



PREPARATIONS

pale, greenish light in the Chamber. The pun did not amuse him.

'Quite right, Toad. We must have no ideas of that sort in our minds as we set out,' Badger agreed. 'As their prospective guests, we should be determined to be on our best behaviour. But enough of this! We have a very dangerous, harrowing journey ahead of us. We must plan! Quiet, everyone! Quiet PLEASE!

'Now, et... Fox, how shall we begin? I'm rather a sedentary animal. I'm afraid I haven't any real experience of this sort of thing. But you go further afield.'

'I suggest we begin by asking Toad what sort of terrain we shall have to cover on the journey,' said Tawny Owl drily.

'H'm!' Badger cleared his throat. 'Yes, of course... I was just coming to that. Toad?'

'To be absolutely truthful,' said Toad, 'because I don't want you to have any illusions, I can't offer you much comfort. The country we have to cross is almost all hostile. We begin by going through the housing estate, thus skirting the army land...'

'Hold on,' interrupted Badger. 'That's a bit risky, isn't it?'

'Well, of course we should travel at night,' said Toad.

'But supposing there were cats about? Or dogs? There might be dogs loose.'

'I came that way,' said Toad, a little offended. 'The army land is more dangerous. They have shooting practice - and bombs.'



IV

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There was a tremendous hubbub as all the animals started chattering at once, and the young animals ran around chanting: 'White Deer Park! White Deer Park!' in their shrill voices, as if they had already forgotten the existence of Farthing Wood. Even Adder evinced enough interest to uncoil himself and slither towards Toad to ask him for more details about the colony of frogs. He had decided these must be particularly succulent if even the humans considered them edible.

'Really, Adder, can't you forget your stomach for one minute?' asked Toad testily. 'Besides, you must promise not to hunt the frogs. They're very rare and important. We don't want to be accused of harbouring a viper in our midst, you know.'

Adder scowled, his red eyes turned to a deeper hue by the



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'I think I must appeal to you birds,' Badger said. 'None of you, I know, is obliged to join us land animals. But we shall need you for reconnaissance. You can fly on ahead – spy out the land, as it were – and tell us if it's safe to proceed. What do you say?'

'I can't see in the dark!' retorted Pheasant.

'I'll scout for you during the day,' said Kestrel, 'but only Tawny Owl can help you at night.'

'Will you help, Owl?' asked Badger.

'Of course I will,' said Tawny Owl, very much on his dignity. 'How could you think otherwise? I brought the birds to the Assembly, didn't I?'

'Thank you, my feathered friends,' said Badger, looking so pointedly at Pheasant that he turned away and pretended to be passing a remark to his mate.

'If we're all to travel together,' said Fox, 'we shall have to do so at a speed that *everyone* will be able to maintain comfortably, from the largest to the smallest.'

'From the swiftest to the slowest,' corrected Badger. 'Who is the slowest of us?'

'Mole!' a dozen voices shouted accusingly.

'I can walk as fast as Toad,' Mole said, a little hurt.

'Not overland,' said Toad. 'We shan't be digging tunnels, you know.'

'Never mind, Mole,' said Badger sympathetically. 'We're all made in different ways. It's not your fault. None of us can dig



as fast as you can.'

'We don't seem to be getting very far,' Tawny Owl broke in impatiently. 'We haven't got beyond Farthing Wood yet.'

'I think we should go through the estate, as Toad says,' remarked Fox. 'We shall all need to drink our fill where we can. Kestrel will have to direct us to the swimming-pool he mentioned.'

'Very well,' Badger conceded. 'Then that is our first objective. But we must aim to be well clear of the estate by daylight.'

'How are *we* to manage?' asked Pheasant. 'We're not nocturnal like Owl and most of you animals. We can't fly at night.'

'You'll have to follow me,' said Tawny Owl. 'You'll be able to see *me*, I suppose?'

'But how will Kestrel find his way to the swimming-pool?'

'I shall manage,' said Kestrel. 'Don't forget the estate is well lit. I shall fly slowly, ahead of the main party, and stop at the pool, where I shall hover as a signal, until the rest arrive.'

'Excellent,' said Badger. 'Now, Toad, would you care to continue?'

'Well, once we've left the estate behind,' Toad went on, 'and, remember, we have to cross the trunk road on the way – we have a long stretch of farmland to pass through; lots of fields and orchards. That shouldn't be too difficult at night. After that we come to the river. If the drought holds, that won't be much of



THE ANIMALS OF FARTHING WOOD

an obstacle. Then it gets more difficult. But I can tell you more about what's ahead as we go on.'

'Yes, that's the best plan,' agreed Badger. 'We'll cross our bridges as we come to them.'

'Well, let's hope we come to one when we reach the river,' Hare said jocularly. 'I'm no water lover.'

Everyone laughed at this, and when the laughter had died down, one of the voles piped up: 'When do we start?'

'At once,' replied Badger. 'That is, tomorrow night. We all need a good rest first, so that we can start refreshed.'

Some of the animals started to edge towards the door, feeling that the meeting was over. 'We haven't quite finished yet,' Badger called to them. 'There are various officers to appoint. We've decided Toad is to be our guide. Kestrel and Owl will go ahead as scouts. But we need a leader; someone who is courageous, and able to make quick decisions. I can't think of anyone better than you, Fox.'

Fox showed his appreciation by wagging his tail. 'I, in turn,' he replied, 'should like to nominate you as quartermaster, Badger. With your good sense applied to food, I'm sure we shall all have enough to eat every day.'

'I'm most obliged to you, Fox,' he said. 'But I beseech all of you to fill your stomachs well tomorrow, before we meet. We can't know for sure when we shall eat next. Now are there any other points we haven't discussed, anyone?'

'Yes,' squeaked one of the fieldmice. 'For the benefit of the



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smaller animals, I'd like to ask that we all renew the Oath tonight, in full company. I'm sure we'd feel more comfortable with the knowledge that everyone is bound by solemn oath to help all the others.'

'A worthy thought,' agreed Badger. 'We shall call this new oath, the Oath of Mutual Protection. We must all swear that, for the duration of our journey, our first consideration is for the safety of the party; in other words, the safety of each individual. Adder, I think it might be appropriate if you were the first to swear.'

'I swear,' said Adder with resignation, while actually still thinking about the Edible Frogs.

One by one the animals and birds of Farthing Wood adopted the Oath, and even the young repeated the words as their parents had done, feeling proud of the fact that they were not excluded from the solemn procedure.

'I think it would be as well,' said Badger afterwards, 'if each *group* of animals chooses a leader, who will be able to represent them at any discussions we need to have for planning our journey. They can report to Fox tomorrow, when we meet for a last talk before we leave.'

'When the village clock strikes twelve tomorrow night,' said Fox, 'I shall be under the Great Beech by the hedgerow. Meet me there.'

Badger looked all round again. No one had anything further to say. 'I now close the second Assembly of Farthing



Wood,' he intoned.

The animals filed slowly out along the tunnel to the open air. Adder brought up the rear and, feeling hungry, doused the insect lights as he went.



V

FAREWELL TO FARTHING WOOD

All day the bulldozers crashed forward on their path of destruction. Shrubs, young trees and undergrowth fell before the cruel onslaught of the monsters' greedy steel jaws. Old trees, stately and dignified with age, were mercilessly machined down by vicious saws. Yard by yard the forest fell back before the human despoilers; and, crouching in their burrows and tunnels, or huddled in the remaining tree-tops, or cowering under the bracken, the animals of Farthing Wood listened, shuddering, and longed for darkness.

Badger, in his cool set, heard the roaring and crashing grow nearer and nearer, but dared not stir. Fox, in his earth at the foot of the slope, panted in the heat, and waited for the chime of five



from the village clock which, he had learnt, signalled the end of the noise, and the departure of the men.

The squirrels leapt from tree to tree, watching old homes uprooted in their wake, and Mole dug deeper and deeper down into the earth, trying to reach a point where he could no longer feel the terrible vibrations.

Under the hedgerows the hedgehogs lay among the leaves like a set of pin-cushions, while Toad and the lizards kept out of sight in the undergrowth.

Tawny Owl, in the highest branch of his favourite elm, ruffled his feathers and closed his large round eyes to the sunlight, while Pheasant and his mate squatted in the thick ground-ivy in the densest part of the wood, and kept as quiet as the fieldmice.



Adder had draped himself over a birch-stump to enjoy the sun, but when the machines had approached he had vanished in a flash into the thick bracken.

Only Kestrel, soaring high above the wood, was free to watch the advance of the humans and their machines. As he watched, he knew he had been right to join the animals' party, for pretty soon everything below would be desolation; and after that followed the brick and concrete.

So the dreadful hours passed, and only when evening came, bringing silence, was it possible for Farthing Wood, in the last few snatched hours, to sleep.

Shortly before midnight, Badger awoke and looked sorrowfully around. Never again would he sleep in his own chamber in this beloved set, where he had fond memories of his young days in the care of his parents, and which had been used by his ancestors for centuries.

For the last time, he shuffled along the corridors and paused at the exit, sniffing all round warily. He wondered if there were badgers in White Deer Park, and, if he should ever reach it, where he would construct his new set. It was hard that, at his age, he should be driven out from his birth-place and ancestral home by callous humans, who seemed to ignore the very existence of their weaker brother creatures.

He trotted out into the open and down the slope, glancing back every so often, and telling himself each time