where was the engine? Then he thought of the ants and how they must be feeling as surprised as he was. He laughed aloud. No doubt they were earning for themselves great glory; a place in ant history; and a long dusty walk home.

The thought of his own plight sobered him again.

“Shake my spines, things do become complicated!” he grunted, thinking hard. Where would the engine be going? All around Knotty Cot, he wouldn’t be surprised. Ah! but it would end up in the Engine Shed. Hadn’t Hickey Burr said that all the engines were kept there when they weren’t running? Now he could leave the train at Blinkers Wink instead of going on to Trampledon, the station nearest to Holly’s place. Keeping to the side of the track he could follow it round until he came to the Engine Shed. It couldn’t be far, from what he remembered of it. He would ‘hang about’ there until everything was being closed up for the night. With luck he should be able to slip in when no one was looking. If he were to be discovered on the way out it would not matter. Hereabouts, hedgehogs had always been welcome. It was understood that humans were glad of their help against pests. Many a supper and breakfast had come his way from the park-owner’s little daughter, who seemed to know all about, and understand, his weakness for dog food. Always she greeted him with delight, begging him to stay, offering him a bed and the free run of the garden. If all went well now, he would do something about that before going on to Holly’s.

“I’ll nab m’ reach-me-downs, then I’ll go round and look her up,” he promised himself.

He ran into no difficulty at Blinkers Wink freight depot since no one was about. Scrambling quickly from the train he was off down the platform ramp, across the track leading to the Engine Shed and away beside it. All was quiet and peaceful. His spirits rose as he went. He felt he had the whole matter in hand. A little farther and he would be able to decide which end of the Engine Shed would be best to try for a way in.

There it was. Now he must go carefully. He stopped, sheltering behind a feathery evergreen and scanned the scene. Men were standing beside the turntable with their hands busy and backs turned as they put away the engines. It was to be a long wait. When the men moved to some task near the Carriage Shed, Hitch, keeping out of sight moved forward. Gaining the end wall farthest from the power house and stores, he rounded it and slipped quietly in at the first pair of double doors standing ajar. He was inside: that hadn’t been difficult.



He walked the length of the Shed, his head almost reaching the ceiling. Rows of steel pillars underpinned the framework that held up the plywood roof. It was pricked with skylights to let in a smoky-pearl light and covered outside with tarred felt to keep all dry and snug. The glare from tiny electric torch bulbs that here looked like the full scale ones, made him blink. Between the rows of pillars, on the real concrete floor, railway lines were laid, making the stalls on which the engines rested. Over each stall ran a louvered smoke vent, the full length of the Shed. It would have taken away the smoke from the funnel when the engine was fired up in the morning and damped down at night, if it had been a real Steam Shed. To make it seem real, for of course the whole railway was worked by electricity and controlled from the 'Cabin', matt black paint had been liberally daubed about the vent to make it look sooty. Between the rails of each stall was a service pit. As in real life, spare parts had been left about, resting against the walls under the big many-paned windows, or hanging on hooks and nails. Oil-cans stood in the rings made by the drips that had run down their sides, together with the tools of the trade. Several wheels were propped against the end wall between the doors leading to the power house and stores. A number of little plastic figures, men in boiler suits, stood about in the manner of men working and handling the gantry crane. This crane was the pride of the men who had made it. It ran on overhead rails and reached all parts of the Shed.

The model steam-engines, like their full size counter-parts, rested in their stalls after their labours. Faint gleaming and brass polished, they were proud and splendid monsters. There was the passenger express the Princess Coronation, splendid in blue, next to an empty stall. In the third and fourth stalls, two more passenger expresses, the Jubilee and the Royal Scot, one in black and the other in crimson. Beyond these Hitch could see the mixed traffic or general service 'Crab' Mogul also in crimson and then the dull black of the 8F goods express. The next, the Fowler Tank engine, looked familiar. It had pulled the goods train that had brought him to Blinkers Wink and he felt just a little more at home with that one having travelled behind it. A Flatiron almost hid one of the shiny red shunters, the Jintys, last in this glittering parade.

The doors to the stall nearest to him, the empty one, were wide open. It was most likely that the engine he wanted would come in there to

be with the other passenger express locomotives. Keeping carefully to one side to be clear of the track he peered round and out through the double doors and waited. While he had been checking those inside the Shed, another locomotive had come into the yard and was standing on the turntable. Slowly it swung round. Ah, here it came now, one of the biggest and best. It must be 'his' engine. Was there anything on the front? Being short sighted, he just could not make out at this distance. His heart thumped. Almost filling the doorway with its bulk the Princess Royal came in past him. Yes, he was in luck! Then a distant voice spoke:

“Bring out the Red Princess again, will you please? I think it looks in need of a bit of cleaning up.”

The engine moved past him again, going out. Hitch reached out but was nervous after his earlier brush with it. He fumbled, was not quick enough and it was gone. This was too much. It upset his usual steady temper. Rashly he launched himself after it, missed his footing and fell into the service pit. In a great huff he clambered out and looked for the safest exit. Having squeezed through the door at the back of the Shed he could hear the voices of the men even more clearly as they stood over the engine. It was no use, he decided. Something then, seemed to snap inside him. He must get away. Which way, though? There seemed to be people everywhere. Losing all sense of direction, he went rushing round and round, in a wide circle. The men straightened from the engine and stared with amazement. Regaining his wits he plunged into the nearest cover and lay there.

After a while it grew quiet. Sniffing and listening he came out of hiding. All was tidied and closed up. They had indeed tidied up the engine for there to one side of the turntable lay the cause of all his troubles. That which was lost was found. A few moments later he was completely himself again and free to roam. Which way now?

He explored a little to the north and found the 'Cabin', near a cluster of trees that grew beside the park-owner's garden wall. They sheltered a whole collection of odds and ends put there to come in useful again some day.

Day was drawing to a close. Westwards the sky spun to limpid blue caught fire and the sun slipped from the flame-red glory through amber

veils to sink in the purple clouds that lay like some dreamlike shore on the low edge of the sky. In the mellow softness of the golden twilight that followed, Hitch feeling more lively with every step, turned westward. If he was to pay that visit to the park-owner's garden, now was the time. It was but a short way from here.

Chapter 5

Hubble– Bubble

By night, save for the odd settling creak of timber, bricks and mortar, no sound came from the house. Humans lay in their beds deep in sleep. There was little sleep in the garden around it. Bounded on the south side by the visitors' tea-shop and the outbuildings known as the Stores, to the east the garden wall and the north and west by hedges and trees, it was full of little scurrying, chattering, chirping sounds; much to do and all in the night's work. Shadows seemingly as solid as the objects that cast them, cut sharp black patterns on a silver ground. The simple day-time scene was lost in the romantic mystery of nocturnal fancy-dress.

Hitch mooched along the paths and by-ways. He inspected everything. Changes there were, but he was glad to find things mostly as he remembered them.

"Always liked this garden," he thought. Some he didn't like at all. A fellow couldn't be comfortable with not a weed in sight and flowers blooming always perfectly and to order. A withered flower-head left on its stalk was counted an outrage. There was little cover in a hedge clipped to within an inch of its life. As for the trees bound with stakes and bands, like Victorian misses corseted with whalebone, he felt sorry for them, poor things. He remembered visiting a particular vegetable garden, where the vegetables were dragooned in thin straight rows, staked, tied, counted, labelled, pruned and disinfected. At the time he had half expected an officer of the guard to stalk round the end of the row and all stiffen to attention to salute him. Come to think of it, he must have come round; in the guise of the gardener armed with a leaflet in one hand and a pesticide spray in the other. Hitch had not stayed to find out. There was no scope for his talents there.

Just as much he hated the vast stretches of concrete cheek-by-jowl with heaps of overgrown, broken pots and bottles and scattered rusted

toys, that he had come across. Litter that the wind had snatched in fun and left in idleness often added to the wretchedness. Hitch shuddered.

Now in this still green friendly place things were better, he mused; no meddling with odd corners and verges. No 'tidying up' destroyed the butterflies' nursery, so the gay little creatures would flutter and flirt with the flowers that bloomed each in its own way, shy or gay. The bold ladybird could go adventuring, leaving her children to learn the A B C of beetledom. Spiders at the weaving trade could practise their craft midst the tall grasses. Trees and hedges shaped according to their natures spread kindly shade and shelter. The fat vegetables squatting comfortably in homely compost and free of sprays threw out the odd runner and dared



a blemish or two. Who minded when they had such good flavour in the pot?

Flattening himself like a pancake, Hitch had come in under the gate in the wall. Along the pathway at dusk he had been discovered and welcomed. Pet food was brought out, as he had hoped, rather than the misguided traditional bread and milk. As it happened, it was cat food, but hey, who could be 'picky'?

Given the freedom of the garden he had then started his tour among the flower beds where he found several clearing-up jobs to do. He did them thoroughly before moving on. The site used for the garden bonfire he sniffed but otherwise gave a wide berth. Many a one nosing about and thinking it to be a haven, took a nap. Lucky they'd been to escape with their lives when it was lit. They quit, headlong, hotfoot, and singed spine. It gave him the collywobbles to think of it.

Exploring the shrubbery he looked with interest at a bird-house, one of the nesting boxes carved by Old Harry in the shapes of quaint little steep-roofed cabins. The sounds that came from it, no bird had ever made. Old Harry, checking at the beginning of the nesting season whether it was in need of repair, found the entrance sealed with wax save for a tiny hole. A colony of wild bees had taken over and claimed squatters' rights. He had argued the matter at first but the bees had put their case with such force and penetration, driving the point home, that he decided it was best to withdraw and leave well alone. Hitch could hear the hum of conversation as the bees went about their chores or changed the night shifts. There must be some very hot gossip abroad for them to be waxing so lively after a long day spent collecting pollen. Calling as they did from flower to flower as the roundsman calls from door to door, they came in contact with all kinds of folk and heard all that was new and of note. He understood enough from their excited buzz to realise something was going on but precisely what he just could not make out.

At first he had meant to visit only a night or two, but when he found how much there was to do he stayed longer. He worked about the shrubbery and the flower garden methodically. Now and again he took himself to the out-door bedding-plants before they were transplanted to the park, or to the vegetables, by way of a change. On trips to do a bit of



small game hunting among the cabbages he passed the foot of the dove-cot. This was a pretty, white, barrel-shaped house with a pagoda-like roof all supported on a sturdy post overgrown with rambling rose. The downy, drowsy inmates snuggled together cooing contentedly. Punctuating that satisfaction with life in general there came again the mention of 'goings-

on' and a sort of hushed excitement to add a little spice to a pampered existence.

Each evening before the night's work began, he made his way to the back door of the house sheltered by the low pink-washed wall of the porch and white trellis-work overhung with violet-blue Wisteria. On the wide red flagstone doorstep warmed by the sun, he would find his wages. There too would be a glowing orange pom-pom of silky-furred kitten-cat who acted as if he owned the step at least, though he had arrived but a short time ago. Through widening gooseberry green eyes he stared at the world and blinked as he rolled over and stretched. Bright as a new penny he went by the name of Copper. Though he was half-grown he had much to learn. He still seemed to mix up his legs as he had when a kitten. On the odd occasions when he did sort them out he charged forward; forgot the pattern; lost his balance and landed upside-down, dazed, bewildered and whiskers askew. His mistress hoped however that he would soon gain some sense and when he was fully grown, police the park and outhouses. Her father complained often about the damage the mice did but thought a cat might do more, digging in the flower beds, clean though the habit might be. For his daughter's sake however, he was willing to accept Copper and give him the chance to prove his worth.

Anxious that Copper should understand, she held his face level with her own to make the point to him.

"You won't dig up his flower beds, will you? You will be good and just frighten away the mice, won't you?"

Copper blinked his eyes, wriggled, opened his little pink mouth and mewed. She put him down. He played with his tail, took a few side steps, climbed the twisting branches of wisteria and couldn't come down. She shook her head and sighed. He had a talent for becoming stuck or shut-in and meowing loudly to be rescued or let out and was generally in difficulty, but she loved him.

Privately Hitch had little time for a body that couldn't fend for itself. The odd meal or helping hand was one thing; to be 'kept' was another.



Sometimes they were joined by the small girl's brother. In this way Hitch had learned a thing or two that shed some light on the rumours flying about. His curiosity had been teased by many a passing bee weighted with pollen and self-importance; she obviously knew the inside story. Now he knew it had something to do with a mouse; a special mouse; a French mouse.

The boy had made a trip to France with a school party. It was an exchange visit with a school there. The French boy with whom he'd paired kept mice. At the school the biology teacher bred mice and gave one to their visitor. There was no doubt that at the end of the visit the French boy would keep the mouse along with his own. For the whole of the visit the mouse travelled about with its temporary owner. So used to each other did the two become that on the last day the mouse went in the usual way, in the boy's pocket, to the railway station. In the flurry of loading baggage, managing tickets and saying goodbyes, the mouse was forgotten. When it was remembered a very worried boy did not know what to do. The mouse was an 'illegal immigrant'. It might have to be killed: he couldn't bear that. Fear of this decided him and he arrived home with the mouse in his pocket. He would keep it. It couldn't harm anyone if he kept it safe. Only his sister shared his secret. All was well, they thought, until one day the mouse was not in its wooden box home. Two worried children would talk over their problem, on the flagstone step.

When they had gone Hitch took himself to his bed, a very comfortable place where he could lie outside the bedclothes instead of under them, stretching his limbs in the warmth of the sun. He roused at one time to hear voices from the potting shed nearby:

"You mean the painted figures from the platforms I take it?"

"Yes. I just can't understand what's happening to them. There are quite a few missing from around Holly Hocks Halt, Trampledon and Mouldy Moorings. My son noticed that they were gone from Mouldy Moorings because I let him arrange those. Queer business! It's not children from among the visitors who take them, 'though I could quite understand a child might be tempted. No, they disappear during the night. Shouldn't think it's that cat either. It usually spends its nights in the kitchen. Anyway it's more in a young dog's nature to take things. Then

again, they bury what they take like they bury their bones. There's no sign of earth dug up or any dog either. I hope it's not anything to do with that cat. It's an odd creature most of the time, so who knows? Can't afford to keep losing stock, that I do know. Time and labour spent on it costs so much."

Hitch gave a thoughtful rub at his whiskers. Life never stood still: it was always on the change and everybody, even the humans had problems. He had a new, small one of his own. The mention of Trampledon reminded him of Holly and that time was going by quickly. If he did not make a move soon he would be too late to know his grandchildren. They would be grown and making their own way in the world. Summer Solstice, that primal, brief, magical night, was very near and he would like to spend it with them. So he must go soon.

Knowing he'd be missed, he did a little extra cleaning along the rows of brassicas: cabbage, cauliflower and kale, brussels sprouts and broccoli, all had his expert attention. Old Harry was especially pleased. As he put it:

"Them bugs in them brassicas 'ave 'ad a right shakin' up."

Hitch paid his last visit to the back door step. After a good sleep to be fresh for the journey he set out in the direction of Trampledon. He would go on foot by way of Blinkers Wink and Mouldy Moorings. It might take longer than train travel, though in his case he wasn't so sure of that, but he could have a good look round as he went. The trouble with high speed travelling was, your person arrived while your wits were just starting out.

Chapter 6

Kith and Kin

The nights were dark now; blue-black velvet pricked only with the diamond-hard light of a scatter of stars overhead. Behind a pen-and-ink frieze of houses on the distant skyline, a soft yellow glow from street-lamps tinged the sky. Hitch made his way through the numerous little house-lined streets, along miniature highways, across small bridges and over diminutive fields stocked with Lilliputian cattle and sheep, manikins played cricket on the greens. Outside a church stood a crowd of guests at a dolls' wedding. Everywhere he found the puppet-populace scattered about as though working at every-day tasks. Day and night they were there, fixed in their customary poses, without need of rest. They made his



journey difficult. As the crow flies it was not far. Being without a strong pair of wings Hitch could only plod over each obstacle, keeping his temper and pressing onward. After resting the day at a farmhouse he started out again. Twilight slipped towards darkness and now he felt stirrings of excitement. He was nearly there. Turning the last corner he peered, recognizing Holly in the little garden before the house.

She was surprised of course but truly delighted to see him. Inviting him in, she was pleased to show him how comfortably they were settled and fairly prattled away:

“We have been made so welcome, shown every kindness and encouraged to stay. That’s more than can be said of that rag tag and bobtailed lot of mice that have moved into parts of Mouldy Moorings, to say nothing of those at Blinkers Wink and one or two other places. Well ... if far from bobtailed, rag tag they certainly are: living on top of each other, lying in bed ’til all hours, stealing when they’re not and up to all manner of other things that would stand your quills on end, I’m told. But there now, tell me how you are. It’s been so long. Did you find us easily? A lot of folk will be so pleased to see you here. I know the children will. I’ve told



them all about you, so you won't be a stranger."

"Tell me about them," answered Hitch, "for I know so little of them. Are they out now?"

"Yes; they are just that little bit independent now," owned Holly.

She spoke with the pride that comes of knowing that her children would be strong and able to look after themselves. This must come before everything in the wild. They would grow up and go their different ways, even the youngest and frailest. Every mother knew that must be.

"There are four of them," she went on. "Three boys and a girl. They are called: Teasel, Thistle, Willow-White and Wait-for-me."

As she said each name, Hitch nodded, tucking them into the corners of his memory for the moment when he would need them. The first two did not surprise him. It was the custom to use the names of spiky plants. He blinked a little at 'Willow-White'. Holly quickly explained:

"So soon after she was born she had long silky soft white spines like the hairs on the White Willow leaves. She has such pale colouring, it suits her well, though she's forever asking me why I chose it— but there, she asks 'why' about everything, all the time."

When it came to 'Wait-for-me', however, Hitch shook his head with wry amusement and asked for that to be explained too. It was Holly's turn to laugh.

"Well I know it sounds odd," she started; but at this point there was a scuffling of little feet outside and a murmur of thin small voices.

"There they are now," she exclaimed. "Come in, Granddad is here," she called.

Murmur grew to a clamour of birdlike twitterings. The door opened suddenly and an avalanche of young hedgehogs burst into the room to come to a sudden stop in a shy silence. Into this a heartfelt plea broke, as the smallest hedgehog panted some way behind the others:

"Wait for me!"

Holly smiled fondly and put forward the leader of the group:



“This is Teasel.” She laid a coaxing hand on the next small figure who it could be seen plainly by the way he put down his head, was rather shy. “This is Thistle. Here is Willow-White and...” Before she could say anything further however, the last of her little family piped again:

“Wait for me!”

“There,” continued Holly, “he’s introduced himself. He does have a name but he’s always known as Wait-for-me. Being the smallest he has a hard time of it, keeping up.”

“They’re real taking little things,” Hitch told Holly.

She looked pleased.

“On the whole they are very good, though I am cross with them sometimes,” she confided. “Teasel’s a great help. Thistle has his good points too, ’though he’s very shy and Willow-White...”

“That name!” put in Hitch. “Sort of quaint,” he added.

“Some think too fancy,” said Holly. “She did, still does, look a bit different though and where’s the harm? The boys were the usual ‘cotton white’, then dark. She was primrose pale and hardly changes...but enough about the children. You must have something to eat and I’ll make up a bed for you. You will stay a while won’t you?”

He agreed he would.

Others had seen him arrive and when he had had some time with his daughter and grandchildren, they began to ‘drop in’.

Soon they were making a party of it and everyone enjoying it to the full. Such a gathering of hedgehogs had not been seen in those parts for many a moon. Wait-for-me sitting snuggled close to his mother felt not in the least left out of things as he so often did. At one particular time great was his importance. Grandfather telling of his own childhood had said:— “I was no bigger than Wait-for-me, there...” and all eyes had turned upon him. It was a moment he would never forget.

The small urchins drank in every word as the old tales were retold.

“Remember the time when Hickey Burr was chased up a tree by a dog snapping at his heels, at least, as far as the bottom branch?”



“Oh yes. He climbed a short way along the branch. Then he lost his balance, quick as lightning curled up to take the fall and landed in the middle of the dog’s back. Never saw a dog move so fast or yelp so loudly before or since. Probably gave him a healthy respect for us urchins.”

“That reminds me, met Hickey Burr just a while back. Doesn’t go far now.” They all nodded.

“What about the time we dared Porky Prickle to climb that old scarecrow’s trousers? It was up on those allotments beyond Cowslip Down. Funny thing, he didn’t realise at first, he was going to have to jump several inches from the ground. He did it though and climbed right up. Trouble was he always overdid things and coming down he showed off. Pretended he was having a good look round when really it was to keep us waiting on him. Got caught up, head-first in the trouser pocket and couldn’t get out.”

Above the laughter one said, “There was that tale your Granny used to tell, Hitch, about a great uncle of yours I think it was.”

Hitch spent so much time alone that he too was thoroughly enjoying the company. The flood gates were opened and the torrents of memories rushed out.

“You mean the one about old Cleaver? Bad tempered he was. Couldn’t ever tell him anything either. He was looking for winter quarters at this particular time. None of this park or the terraces were here at that time, my Granny would always point out. Used to be a bit of a hedge ran along the top of the steep bank that went all the way down to the level of the lake. Folks lived closely off the land then and fetched up where they could for living quarters. Now Cleaver built himself a winter retreat in a cleft of the bank under the hedge, despite he was warned that it was always raked clear of dead leaves along there around February. Closed up his doors he did and retired for the winter. He woke one morning in spring to hear the lapping of water quite near. Looking out he was dumbfounded. Couldn’t make out where he was at all. Stuck in the fork of a branch of an old fallen tree, that’s where, right out over the water. Lucky he wasn’t drowned. By the time he was able to reach firm ground he was in a right old ‘tis-woz’. Later he found out that he must have been raked up and

rolled like a ball, house and all stranded with ivy, to the bottom of the hill and bounced into that maze of broken branches.”

So well was this tale received that he went on to describe his own adventures on the railway. There was much laughter at these. One wag put in;

“Well if you will hob-nob with ants, you must expect an ‘antyclimax’.

Hitch grinned, but defended himself.

“I didn’t expect that engine, that was the trouble. ‘Train Robber’ that it was. Fair upset me. I was a numbskull, lost my head completely, but there I was beside myself. Finest bit of homespun stinging-nettle cloth gone in a flash. Difficult to get, though it was around before flax or hemp was discovered. Good old-fashioned hook-bristled goosegrass fastenings, too. Man’s discovered the trick of it now and calls it ‘The Touch and Close Fastener’. Goes to show— nothin’ new under the sun.”

There came a lull and Holly thought the young ones might like to do a party-piece. They agreed but weren’t sure what to do.

“What about a recitation,” suggested Grandfather, “know any?”

Teasel said that he and Thistle did and he looked at Thistle, who nodded but moved from one foot to the other. The two brothers stood side by side before the company.

“Puzzlin’,” they solemnly announced the title together, Teasel piping in a full high treble and Thistle’s voice small and thin.

“So many things I want to know
Like, when bubbles burst, where do they go?
And, what’s an echo, where does it dwell?
Why does it answer, I wonder as well?”

Teasel recited with head well back and short legs braced. Then he looked encouragingly at Thistle, who began in an even smaller voice than he had said ‘Puzzlin’:

“When I’m in a huff, then people say,
You got out of bed, the wong side today.”

At this he was entirely overcome and could not go on. Teasel went quickly to his rescue:

“But as my bed’s against the wall
How can I get out that side at all?

Where do I go, when I go to sleep?
I’m here, then there, with no chance to peep,
And in the mirror I’m there quite plain
But I look behind, and I’m gone again.

Sand in a bucket I can easily lift,
Water’s no problem, easy to shift,
But if I’m in the bucket, why have I found
Not a mite can I lift it up off the ground?

A match rubbed on a box, will make a fire,
The result, for a hedgehog would be dire,
How can we tell a bed’s safe in a pile?
Is it best to assume not, and run a mile?

I have to grow and learn to find
Answers to questions of this kind.
Still as I grow, I must puzzle and try
To find the answers by asking...”

“Why?” finished Willow-White, with her favourite word and:

“Wait for me,” said you know who!

A burst of applause rewarded them and Hitch was visibly moved by this little scene. So much so that he took a quick dab at each eye as he blew and polished at his nose with vigour. Feeling that now everyone must be looking at him, he said with wry amusement:

“I do have trouble with this olfactory organ of mine.”

“Don’t we all,” said his neighbour. “Couldn’t do without them though, even if they do put the damper on things sometimes.”

Bubbles of merriment broke at the brim of each cup of happiness and well being, to make an atmosphere that was light, warm and mellow.

It was by this time, however, that Holly realised it was growing light and the youngsters should be in bed:

“Now off you go and to sleep quickly,” she urged.

They said their Good-mornings to the company who would stay a little while yet and were soon nestled down, all drowsiness and contentment. All that is, save for a question that niggled at Willow-White.

“What’s Granddad’s ‘old factory organ’?”

“His nose of course, and its ‘ol’ not ‘old’,” answered Teasel.

“Bet she thinks it ought to be ‘old factowy hooter’,” said Thistle and giggled so much he was plunged into an attack of hiccoughs.

“But he does say such funny things sometimes,” insisted Willow-White defensively. “like he said, ‘he was beside himself’ and...what was it...‘he lost his head’? Now go on woolly-head,” a nickname which any hog called Thistle, hated, “say, why didn’t I ask him where he found it again?”

Thistle however was too busy with his hiccoughs. Wait-for-me added nothing at all not even his usual plea, but not for the usual reason. This time he was fast asleep.

During the nights that followed they grew to know their grandfather well. Teasel looked up to him and did everything the way he did. He copied the way Hitch clicked his teeth with appreciation after a meal. Privately he practised the two expressions ‘Well shake my spines’ and ‘Sharpen my spikes’. His growing up was not quick enough when it came to managing his food though. Never could he escape Holly’s cry ‘Chuwit, chuwit’, as she scolded all her little family.

“I whistle like a nuthatch at times,” she confided to her father; the way humans feeling guilty, say, ‘I sound like a fishwife’.

“I understand,” he assured her. “So many things are different and worrying especially with a family to bring up.”

By now they had been joined by the family who were quiet after a game of ‘leaping on all fours’, that they played sometimes. Holly, whose thoughts still ran on caring for them was reminded of a journey they had made a short time ago.

“We had stopped for me to lift Wait-for-me by his scruff...some steps were too difficult for him...when Teasel said look and we saw something very odd,” she said.

Teasel feeling very important, burst in:

“Yes, we were up by Holly Hocks Halt and we saw all these lights strung out and they disappeared into Bentwhistle Tunnel.”

“That’s right,” said Holly. “Now why would a train be travelling on the line at that time? They are all put away before sundown and as they are never run in the dark I did not think they would have lights.”



Thistle nudged Teasel and whispered.

Teasel spoke up again. "A starling told us that his wife told him and she had it from a Yellow-Wagtail, that a lot of mice have been seen carrying things. Only of course it may not have anything to do with anything," he tailed off.

"Of course it hasn't," put in Willow-White. "Why doesn't that bird mind his own business? He mimics me when I tell Wait-for-me to hurry. I wonder why," she added!

"Because you shrill so. I expect you remind him of his nest full of fledglings waiting to be fed. He means no harm," chided Holly. "He's a born clown."

While this had been going on Hitch had put two and two together but couldn't make the answer four. Trains, or at least a train was seen when and where it ought not to have been; rumours were flying about; things were disappearing; mice were carrying things and an illegal immigrant mouse was about. It was all very puzzling. Of this much he was certain though; SOMETHING WAS GOING ON. MICE WERE AT THE BOTTOM OF IT. THEY SHOULD BE PUT IN THEIR PLACE AND KEPT THERE!

Chapter 7

“The Best Laid Schemes o’ Mice.....”

An impish breeze idled with the pages of Time’s records. Its meddling laid bare all that had caused the rumours and gossip that Hitch had met with in the park-owner’s garden. It happened like this.

All that was known of the French mouse at first was that he had arrived. Indeed that is all that would have been known of him at all, probably, if he had not taken ‘French leave’.

Born and reared in very modern mouse-quarters, he always had plenty to do. Handled, petted, and fed tit-bits by the boys, his self-confidence grew. Having met with the French boy’s mice, during the English boy’s visit, he had gained a wider experience of mouse matters. At the end of the long and interesting journey to this country, he felt himself to be a widely travelled mouse and wondered what new and exciting things would happen to him.

The house into which he was put lacked style, but it was warm and dry and the food was good. Sure that this was a temporary arrangement, he waited patiently for his new adventures to begin. The days and nights went by and nothing happened. Still he had no quarrel with the food, he was exercised, but he grew bored. For many hours at a time there was little if anything to do and worse, there was no company. Being of an enquiring turn of mind he had soon examined the full extent of his quarters; knew every grain and wood knot, every wire of the grill set at the front and was quite familiar with the door and its catch.

Late one evening for the want of something to do, he gnawed at the catch several times. It gave way. In the time it takes to twitch a set of whiskers he was outside. This looked more promising and he was quickly away to find new interests.

Finding a well-beaten track he followed it and came upon another traveller. He hailed the fellow. To his surprise, not knowing how strong



was his French accent, he was answered in his own tongue. This French was as odd as his English, but nevertheless he understood what was said.

The English mouse fell in beside him and relieved at finding company the French mouse poured out his history; mentioning at the end how pleasant it was to hear his native language.

“I was fortunate enough to pick it up from a French chef,” proudly the English mouse replied. “Few have that chance. Starting life as I did, in the back premises of the Golf Club Hotel, gave me a great advantage I fancy. I do not only speak French but have a fund of American phrases from American visitors. The kitchens had all the latest gadgets too, so I understand things, whether they be mechanical or electrical.”

So the French mouse was left in no doubt that his companion held a high opinion of himself and that it was the only opinion that mattered to him. That he often made mistakes was discovered later. Some were vast but he felt that this was in no way his fault.

As they went along he explained that he was on the way to a meeting where a matter of great importance was to be discussed.

“I do not want to be late for without me matters will not have proper attention and the right course of action will not be shaped. If you are interested, come along and be introduced to everyone. With me to sponsor you, you are bound to be accepted.”

By this time they had left the out-buildings of the workshops far behind and were threading the streets of Blinkers Wink.

“Meeting places that there are,” the guide went on, “are The Bull’s-eye – we never meet there for fear of being seen. The Cat-on-the-Fiddle—don’t care for that at all, always afraid of being hornswoggled.”

When the French mouse looked puzzled, he said shortly:

“You know, bamboozled, gammoned, swizzled?”

Vague understanding dawned in the eyes of the French mouse and he ventured, “Treaked?”

“Tricked, just so,” was the reply. “Now the Bee’s Knees and the Ant’s Ankle are both too small and any way they are rather low joints, so we gather at the Hole-and-Corner and hold the meetings either in the Hole or in the Corner. Here we are now. By the way I’m Wurzel Wiseacre,” he said, as if the name was on every lip, and led the way into an inn. They came upon a whole throng squealing and squeaking to make themselves heard.

“Oh, here’s old Wiz-Wits,” jibed one of those present.



“Pass the cheese and wine, propose the toast,” sniggered another.

“We are not here on some light matter,” pompously reproved Wiz-Wits, to use the nickname by which he was generally known. “This cat business could be grave.”

A few ears quivered at the last word.

“Oh come,” rejoined a third, “that foolish kitten is hardly a C A T.”

“Yes,” added a fourth laughing, “its name might be Copper but its too silly to be a policeman.”

“A scatty cat, a nutty cop,” chanted yet another and the chant was taken up by many.

“The Nutty Cop of Knotty Cot...The Nutty Cop of Knotty Cot.”

Wiz-Wits was not having this, particularly as he had not thought of it. He looked round for something to win their attention, found it and made a pun:

“Let me present mous-ewer...te-he-te-he,” giggled Wiz-Wits, tickled by his own wit, while a number of his listeners looked pained, “Mous-ewer Le Sourir.”

“Ow you do,” said the French mouse, giving a tweak to his black beret and bowing. “Forgeeve me eef I make ze small zing right. I am La Souris. Only ze mouse– La Souris, nevaire ze smile– le sourir, can run undaire, what say you, ze cooker?”

At this, wide grins spread over the faces, of the company. Wiz-Wits had ‘goofed’ and ever after this the French mouse was known as Smiler.

Being the centre of attention was as heady as the strong wine of his own country to Smiler. He aimed to stay there.

“Theese cat you say of, ’e ees young ees ’e non, but ’e veell older grow?”

Written large in the eyes of the muster was surprise that anyone should think it worth mentioning something so obvious. Smiler though, rapidly followed his first question with another:

“Veel ’e be so stupide then? ’e may grow wise!”

Everyone’s attention was riveted as he described, with some help with the language from Wiz-Wits who would not be left out of anything for long, what had happened to one of his ancestors.

In those days the mouse-quarters had been poky and limiting and life in them safe but boring. With a few following him this daring young mouse broke out. For a time they lived as a guerrilla band behind the

skirting boards. They raided for crumbs left by the children who boarded and who brought out biscuits, crisps and chocolate to help them wait the time to their meal. Like the children, they grew fat and slow on this diet. There was a well fed kitten about at the time that did no more than paw at playthings and sleep in the sun. To smell C A T lent excitement to the raiding, with nothing really to fear, or so they thought. Time passed, the kitten grew and the day came that showed them he was no muff but a master. The few that were left gave themselves up to finish their days in safety.

A silence followed this blood chilling account, broken by shrill squeaking as their own risk burst upon them. There was not a hair that did not bristle, not a whisker that did not quiver. That kitten must go. They were relieved and thankful they knew of the danger before it was too late to do something about it. Very thankful, until one in a hollow voice asked:

“But WHAT CAN we do about it?”

A second silence fell, longer than the first and louder. Smiler shrugged his shoulders as he lifted his eyebrows, the way the Frenchman has of showing he could make a suggestion but others might not think it any good.

Every eye said, “Try us!”

“I know a leetle of these Copper. Ze proprietaire non much like 'im. If you make shame to fall on 'im, 'e go.”

As the idea took hold, murmurs of agreement grew loud. The lunatic fringe were all for doing things so wild, nobody else would give them an ear. One who had said nothing up to now voiced what was in many minds. It must not be traced to them, whatever it was. They must think of something for which only the cat would be blamed. There was the rub; nobody could think of anything.

Wiz-Wits trying to look as if he was working something out stared in front of him, when a very small mouse wavered in a very small voice:

“Couldn't we dig in the flower beds?”



Seeing the worth of this, Wiz-Wits in a flash, took it over as if it were his own.

“We all know that it is because cats have the habit of digging that we have not had one here to worry us before now. The owner may not mind the o-d-d dig or two after all, since he’s allowed him to come here. If we make it look as though he has been digging a great deal...er...untidy digging,...er...that is...the cat I mean.” A fidgeting in the audience and the sight of little furrows appearing between the eyes of his listeners whipped him into an unusual burst of inspiration, “...AND BURYING THINGS HE STEALS. He’ll be out of here faster than he can peel open those gooseberry eyes of his.”

“Dogs bury things, not cats,” argued one.

Wiz-Wits was not going to be defeated so easily:

“As there is no dog, blame is bound to fall on the cat,” he said witheringly.

No one could better the idea anyway and on it being put to the meeting it was carried. Everyone felt the need to be doing something and wanted to be thought willing. Heads were put together to decide what they could steal.

“Those plastic dolls from the stations...take some time to collect them and meanwhile what’ll we do with them?...Hide ’em under the platforms ’til we’ve enough...Won’t they be missed right away?...Won’t matter...If we don’t take enough they might not be missed at all...We’ll need all the help we can get on the night to do the burying...I’ve got family and friends on the golf course; they’d help...good thinking, a lot of us have...Still going to be a big job though, we’ve to hump them to the flower-bed to bury them.”

Hushed, they pondered the problem.

“Supposin’ we borrow a train, or trains.” This came from one of a pair so fat, they seemed to roll rather than run.

The idea was staggering. They were really getting somewhere now. Out of the realms of possibility and into the sphere of fantasy, some feared. It was plain the speaker was serious, though.

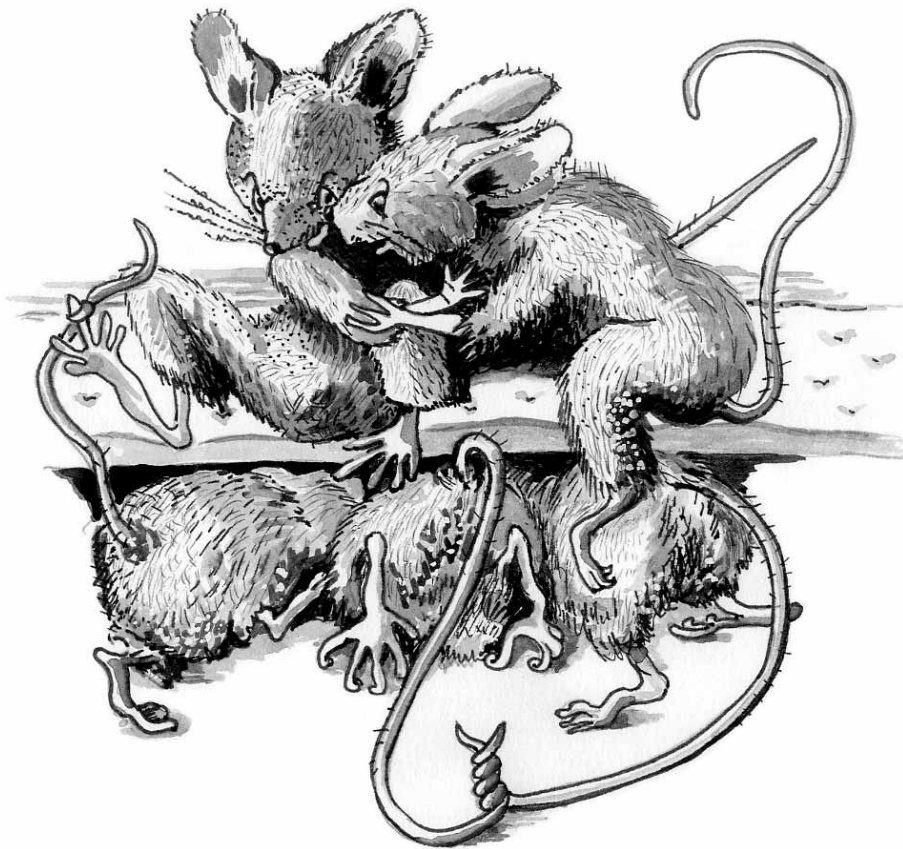
“Our place is in the ‘Cabin’. We know exactly what the man at the controls does; the hours we spend watching him... His wife is a wonderful cook.” He rolled his eyes heavenwards at the thought and ran the tip of his tongue round the edge of his mouth. “It’s worth every minute of watching,” he sighed. “We’d best try with just one train first,” he came back to the matter in hand. “Will need a bit of practice and help with the switches.”

So the mouse-mischief was plotted. Soon they were carrying out part of the scheme. Small bands of mice, with much puffing put their loot out of sight under the platforms and a picked team learned what to do in the Cabin.

It was during the almost moonless part of the month when Hitch was keeping an eye on things in the gardens, that they dared to test the tricky part of their plan. They brought out a train, ran it and put it back unnoticed by anyone who mattered they thought. It was this train going

through Holly Hocks Halt and Bentwhistle Tunnel, that so puzzled Holly. Press-ganged into being the crew, several mice 'grew cold feet' and tried to back out of the venture. They said there were no lights by which to see what to do. When it was pointed out that they usually worked without lights, preferring even the darkest nights, they argued that that was different, it was doing what came naturally. If they thought that was the end of the business they underrated Wiz-Wits. Spurred on by the success so far, he had another of his rare brainwaves. Glow-worms, they were the answer and he sent a party to Spooks Spinney for as many as could be coaxed to come and help.

Though the trial run of the train was a success, there had been a few nasty moments as the train approached Bentwhistle Tunnel. It hooted! Everyone gasped 'OWL' and clutched his neighbour or bolted beneath the seats. One regaining his breath squealed at another:



“Don’t meddle with those levers,” and was surprised when the other denied touching anything.

Afterwards, there was much laughter and banter at this too. All was explained by a mouse who had been standing alongside the track. The hoot had made him jump, but he had seen a rod, fitted to the engine, flick a switch by the track.

When Wiz-Wits learned this he did not appear to take much notice, but when there was no one there to see him he had a look at it. The power was off so he tried it and found it easy to manage.

Now they finished the plan. They decided which flower-bed would be best and worked out how to manage the digging. Leaders for the working-parties at the stations were chosen and runners picked to carry messages between parties. When helpers from the golf course arrived on what was now called ‘Nutty Cop Out Night’, they would be sent where they were most needed.

When the time came to muster this task force, Wiz-Wits pointed out that it needed someone skilled in leadership. Hence he would go and take a couple of lieutenants. There was little to go wrong here now, he was sure and they could manage without him. Few disagreed with that! When a hitch did arise in fact, Smiler quickly suggested a way round it.

Copper spent his nights cosily indoors it was belatedly discovered. How could he be blamed then for the crimes they were plotting to pass off as his? Smiler, during his escape from the back of the workshops, had noted a line of white overalls hanging in a row along with overcoats and boots. These gave him an idea. If he were to lay traces to make it look as though the inner offices were mouse-ridden, the cat would be pressed into service in the hope that at least the smell of him would frighten off the invaders. First the pockets of those overalls would soon become as fretted as the best French lace, even if the owners mistook it for ‘broderie anglaise’. Trails laid from the garden and the yards then, would make it obvious that the cat must be allowed to go in and out easily. Thus the silly creature would have no alibi. When he had done his work Smiler would send a message. Satisfied they had thought of everything, they awaited word from Wiz-Wits that he had drummed up a band of strong and able

volunteers. Then all would hold first class tickets on the express train to the end of the line and Liberty Hall.

What happens next?

Do the mice succeed?

How does Hitch come through?

Where does Hitch decide to go next and who does he meet?

How does the story end?

In order to find answers to these and other questions, you will have to obtain the printed and bound version of “Footprints in the Dew”.

Please return to the website (<http://www.footprintsinthedew.co.uk>) and go to the “Printed Version” page.

After you have read the details there, **please register your interest in the Guestbook** and we will contact you when copies become available. Until you do, we cannot satisfy many people.

We will be in touch via the email address you give, as soon as there are developments. We **guarantee** not to pass your email address to anybody else.