

The “Don’t try this one at home, Kids!” Section – an alternative second half to “*The Wind In The Willows*”, my first major story. Bear in mind this was written with no “audience” but myself in mind, back in 1981. My own comments to myself are in italics, as at this stage in history it’s a rather different Simon Barber writing it – and I’ve certainly got a few issues with how I should have written it !

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

“Going South, with the rest of them,” murmured the Rat in a dreamy monotone, never looking at him. “Seawards first and then on shipboard, and so on to the shores that are calling me.”

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ The above © Kenneth Grahame, 1907. What follows is my fault, circa 1981. Mea culpa. ^^^^^^^^^

The Mole shrugged, baffled, and stepped aside as Rat swung his pack past him. As he watched, a thought occurred to him. “Rat!” He called “You’re acting just like Toad now! Come on back and be sensible, do!”

Although his friend heard the words, he could not heed them. Rat seemed, indeed, to be in some fit of obsession, but it was a kind deeper and firmer than any whim of Toad’s. The South had been calling to him, singing in the distance all that long, golden harvest-time. And now Rat was on his way there at long last.

As he walked under the blazing August sun, some of the first enchantment started to wear off, leaving a slow, steady resolve beneath. The Downs ahead grew steadily as the afternoon wore on, but it was not until evening was throwing long shadows on the hedges that he started to climb the steep slopes out of the plain. Ahead, a shadow moved slowly along the path, often stopping as if to rest. As he drew closer, Rat saw that it was the Wayfarer who was toiling up the flinty trail.

The old Sea-Rat turned and smiled distantly into the sunset. “Yes, my young friend. You followed, as you knew you must. Our road is a long one, but we will tread it – to the South, and to the Sea!”

The Rat gripped his hand and shook it warmly. “My dear friend!” he said, as sobs of pure joy welled up from deep within. “But for you, I would never have started this day – or any other.” He turned to look back on the great vale stretching below them, with the black shadows of the Wild Wood sprawling as far as the eye could see. His River was down there in the darkness, but it would wait.

The Wayfarer guessed his new companion’s thoughts. “Don’t worry,” he said quietly. “The time to return will come. But now –“ he waved an expressive paw over the ridge above, “Now, the Adventure calls! Come, we must find some shelter before it gets dark.”

That night, the two of them slept under the stars, shielded by a beech hangar just off the ancient Ridgeway. As he slept, Rat could feel something of the place, sharing for awhile something of the dreams of a thousand generations, Man and Animal, who had trod that way to adventure under new skies. For the road was an old one, made by the animals even while the hills were being raised, and were its length its age, Man would have only traveled the last few paces.

The next morning Rat awoke, and stared up in surprise at the swaying green roof far above him while his memory returned. There was a hint of brown in the leaves, for the year was already on the turn once again. He stood up, drew a deep breath of the cold, clean air of the hills and looked out along the pathway, its sunken route dark in the slanting early sun. Beside him the Wayfarer stirred into life, his faded blue jersey glistening with dew.

Two animals sat by the path and shared breakfast in a friendly silence. Each had questions: neither were in a hurry to ask them now. The one thing that did matter was their destination.

“Tell me,” said Rat presently, when the two were striding along later that morning, “how far is the port we’re making for? I mean, I’ve never been over the Ridge before, let alone to the Sea.”

The old Wayfarer winked a bright and beady eye. “If you’d have named any particular harbour, we’d have made for it,” he said. “As it is, we ought to make the Sea in about three days, somewhere near the Wallcreek coast. There’s no hurry.”

The two of them strode on. All through that day they walked over the chalky cornlands, crossed a gentle valley and slept the night in a friendly barn. The next day the land got steeper and the soil redder, until that evening they were crossing steep gorges where dark pine trees climbed up from the rushing stony waters.

Towards noon on the third day, they were wandering over a high sandy heathland at the end of a long chain of hills, when the Wayfarer suddenly stopped, his wrinkled nose lifted up in ecstatic pleasure.

“Ah!” He breathed, “Smell this wind, Rat, it blows to us fresh from the Sea! I feel the white spray in it, the tang of the salt waves it passed over!”

The Rat paused, sniffing. Strongly the scent of the gorse and heather around them could be felt, and behind them – yes! A sharp, somehow racy tang he had never smelt before made him prick up his ears and whiskers in a pure moment of adoration.

“Come on,” said his friend, suddenly in a hurry. “If we make good speed, we can be past Wallcreek by nightfall.” With that they pressed on, Rat’s companion moving almost at a jog despite his age.

And so it was that the two travelers descended from the houseless hills into the port of Henschell, just as the lamps were being lit in the leaded windows. Slowing as they entered the steep little valley where the town lay, the two looked out between the rocky hill slopes onto the endless Sea, waves rolling in pale grey at dusk.

“So that’s the Sea!” The Rat said slowly, awe-struck. “That’s – Really – Huge!”

His friend smiled. “They all say that on first sight. I’ve crossed the length and breadth of it, as you will soon – but that doesn’t make it any smaller.” He stood looking at it like an old friend for a minute, and then turned back to the spellbound Rat. “We’d better get to the tavern; the host’s a friend of mine.”

The “Trade Winds” Tavern stood halfway up the single cobbled streets, its cheerfully lit windows shining out as a beacon to all travelers on sea and land, weather-bound or benighted. Small steps down from the street led to the main animal rooms, tucked away in the thick stone walls.

The Wayfarer swung open the heavy ironbound door and strode into the room, lit dimly by a glowing log fire in the wide hearth.

A portly squirrel entered from the other room. As soon as he saw the Wayfarer, he dropped the empty tankard and rushed to meet him, vaulting over the bar. “Guiso, you old sea-dog!” he cried “How long is it since you left us? A year? Welcome back, anyhow!”

The two executed a remarkable handshake, followed by a gesture with four locked fingers, a spin round and a shout of “Hola!” They separated, laughing.

“Oh yes, I’d like you to meet a friend of mine,” said the Wayfarer, when he had calmed down, “Ratty, shut the door and come on in! This is an old shipmate of mine, Squirrelton.” The two shook hands, and were friends forthwith.

“Now,” said Squirrelton, rubbing his hands together. “What will you have? I’ve rooms, of course, and a meal’s ready if you haven’t eaten.”

“We’ll take all we can hold,” the Wayfarer smiled, “Three days we’ve walked, Ratty and I.”

The Rat was sat down at the end of a long, clean-scrubbed table, hewn from a single slab of oak. The table, indeed everything on the walls, fitted perfectly to give an impression of simple splendour, from the stone-flagged floors to the ceiling timbers washed ashore from ancient wrecks. As the sound of scraping plates reached him from the narrow galley-like entrance, Rat suddenly became aware that long exercise on a tight belt had famished him, and he was more than ready to do justice to any meal.

“This,” said the Wayfarer, breaking off conversation with his squirrel friend, “is a variant on fish chowder. See how you like it.”

The Rat, now warmed, rested and hungry, would have been pleased by anything. But this, this steaming mountain of succulent fish, squid and rice, filled the senses almost to their limit with a savoury excitement that warmed and satisfied, tempting and fulfilling. As he sat back, full and blissfully contented, he felt ready to do anything.

Suddenly the heavy doors in front of him burst open and a party of Ship’s Rats filed in, led by an officer in an immaculate black uniform. (* 1)

“Ho, Landlord!” He cried, his men stopping with a single stamp of sea-boots. “My men and I require rooms, food and drink for the next two days.” He took a small bag from the metal canister at his belt and dropped it with a heavy thump on the table. “Here is your payment now – we may be recalled at any time.”

The wayfarer leaned over to Rat, who had been watching the proceedings with evident alarm. “Imperial Mariners,” he whispered. “They travel all round the world, hunting down pirates and smugglers. Often a bit arrogant to us ordinary folk, until they start to relax a bit.”

The officer had dismissed his men, who were rapidly shedding their black and green uniforms in the heat of the fire. He came over to where Rat and his friend were sitting talking quietly.

“You’re Guisot, the ship-rat, aren’t you?” He asked. “Sector-leader Martens sends his regards over that Malta affair.”

“Just doing my duty,” the wayfarer said levelly, keeping his gaze on the table in front of him. “Anyone would have done the same.”

“Still,” said the officer, whose name was Vandor, as he sat down next to them and loosened his jacket. “We’re all in your debt now. Can we repay you in any way?”

“Maybe you can,” the Wayfarer said, looking up. “Our host tells me your ship’s the only foreigner in the harbour. Where are you bound for next?”

“Cadiz, when we’ve stocked and rested, and then the Bahamas,” Vandor said. “After that” – he sucked his breath in sharply, “we’ll probably be in action against the Cuban pirates. You can, if you like, make the trip to Spain with us – though I wouldn’t advise on going across the Atlantic right now.”

“I’ll drink to that!” said the Wayfarer, flashing a sudden smile. “Ratty – to the South!”

That night, most of the village seemed to be in the tavern, mostly fishermen, pilots and ferrymen. (* 2) The old walls echoed with sea-shanties from across the ages, songs of the roaring South-westerly gales that crashed in from beyond the Lizard, or bitter East winds driving foam flat out along the towering white-capped waves. The Imperial group formed a line along the table in their black and green uniforms, silver insignia flashing as their anthems roared out to the crash of boots on the floor and tankards on the table.

The Water Rat found himself a part of the choruses, felt himself floating in the sea-magic of the Great Sea, lifted up on the wings of song to the great booming surge of water as it swept up to fulfillment, breaking laughing on the shore. Subtly he became aware that the song had faded, to be exchanged for a different tune. It was the dream of the South once more, this time all the more vivid with the Sea so very near, its waves sending a delicate heartbeat through the rocks to his feet, which were moved to dance. Tankards of old ale were drained, white with foam as the waves themselves. Dimly he remembered the Wayfarer leading him up a firmly creaking wooden stair, into a rafter-roofed room and finally being tucked into a cool, sweetly smelling bed.

(* 1) Why is it only the bad guys who get the cool uniforms and the neatly polished boots? I disapproved in 1981, and I still do.

(* 2) In the original book, it gets a bit confusing as to the size of the characters involved. Rat certainly lives in a hole in the riverbank, so is liable to be rat-sized. But Toad (not a large character) can be mistaken for a short human, and drives a standard human car. If Kenneth Grahame never got round to resolving the question, I refused to worry about it myself. Similarly, names get a bit confusing if there’s more than one character of the same species – but the Australians manage to live with all being called Bruce, so I’m told.

He awoke late the next morning, gently eased out of the nightlong sea spell by the clear light shining through the open window. In the same room several of the Imperial Mariners lay in their beds, snoring softly with their uniforms laid out neatly on the floor beside them. Rat yawned hugely, dressed and staggered down the stairs to emerge in the main room where breakfast was being laid.

The Wayfarer was sitting on the window-seat, smoke from his long pipe swirling upwards through the sunbeams. He smiled to see the Water Rat.

“Well!” He said, putting his pipe down on the broad ledge. “Quite a night, eh? I told you the Imperial Mariners could relax, out of uniform.”

“What are we doing today?” Rat asked him. “Are we leaving?”

“No, not yet,” his companion said. “Their ship, the Barracuda, doesn’t start till tomorrow. And besides, it wouldn’t be a good idea for you to set out without before you learn a bit about the ways of the Sea.”

After breakfast, in the course of which most of the guests from the previous night staggered down, Rat was taken by his friend down to the quayside where a narrow breakwater shielded the little cove. Rat stood looking out to the open seas, shaking his head in wonder while the gulls screeched a “Good Morning!” to each other. The Wayfarer pointed out their ship, a low sleek ironclad bristling with gun-turrets and complex detection equipment.

“There she is,” he said, “as fast and trim a ship as ever set screw to water. Mind you, I’d prefer to sail, but as it is it’s this or swim.”

Rat was too fascinated by the long, low ship to make any complaint, or indeed any comment whatsoever. To him it looked like a gleaming dolphin, ready to leap out underway at any second. He noted with interest the other boats, mainly fishing smacks, that his friend showed him being made ready for the evening’s work. But his heart was stolen at first sight by the Barracuda.

All the rest of that day Rat and his friend explored the steep, rugged cliffs and flat storm-beaches around Henschell port. The harbour was the only break for miles in the frowning walls of rock, fringed below the breaking waves with low, jagged ledges that were treacherously hidden in the dark and at high tide. Now and then they would come across reminders of that cruel coast; spars and timbers of ancient and recent wrecks lay half-buried in the sun-drenched sands.

That evening they slept early, the port far quieter and less strange than the previous night. As he turned in his bed for the last time before falling asleep, the Water Rat whispered to himself, “The South!”

Sunlight woke him once more, as it did the rest of the Mariners in the room. Rat had found them friendly enough, but not given to chatter with strangers. “Very much a closed group, half of them are related”, he could remember the Wayfarer as having said, and he appeared to be right. Rat went downstairs, more surely than the previous morning, and found his friend and Vandor waiting for him in the main room.

“All ready, then?” The Wayfarer asked him. “My, but I’m glad to be moving again.”

He was interrupted by a clatter of boots as the Imperial Mariners descended in file, their uniforms once more clean and well adjusted. “All present and correct, Capt’n,” snapped the end one, who wore a silver lightning flash on his collar.

“Very well,” acknowledged Vandor, “to the boat! To Cadiz!”

The group, some twenty, stood in line outside the lime-washed walls of the tavern, moving off with Vandor in the lead. The Wayfarer looked at Rat standing nervous by the door, clasping his satchel tightly. “Well, here we go,” he said nonchalantly. “Out onto the high seas.”

Rat could feel his excitement mounting as they followed the group down the cobbled street and onto the quay. As they clambered down the old iron ladder to the boat, rocking gently under a clear blue sky Rat gave the land, his England, a last parting caress on the seaweed-tufted wall.

“Here we go, indeed,” he said softly to himself, as the oars of the skiff dug into the salt water and moved him and his friends out to the further berth where the Barracuda lay ready and waiting. The first step had been made: Rat was loose upon the high seas.

Later that day, he was sitting with the Wayfarer under one of the radar bowls (*1) that jutted out over the bow. Rat was being miserable seasick.

“Just look at those waves,” he groaned. “Every one of them ends up at my stomach.” He moaned again, and leaned over the edge.

The Sea Rat barely suppressed a chuckle. “Look, Ratty,” he said kindly, “you’ll live through it. Once you’ve got your sea-legs you can trot around on a full stomach, even if it is ham and fried eggs.”

“Ham and f.f. fried eggs?” Rat said, coming up with a distinctly greenish hue and a look of horror. “When I even think of food ...” his voice trailed away, as he leaned over the side again.

“On this whole ship,” his friend continued, waving an expressive paw at the sleek ironclad, “you won’t find a single animal who hasn’t gone through it, from Imperial Mariners down to the deckhands.” He looked out to the horizon, from where the heavy sea-swell came sweeping in. “Mind you, this isn’t the steadiest of ships, not with all this metal topsides. If the waves came at us from the beam, we’d roll like a barrel.”

* 1 *Inappropriate tech, I know! I should have called it a “Hertzian Wave Reflection apparatus” and described the 1910 vintage spark generators. Actually there were ship-based crude “radars” in the 1920’s, and the tech was available earlier. More like an arc lamp really, it blasted out all frequencies and listened for anything coming back.*

It was not until the fourth day out at sea that the storm struck. Rat had made a rapid recovery, and had ceased to curse the day he left his smooth, calm River behind. His friend had been uneasy all day and had taken to pacing the deck restlessly, his hands clenched behind his back and his head down.

“What’s up?” The Captain had asked him, spared from the bridge for a few minutes break.

“I don’t quite know,” said the Sea Rat, worriedly looking out at the yellow haze that shrouded the horizon. “But I think it’s going to cut up rough tonight.”

Captain Vandor stood for a moment deep in thought, following the Sea Rat’s gaze. “First Mate!” He called up to the bridge, “What’s the weather report, Biscay zone?”

“Strong fronts approaching, Capt’n,” the squirrel in command called back. “barometer’s gone down four points in the hour, and by the radio static I’d say there’s lightning about.”

The Sea Rat hurried to seek his friend, finding him in one of the aft missile silos. (*1) “Ratty,” he said, “we’re in for some rough weather tonight, or I’m a mackerel.”

“What, already?” Rat asked in mock disbelief. “Fair weather’s bad enough, yet here we go into a storm! Where’s this sun-soaked South you told me about?”

“This is the mid Atlantic we’re in, not the Mediterranean,” the Sea-Rat said gravely. “So if I were you, I wouldn’t load my stomach much tonight.”

That evening the haze spread across the whole sky. Pale grey and coppery clouds spread in from the West, turning blood-red as they passed over the setting sun. In the last of the half-light, layer after layer of clack storm clouds could be seen crowding over each other to block up the sky. And all this was in a deathly silence, the only sound being the suddenly louder slap of waves on the hull, and the hum of the Barracuda’s engines. Watching from the bridge, Rat felt as if he was in a theatre waiting for some great curtain to rise.

When the “show” started it was indeed dramatic. A distant cloud lit up from below with lightning, the sound coming as a dull leaden thud a few seconds later. Looking up, Rat was alarmed to see the radio masts glowing with a pale blue light that appeared to run along the metal like liquid fire.

A first spatter of raindrops the size of marbles hit the deck, and then the storm was on them! The ship pitched and rolled in a rising sea, with rain driving sideways to mix with the sea foam, cloaking the windward side with a four-inch veil as water hit and shattered back again. And all this was lit with the unearthly glare of lightning, bursting all around with an ear-splitting barrage of sound that rattled the armour plate of the ship itself.

Rat soon felt ill again and staggered down to his cabin – thoughtfully chosen by his friend in the centre of the ship, where the heaving was mostly confined to Rat’s stomach. Lying in his hammock with his feet repeatedly thrown higher than his head Rat could not but wish that his new life, despite the attractions, had the stability of the old.

“Oh My!” Groaned Rat. “If I was back with Mole and Badger now, or even with Toad! A nice steady prison cell’s nothing to this!”

Some time later in England, (* 2) Toad was waking up one morning with the early sunlight shining into the hollow of the tree he had passed the night in. He swung down to the ground, shivering slightly in the grey Autumn mist that was rapidly clearing from the water meadows.

“Well,” Toad chuckled to himself, “done it again! Fooled ‘em all! Back to dear old Toad Hall now, and then we’ll see what happens.”

Toad had no particular route in mind as he ambled along the edge of the wood on a bridle path, his cold feet warming up rapidly with sun and exercise. Eventually, the rough track gave way to a surfaced road, and he could make a good, if tiring, speed towards home.

By noon, he was decidedly hungry. His last meal had been in prison the day before, and he even thought longingly of the bread and cheese the warder’s daughter used to bring him every day for lunch.

“Bless her heart!” He said lightly, “why, she had more justice in her than a whole court full of judges. Still, they won’t catch old Toad again so easily, mark my words!”

As the afternoon wore on, Toad started to pass several inns along the way. As the other travelers, lounging in shady doorways or beneath their brilliant sunshades (* 3) called out “Good day madam!” he cursed the shabby disguise that had neither wallet nor pocket to put one in.

“Just one shilling, and I could stop for a meal somewhere,” he thought hungrily. Consoling himself with banquets in Toad Hall, which he planned as he walked course by course, he trudged his lonely way down the dusty, winding road.

By four o’clock Toad simply could go no further. He flopped down exhausted on the verge, now brittle with dry hemlock stalks. Entirely drained by lack of food and fatigue, Toad slept.

*1 Ack. More inappropriate tech! There were plenty of interesting innovations to explore on a 1910 dreadnought, I might have given it a “rotary Whitehead Torpedo launcher” instead.

* 2Continuity alert! For folk who’ve read the book, Toad has just broken out of jail and is doing an early escape-and-evasion heading home. If I put this on the same “time track” as Rat’s adventures (which start in late August) that’d be 99% finished by the time we find out what happened to Toad. To produce a balanced story, I had to do some mental gymnastics and start Toad’s adventures something like 3 months further along. Just so you know.

*3 Must have been a hot Autumn! Hmm, my mental gymnastics needed some limbering-up to get the time skip right. The weather and the sunset times are definitely August rather than the early November it should actually be.

He awoke an hour or so later, conscious of a low rumbling sound that he well remembered from his motoring days. “Poop-poop!” Toad said brightly. “Perhaps this car will stop for a poor old washerwoman – the driver gets out to see if I’m all right – I jump in, and off goes Toad again!” He waited patiently while the thundering engine-note approached, now mingled with a curious clatter and squeal, as of rusty chains rubbing together.

Around the corner came the strangest vehicle Toad had ever seen in his life. It had the shape of a long box partly trodden on, with the front end sloping forwards and slightly rounded. On the outer edges of each side ran a moving track of metal plates, driven by toothed sprockets and rollers. (*) At the front was a metal box with an open hatch, through which the driver looked out between the tracks. As he saw Toad lying by the roadside, the driver crashed down through at least nine gears to slow his machine, and turned the engines off.

“Can I help you. Ma’m ? the driver asked courteously, swinging himself out through the open hatch.

“Please sir,” said Toad, rapidly dropping his intention to drive off with the vehicle, “I’m only a poor washerwoman who’s lost her way on these roads trying to get back to Toad Hall from her daughter’s house in the town. And I’m simply worn out, and I haven’t a hope of getting back home before dark.”

“Well, that’s a sad story and no mistake,” the driver said. He turned and shouted into the vehicle. “Abe! Zeke! There’s an old lady out here who could sure use a lift. There’s no village along this road for miles. Can we give her a ride?”

There was a muffled shout of assent from inside, and the driver turned round to face Toad again. “Well Ma’m,” he smiled, eyes hidden by his padded helmet and chain-mail mask, “you’d better get up on the decking. It’s no place for a lady in there.”

Toad trotted round the side of one of the sponsons and clambered up the back between the tracks. A wave of hot air and petrol fumes wafted up through the open hatches, and he thought three times about getting such a “motor-car”. As the engines fired, Toad was cock-a-hoop with his good luck.

“Done it again!” He chortled, his teeth rattling as the unsprung “Liberty” tank ground down the rough road at a steady trotting speed. “This is the kind of thing us Toads were made for!”

Two hours later, he was not so pleased with himself as the heavy jolting mile after mile shook him like a jelly on the hard, rivet-studded decking. As the sun went down, the driver stepped down through the gears as both he and Toad saw the River in the distance, some far-off loop shining red as the evening fell.

“This is where we hit the barrier and go cross-country, Ma’am,” the driver called back. “You’d better get off now, unless you live by the Downs.”

Toad thanked him profusely, and slid down from his mount along the steep back plates. Landing in a heap, he took a full minute to regain his feet, by which time the tank was a mere speck retreating over the darkening fields. For Toad was hungrier than ever, and the shaking-up had quite shaken the strength out of his limbs.

“Still,” he thought to himself as he struggled along the road towards some woods. “here I am, not six miles away from home, whatever my state. How clever it was of me to have come so far, when only a day ago I was still in prison!” With that, Toad wept bitterly at the thought of the hardship and injustice he had suffered, and only cheered up when he reminded himself of the delight Mole and Rat would surely show when he appeared in triumph.

“And then I’ll take Ratty in hand, like I said, and make a real animal of him for once! He’s a nice enough chap, is Rat, but far too limited in outlook.” As Toad’s strength slowly returned, so did his pride. He started to hum, then to murmur, and at last burst into song at the top of his voice:

“Ho! Toad’s the one they’ll tell you of
In a thousand years or so
Forget the Kings and Emperors
To Toad does Victory go!

Yes! I’m the one to shout about
The great English Hero
In jail they put me – now I’m out
My valour’s clear to show!

O Toad! Great Toad! You are the best
In England’s crowded land!
Your cleverness has passed the test
The world’s at my command!

When Toad returns in triumph – yes!
Then all will clap and cheer
For those who do not know me yet
I’ll shed a bitter tear!”

There was a lot more of the same, except that as he went on some of the songs became almost boastful (by Toad’s standards). His heart felt lighter as his stomach felt emptier, and the light faded from the sky.

* In other words, a Mk VIII “Liberty” from 1918. Well, it is only 10 years after the original book. There is a reason Toad doesn’t know what it is, but we’ll find out about that later. Promise! My main continuity problem is that even the Mk. VIII isn’t a touring vehicle – you’d be hard pressed to get 10 miles before something broke down...

When the stars were shining brightly above him, Toad rested in the cover of the cool verge. Slightly unnerved in the silent wastes, he had stopped singing and taken to looking nervously behind him into the darkness. Near home he might be, but since every step also took him closer to the Wild Wood, he was taking no chances.

“Just in case,” he kept repeating to himself hurriedly, and “Well – you never know.” Eventually, staying put seemed a lot more worrying than moving on, so Toad moved on. As he did so, the open road became even less friendly. The hedge banks rose and moved in on all sides on the track. Hedgerows gave way to trees, first overhanging young coppice branches, and then giant oaks and elms that blotted out the sky with dead unfallen leaves. In the darkness between their ancient trunks, lurked ... what? It had all become deathly still as the wind ceased to whisper.

Toad was, at that moment, a very frightened small animal. He had no real need to worry, as the woods he was creeping through were not, in fact, anything to do with the Wild Wood. That lay across the River, deep in its own darkness of mystery and terror. Toad was not to know this: woods had been “beneath his notice” unless he owned them. And so he was moving as quickly and quietly as he knew how, his stomach giving a sickening lurch whenever a twig snapped beneath his feet. As he trotted along trembling, he desperately tried to remember what he had been told about the Wild Wood, drawing no consolation since he remembered only the most gruesome events that had taken place when small animals had ventured in.

“Well, well,” said Toad in surprise, when the true facts became so obvious that even he could see them. “there’s dear old Toad Hall itself, not five minutes off! To think, that I was worried about a little copse like that. Why there’s nothing in the whole Wild Wood itself that’d really scare me!”

With such remarks he soon cheered himself up, and was returning to his usual composure when he saw, at the end of his own driveway, a gate. A gate, moreover, that Toad had not put there, and had no knowledge of ever wanting one there.

He was just striding up to knock on it when a shadowy figure hurtled out of the shadows by the gate and tackled him, neatly and efficiently. Toad and his assailant rolled over into the dry ditch with the force of the impact.

“What ...” Toad was starting to cry out when a firm velvety paw was clapped over his mouth and a voice hissed “Oh, be quiet, do! It’s me, Mole!”

At that moment there was a cry of “Halt! Who goes there!” from the gate, and tubes each side of the gatepost emitted a dazzling flicker of blue-white light that cast the road into sharp relief and the ditch in total shadow. Having missed the blinding burst, a helmeted head appeared above the gate, took a quick look around and disappeared. (*)

“Move, quietly,” Mole’s voice came out of the darkness in a tone Toad could not but obey, and the two scuttled back along the ditch to the woods, where they could stand up again.

“Now then,” said Toad loftily, brushing himself down and trying to recapture some of his former swagger “What is the meaning of all this? Here I am, having just broken out of the strongest prison in the world, and been humbugging everybody to get back here – to be knocked down on my own doorstep! No disrespect to you, Mole, but I’ve a lot to do now I’m home, and I can do it better without having my friends throw me into ditches.”

“But Toad,” said Mole wearily, “don’t you know? Haven’t you heard?”

“What?” asked Toad imperiously. “What haven’t I heard?”

“About the Wild Woodlanders and their new chief? About them having gone and taken over Toad Hall?”

Toad collapsed in Mole’s arms.

At sea, the storm was dying down by morning. The waves no longer sent Rat lurching to the sides of the slippery deck, and the angry clouds were breaking up. A ray of watery sunshine peered out from the rapidly brightening East, and at last Rat could stagger round the ship again.

Leaving his cabin, he found his friend descending the steps that led from the bridge, and hailed him.

“Ratty, it’s good to see you up and about again,” The Sea Rat said, “how do you feel?”

“Ill,” moaned Rat. “I think my stomach’s broken. At any rate, there’s a hole where the bottom of it was.”

“Odd,” his friend mused, looking out at a distant blur of land “you should have got over it by ... but of course!” He laughed, and clapped weathered palms together “How long is it since you ate anything?”

“Two days, three if you count what stayed down,” said Rat, sitting on a coil of steel cable. Suddenly he jumped up, his mouth open in astonished surprise. “You mean, it’s just hunger then?”

“Come along,” the Sea Rat said, extending a friendly paw. “We can’t cure seasickness, but we can cure hunger, no mistake!” With that he led his friend into the galley for a full and welcome breakfast – ham and fried eggs.

Later that morning Rat was talking with the First Officer in one of the lookout posts that jutted out above the top deck. The officer, a squirrel named Staithdan, had been telling him of some of the adventures the Barracuda had taken part in.

“Oh, and by the way,” he added, “About your friend, Guiso the Seafarer. He’s done a lot for us in his time, but there’s one operation that we all wish he’d succeeded with. That was the Malta affair, some two years or so back.”

“He did mention something of it to me,” said Rat, looking doubtful, “but then he changed the subject, and wouldn’t tell me anything more about it. But anyway, as it’s important enough to earn us our passage on this ship, I didn’t pry.”

“That Malta affair,” mused Staithdan, “was all really based around one character, a sort of polecat. We don’t know his real name, and he uses a selection that’d reach from here to China. Blanchetot, Whitey, Weisshut – all they tell us is what we already know. His head’s got a long streak of white fur running down the middle, like a badger. He’s done a lot of things that we know of, smuggling, piracy, wrecking ships with false lighthouses, and a lot more we’ll never even hear about. But in Malta we nearly caught him: perhaps he’s getting overconfident as he gets older.”

- *Not necessarily inappropriate tech! Could have been an arc light, perfectly contemporary. The trouble with the Toad Hall end of things in this version was ... I had no real quarrel with the original story, in that part. But I couldn’t write, “that happened just as in the original, up to this point Here” – so I re-created rather than created, with some bizarre twists. As you will see...*

“Why?” Asked Rat. “What did he do?”

Staithdan sucked his cheeks in and looked out towards the rapidly passing shore, baking in the bright sun. At length, he replied. “This Weisshut, or whatever he wants to be called, was running a slavery business in Malta. He’d already done the same thing in Venice, Tripoli and Smyrna as far as we know, but we never got near him then. His system is simple: he takes over some group or party – revolutionaries, or whatever – that he can use, seems to work for them for awhile, rounds up “prisoners” and smuggles them out of the country along with a few of the group he’s sold out. Then he vanishes without trace, to reappear elsewhere.”

“Yes, but what’s this got to do with the Wayfarer?” asked Rat.

“I was just coming to that,” said Staithdan, sounding annoyed. “Well, he was doing the same routine in Malta, and your friend Guiso found out about it. He joined the group and split it – how, you’d best ask him – and freed the slaves, rats and mice, who were ready to be shipped out. He’d contacted one of our men, and so we could move in while the two sides were fighting it out. Unfortunately, Weisshut somehow got wind of us, and we haven’t seen him since.”

“What do you think happened to him?” Rat asked eagerly. “Will he try it again, do you think?”

Staithdan shrugged expressively. “Who knows? Most likely, he’ll heave to in some port or river and start again someday. The thing is, it could be anywhere – the Med again, the Atlantic coast, the Baltic – anywhere.”

As the sun set that day, Rat joined his friend the Wayfarer on the bridge with Captain Vandor. A golden carpet spread along the water where the great globe touched the horizon, shimmering in the last heat of the day.

“Look, there!” The Wayfarer said suddenly, pointing over the bows to sea, where a ripple was moving towards them. “The wind is changing. It’s coming to us from the South at last!”

The ripple reached them, and the three strained forwards to meet the coming breath an instant sooner. To Rat, the air spoke to his eager nose of strange, unfamiliar scents wafted from sun-baked shores aromatic with unknown luxuriant plants and flowers.

“Portugal at last,” sighed the Wayfarer, almost in awe. “This wind brings us the groves of olive and orange, juniper and jacaranda. I have walked on those hills before us in the shadows, slept in the fragrant glades the air reveals.”

“Lisbon,” mused the Captain, “we stopped there for an overhaul on the outward trip to Rona base (* 1) last year. The time we had there! The shore party could hardly stand up for a week.”

The Wayfarer straightened up and tutted in mock disapproval. “Captain Vandor,” he said with exaggerated formality, “neither you or your crew are any example for the Imperial Fleet to follow.” He smiled, and chuckled. “But since every crew I’ve ever sailed with has been doing the same things, the habit’s probably too deep to stop now.”

The three animals stood together on the bridge, wordlessly watching as the sun edged over the rim of the world. As the last crimson segment vanished, Rat felt a curious tingling sensation raising the fur on his back and neck. It was like a curious form of suppressed excitement – no, for it seemed more as if the moment had arrived, than any expectancy. Rat tried to recall a similar instant, seemingly a very long time ago – an island and a sunrise, not an ocean and a sunset. He shook his head as if to clear it, and seemed to glimpse something special and far-off that called to him. And then, was that a flash on the horizon or in his own mind, as if thought was pouring in faster than he could grasp or recognise it ?

Strangely disturbed, but happy inside, the Rat went down to his bunk and strange dreams that night.

“Oh, wake up, Toad!” The Mole hissed, slapping him awake, “We’ve just got to get clear of the gates, before a patrol spots us!” He pulled the Toad upright, and led him off along a hidden path into the woods. Toad stumbled most of the way; it was a bright night with a nearly full moon, but he was in a half-dazed trance.

At length Toad collapsed on a tree-trunk that lay fallen by the path, and deep sobs welled up from within. The Mole stood by, waiting patiently until the first shock wore off and the tears subsided.

“Don’t worry so,” he said soothingly, giving Toad a reassuring pat on the shoulder, “things aren’t really as bad as they look.” He hesitated for a moment. “At least ... not quite as bad. Badger, Otter and me have been working all-out for you since the trouble started, and we’re sure to find an answer soon. Come along to where it’s warm and dry, and I’ll tell you what’s been happening.”

With that, he escorted the still trembling Toad out through the edge of the wood, across several ploughed fields dimly glowing in the moonlight, and down a steeply sloping passage to a wide forecourt built under a high dome of stone.

“My house,” explained Mole with a hint of pride, “I know it’s not much next to Toad Hall, but we’re using it as a base as it is next to Toad Hall – if you take my meaning,” he added.

When he got Toad indoors and propped up in front of the fire, Mole explained the situation to him while he prepared supper. (* 2)

“It all started just after you’d – well, left, after that misunderstanding with a – a motor car,” he said, while Toad nodded miserably, “the stoats and the weasels took sides against you, as you might expect. They said that you were really finished this time, that you deserved every minute of your sentence, and that you wouldn’t be coming back – ever! Then they got round to talking about Toad Hall, saying that it should be given to them, who needed it, rather than be left empty. And then they got themselves a new Chief.”

(* 1) *Not a complaint for a change, but an actual footnote. Rona is a very small rocky island off the North coast of Scotland. About 10 people and 10 million seabirds live there – and if you don’t mind the weather, it’d make a Rather fine James Bond type secret base.*

(* 2) *Chunks of this are FAR too close to the original, I know. But as I said, I had no quarrel with that thread of the original tale, and wanted approximately the same events.*

Mole shivered slightly, even in the warmth of the room. “At least, he appeared around then,” he went on. “I don’t know what happened to their old chief, and I can’t believe the rumours about it. The new one’s a tall mink, perhaps, from what I’ve seen of him. Anyway, the ferrets held out for awhile, saying no foreigner would lead them! But they gave way in the end, when their old chief vanished and he stepped in. All the stoats, ferrets and weasels are working for him now. After that, the real trouble started.”

At this, Toad hunched up in an even more dejected posture, almost disappearing into his washerwoman’s blouse.

“It was a cold, stormy night, you see,” Mole explained, “Badger and Otter were looking after Toad Hall: I was due the next night. The ferrets and stoats crept up through the scullery and the greenhouse, the noise of the storm drowning out the noise of their footsteps, while the weasels kept the grounds clear. Otter and Badger suspected nothing – it was such a night, you see, and very late – when the mob broke in from two directions at once. They made a stand by the fireplace with a poker and a hat-stand, but it was two against a hundred. The stoats pulled them out from behind a wall of fallen animals, beat them and threw them out into the storm, while the weasels chivvied them out of the grounds, with many insulting and uncalled-for remarks!

Toad barely suppressed a snigger, but quickly straightened up when Mole turned to look at him again, and resumed his mournful posture.

“And since then,” Mole continued, “They’ve been living in Toad Hall, busy all day doing something we haven’t found out about, then partying and carousing all night. We’ve been patrolling the area night and day, ambushing every party that we see. In fact, we’ve got them so jumpy about stepping outside the walls that they don’t dare show their faces unless they’re in a large group, and well-armed.”

“This really is the finish of me,” moaned Toad. “I might as well give myself up and serve the rest of my sentence. In twenty years, perhaps Toad Hall will be rid of them again.”

“Not much hope of that,” said Mole gloomily. “Unless we can come up with ... hullo, who’s that knocking?” Mole ran to the door and flung it wide open. “Badger, Otter!” he cried in surprise, “come on in!”

Badger strode in purposefully, draped in a suit of green netting over his brown suit. As soon as he saw Toad, he strode over to him and pumped his hand solemnly.

“Welcome home, Toad,” he said, “or rather, welcome to the struggle. O, unhappy Toad, to have such a homecoming!” With that, he sauntered over to the table and carved into a leg of roast mutton.

“Don’t worry about that,” Mole whispered, “he’s always low when he’s short of food. Wait awhile, and he’ll brighten up.”

By this time Otter had hung up his camouflage cape (* 1) and field glasses, and spotted Toad steaming before the fire. He rushed forward with a cry of greeting. “Toad!” he said “By all that’s wonderful, you’re back! Perhaps now we can really Do something, with your help.”

“Well,” said Toad, starting to inflate again, “Yes, I certainly am back! I broke out of the strongest cell of the strongest prison in the world to get here – under the eyes of a whole room full of warders, too! I’ve been travelling around in disguise fooling everybody – made ‘em do just what I wanted – taking over ships, and trains, and got driven back here on the biggest motor-car you ever saw in your life!”

Before Otter could think of a reply, Badger cut in icily. “Now look here!” He said “While you’ve been gallivanting around lining on the fat of the land, with your ships, and trains, and motor-cars – none of which you even paid to go on – we’ve been out here working for you, night after night, day after day. And all you can do is boast about how you’ve been in prison, and cheating everyone! Now go and change out of those ridiculous rags, and don’t come back until you look and talk respectable.”

Coming as this did from the disheveled Badger, standing in his mud-smeared leggings and grasping a thick slab of mutton, his speech was not as impressive as it might have been. However, such was the respect inspired by the tried and very solid qualities of that animal that Toad jumped to his feet and was led out of the room by Mole to wash and change into clean clothing.

In a while, Mole returned to his friends who were warming their hands by the roaring fire that cast its cheerful flicker to warm every corner of the neat little room.

“Well, what’s the situation today?” he asked without much hope, seeing that even Otter was looking downcast.

“Dismal,” intoned Badger, turning for comfort to a stack of buttered crumpets “the guards are everywhere, just as usual. Otter managed to flatten a stoat with his slingshot at a hundred paces, but then we were spotted and had to run for it.”

“Yes,” cut in Otter, displaying with pride the large custom-built sling, “if there were a dozen of me, we could clear the place in a week. But as it is,” he sighed, “all I can do is keep ten or so out of action at a time – less, now they’ve started wearing helmets. Still, we’re wearing them down, bit by bit.”

“Bit by bit,” echoed Badger thoughtfully, staring into the flames “the trouble is, we won’t be able to keep it up when Winter arrives – as it will before we’re finished, at this rate. As you know, Mole, it’s tough enough spending twenty hours a day out there, even in Autumn. Can you imagine doing that in the snow? The ferrets have their foxholes and those snug guard-rooms, with every comfort of home. If we’re going to win it’ll have to be soon, now that Toad’s back with us.”

“That’s right!” Otter said, banging his fist on the table, “We’ve got to step up action, hit them with everything we’ve got, all day, every day! If we take out ..”

“No!” Cried Mole with his mouth full, “I’ll tell you what we have to do. Infiltrate! If we get closer to the house we can...”

(* 1) In the broadest sense, that is. Hunters and gamekeepers have been wearing netting and patterned fabrics for well over a century. Otter is NOT wearing issue DPM material!

“Well, I’m not going to do it, anyway!” Toad yelled from the bathroom. “It’s my house, and I’m going to...”

By this time all three were shouting at the tops of their voices and the noise was deafening when Badger’s thin, dry voice cut through their clamour.

“Quiet at once, all of you. I told you we had a problem. Now I’ll tell you how we’ll solve it.”

The other three gathered around the table as Badger finished his supper and explained the plan to them. “Much as I regret to say,” he began dryly, “both of you, Otter and Mole, are wrong. If we step up action there’s a good chance that the ferrets would become so edgy that we’d never get any at all. You say they’re already wearing helmets, Otter. What good would your slingshot be if they took the next step and wore full armour? And Mole, you know as well as I do that even if we do get closer there’s still a hundred of them against the four of us. The only way is to take them by complete surprise.”

“What? Otter exclaimed, “How on earth can we do that, with guards combing every inch of the grounds, and patrols keeping the fields around clear? Even with four of us, there’s no way we can stage a diversion.”

“The ferrets have got the grounds impassable, as you say, Otter. Every way in they can see, they’ve blocked. So we’ll have to go in somewhere they can’t see, of course. Toad, you ungrateful beast, your Father always knew you’d get into trouble, and now he’s right. But he was a great friend of mine, and told me a great deal he wouldn’t dream of telling you. And being far-sighted – unlike some – he made a few preparations for today.”

“Well,” Toad said, hiding a smirk behind his bowed head. “I can’t really deny that I have an unfortunate way of bringing out the worst in people – vindictive motorists, corrupt and petty magistrates, treacherous and uncivilised Wild Woodlanders – but you really can’t expect me to be like my Father all the time. Splendid fellow, as I remember – but sadly lacking in the wit, the sparkle, the sheer “*Joi de Vivre*” that makes my life such a pleasure to all.” Then Toad looked up, and quailed at the sight of the three figures standing around him in stern disapproval.

“Toad,” thundered Badger in sepulchral tones, “you really don’t deserve such friends today, really you don’t. Now, if you can just be quiet and stop boasting for one minute – and I don’t believe you can for any longer- I’ll tell you how we might be able to save your precious Toad Hall.”

The others gathered closer round him, following every word intently. “Under Toad Hall,” he began, “a very long time ago, one of your ancestors built a secret passage. Your father found it, showed it to me and we cleaned it out, when I was a lot younger. He told me that if you ever got into a real fix and it would help, I could let you know, but not until then. You see, since it comes out in rather a conspicuous place, the first time we use it, it stops being secret.”

“And when would we do it?” Mole inquired timidly “If we attack in daylight they’d be all over the grounds and could regroup outside. If we go in at night they could be anywhere in the building, and any number could escape. Besides, it wouldn’t be – sporting – to catch them asleep.”

“You’re a fine animal, Mole, to think of that,” the Badger beamed, “but there really isn’t a problem. By chance I heard yesterday – from one of those rabbits they’ve rounded up to act as servants – that their leader’s throwing a banquet next week to celebrate the start of some “Grand Plan” or other he’s got cooking.” At that he broke off, and frowned. “Their new Chief is the one thing that really worries me. The stoats and weasels are pretty vicious, we all know that. But they were never really, really savage, and clever with it. Their chief is. From what I’ve heard, he’s one of the worst sorts around, and a foreigner too. He even keeps the stoats afraid of him, and that’s saying something!”

“So we burst in on them, with our axes and flails,” cried Toad wildly, “And clear out the whole nest of them, with cutlass and halberd!”

“Get down off that table, Toad,” said the Badger cheerfully “there’s no need for all that. Once we get in there, we can do all we need with good stout clubs.”

“So we burst in, with our clubs, and whack ‘em and whack ‘em and whack ‘em! That’ll learn ‘em!” Toad snatched up the poker and followed the now foaming otter in a mad exultant dance around the room, going through the motions of flattening whole tribes and hosts of Stoats, Ferrets and Weasels.

Badger watched approvingly as the two tumbled out of the room and turned to Mole, at rest in his armchair, with a dry chuckle. “Well, Toad’s certainly back now,” he said, “with a vengeance! I only wish Rat was here to see how he’s improved.”

“Yes, it’s a pity about Rat,” sighed Mole, reaching up to the rack above the fireplace for his favourite pipe. It had been made by another badger once, who had rowed down a strange tributary of the River in a dark brown boat, to trade pipes and fine pottery for honey and bronze ingots (*). As he took the lovingly crafted wood in his hands, the Mole’s thoughts went out to the friend that he missed, now wandering far from home – though just how far that was, Mole would have been amazed to learn.

The Rat awoke early one morning, with the strange feeling that something was missing. He sat up in his bunk, and was half dressed before he realised just what it was. The ship’s engines had stopped. All that could be heard was the faint hum of a generator, and the playful slapping of the waves on the hull outside. Rat listened to it for awhile, finished dressing and staggered up the gangway to the main deck, where he saw a truly incredible sight.

- This is a reference to the “*Deep Wood*” series, the early books of which are in my opinion the Only rival to the original *TWITW*, being some of the finest pieces of writing I have ever seen. Written by Elleston Trevor (who later wrote the famous “*Quiller*” spy thriller series under the pen-name of Adam Hall) while he was on active service with the RAF in late WW2, they are sadly neglected. I have copies of the first 3 in the series – “*Deep Wood*”, “*Heather Hill*” and “*The Secret Travelers*” in their first and ONLY printing. There was a second series, rather inferior, that got into children’s libraries, but the last reprinting was in the 1960’s. Currently unobtainable, except as audio tapes (In the USA, according to a Net search in 2002).

Old Cadiz. The grandly decaying houses straggled in flights of windows and leaning rooftops up the steep hill, drawing the gaze to where the grand grey old fortress cast a cheerful salute to the dawn, with a glitter of polished steel and thunder of brilliant jeweled flags in the freshening breeze.

“Well, quite a sight, isn’t it?” Rat turned to see Staithdan and the Wayfarer looking past him with a kind of nonchalant awe. “We’ve seen it before, but it always gets you, right here,” said Staithdan proudly, thumping the rank badges above his heart.

“That’s the way of it,” agreed the Wayfarer quietly. “That’s where we’ll be going ashore, to stay for awhile. I think you’ll like it, Rat, it’s simply a good place to be.” (*1)

Rat, when he had caught his breath, found that his past life had left him with no words he could use to fit the scene. “It’s all so ... beautiful!” He said with a struggle, and turned back to look again.

At that moment there came a cry from the bridge above them – “First Officer Staithdan, to Command!” Staithdan excused himself and ran up the stairs, squeezing out of the way to let his Captain past.

“Now, you two,” said Captain Vandor cheerfully, “I take it you’ll be leaving us here, and I must say I’ll be sorry to lose you. There’s just one thing before we land, and here it is – if, on your travels, you see anything you think we’d really want to know about, get in touch with us if you can. Guiso, you know us well enough – although we’ve opened a new Atlantic chain base in the Blaskett Islands this year – and you know the kind of thing we’d like to hear of. But you, Rat, where’s your home port?”

“Well, this is my first sea trip, so I really don’t know...” Rat admitted nervously.

“Grid sector X, J, Forty-two,” the Wayfarer cut in. “That’s about where he’s based.”

“Captain Vandor turned to study a world map on the wall behind him. “XJ 42, eh?” He whistled in surprise, “That’s pretty remote territory, right on the edge ... ah, here we are.” He pointed to a tiny red dot on the map. “Right on top of those hills near you, there’s an automatic station. It’s unmanned, and strictly for emergencies only – though there’s never been an emergency in that part of the world, thank the Emperor. All you have to do is find the round rock on the top and say clearly “X J forty-two” and the chamber opens. Inside you type out the message you want to send, push the red button and get out – fast. The place is right at the top of the biggest hill in the range. Got that?”

“I’ll remember it,” said Rat, turning to watch as the thick steel ropes were tied and the ship ended its long unpowered glide to the quay.

“Grab your kit, Ratty,” said the Wayfarer suddenly, an unaccustomed twinkle in his eye, “and we’re going ashore!”

An hour later, the two of them were clambering up the twists, turns and steps of a narrow street that wriggled its way up the steep hill. They kept well to the side, clear of the human traffic as they clambered around the precarious barrels and boxes that were piled outside the gaily-painted shops and houses.

“Take it easy,” the Wayfarer yawned as they rested in the striped shade of a shop-blind, “now we’re here, where’s your hurry? We can take a look round the castle later on if you like – there’s a fine view from the top, and I’ll show you the quarters of the town where we might stay tonight. What do you say?”

The Rat shrugged, almost overwhelmed by the new life he had so suddenly found himself in. “I’ve no idea,” he admitted. “You know what there is to do, and how they run things round here. Just show me around, until I get the hang of this place.”

The Wayfarer chuckled softly, stretched out in the shade.” In this part of the world,” he said “and the more so as you go further East – they just take things as they come. Don’t worry about what to do. Sleep here or there, eat now or later, just as you please. The best time of the year’s starting, when the weather’s cool enough not to have to rest all the time. Wander round the place yourself, if you like. I’ll meet you on the castle walls at sunset, and we’ll go to a place I know of. Right now, I’ve got some friends to see today, on a matter it’s safer for you not to know about yet.”

Rat stood up, and left his friend dozing quietly in the mid-day sun. Choosing a route along the side of the hill, he explored narrow alleyways that took him to expanses of paved courtyards, entrances into the hill or surprising dead ends. He had never been to a large town before, and as he circled the city under its ancient walls Rat could only wonder what kind of life lay hidden under those sun-baked walls.

He was greeted all the time by other animals, and invited into the shade of awnings and doorways to take wine and apricots with them and pass the siesta hours.

“Ah, so you are English, then?” Was the greeting of one cheerful ship-rat who stood in the shelter of an open archway. “As you are no mad dog, you can only be English to walk out at such an hour.” (*2)

Rat accepted his invitation to sit and rest in the shade, for the white clay walls reflected heat like an oven, and he had been sweating hard as he laboured up the sunlit stairs into the shade.

“It’s a nice town you have here,” Rat ventured, looking at the swarthy ship rat who was regarding him curiously.

“Is so,” came the unhurried reply. “What ship you use?”

“The light cruiser Barracuda,” Rat replied proudly, “Courtesy of the Imperial Mariners.”

His new acquaintance lifted an eyebrow, clearly impressed. “You did, eh? They are plenty fine sailors, plenty fine ships. Few years back, they cleared this coast of pirates. Good boys.” He poured strong black coffee out of a silver pot into small ornate bowls.

Rat accepted one gratefully, the steaming aromatic liquid sending back some of what the long, hot climb had taken out. The two rats sat in the archway’s cool shade, looking out at the busy town that started to shake off its siesta quiet as the shadows crept out from sun-drenched walls to give merciful shelter.

(* 1) *And the real Cadiz has never looked anything remotely like it. It’s flat. Moral: use reference material in this sort of tale.*

(*2) *Noel Coward had a track about that in the 1930’s. But as this is set around 1910, can I claim it first? ☺*

“I think you will go far before you find what you seek,” said Rat’s new friend, his golden earrings glittering “whatever you are looking for, I feel you will meet it, though I don’t know how. I feel it.” He stood up, and shook his head as if to clear it. “Mister Rat, something tells me that before all is over you will know more of all things than I, Gabriel Guatamote.” With that he stood up and left Rat pondering deeply on his words. (* 1)

At length Rat stood up, stretched and made his way up a spiral stair to the top of the old town wall, which promised to be his most direct route. On either side the houses had grown to press close to the ancient stonework – indeed, some had leaned over to use it as a wall of the house itself. This meant Rat was constantly walking past open windows and balconies, from whence the inhabitants constantly leaned out to greet him.

Climbing a small turret that stuck up defiantly above the tiled rooftops, Rat was struck again by the sheer size of the town, as much had been hidden by the curve of the hill. Down below him the dusty cobbled streets were now ringing to the busy sounds of everyday life; the clang of the blacksmith’s hammer, the drone of electric motors, the cheery cries of street-vendors who vied in selling their wares with songs each more melodious than the next. The harbour below him spread its encircling arms around an oval patch of water alive with ships cruising to and fro under paddle, screw or billowing red and white sails.

Laid up against the quayside were a number of ships being repaired, refueled, loaded, unloaded and made ready to face the waves once more. Far out along the harbour wall lay a shape Rat instantly recognised – yes! It was the *Barracuda* – sleek and glistening in the drenching sunlight that turned the Sea itself to a chaos of glimmering depths and sparkling foam. The engine-room hatches were wide open, and large dock cranes were lifting some heavy containers out onto the quay, while white-suited crew looking the size of ants scuttled around purposefully. (* 2)

When the action was over and the hatches closed, Rat wandered down to street level again, and spent the rest of the afternoon familiarising himself with the town, which was built like an insane spider’s web with irregular, twisting streets following the line of the hill or else down from the castle to the harbour. As the day wore on and the shadows lengthened, he picked his way upwards to the very oldest, friendliest and most crowded part of the town – and then the Castle was right in front of him.

Although from the ship it had seemed to rise straight out of the houses, in fact the Castle was separated from the town by a ring of short, sun-soaked grass, divided like a cartwheel by the main roads leading in through the imposing gates.

The sentry scarcely noticed Rat as he strolled in nervously, under the portcullis, over the well-oiled drawbridge and out, through the walls into the large courtyard. From the middle of the Castle the high walls cast long shadows that stretched out almost as Rat watched, darkness spilling out from its daytime references in holes and cracks to reach out, soon to cover the whole city. As the sky filled with white pastries of clouds, glowing in rose shades above the West-facing wall, Rat hurried across to the base of the wall and a tall pencil-thin tower that obviously held a staircase. Inside all was dim as the lights had not been lit, and he passed four stories of windows before finally emerging, panting, on the broad terrace behind the battlements.

The Wayfarer was already there, leaning out over the wall with his chin in his hands. His greying fur was ruffled by the sudden breeze that had sprung up from the Sea, and lit with the ruddy fresh glow before him. Rat joined him and the two stood looking out over the city, the harbour, the bay and beyond that to the edge, where sea met sky some hundred miles and more away.

At last the Wayfarer spoke. “I always believed,” he began “that the finest sight in the world was the sunset, from the crow’s nest of a clipper on the high seas.” He stopped, and smiled wistfully. “But this time I’m wrong, and glad of it.” He turned to the Rat, gazing in awe at the vast panorama spread out below him. “How do you like this place, now you’ve seen a little of it yourself?”

The Rat stirred, and looked at his friend directly. The Wayfarer was interested and pleased to see a change in his face as he did so. No longer did Rat wear the bemused look of a lost child; a faint glow as of one who saw beyond boundaries was starting to appear.

“It’s a good place to be in, as you said,” murmured Rat thoughtfully “I’ve learned a lot since we left the *Barracuda*, and I think I see that there’s a lot more to learn than I used to think. Things have ... well, to be honest, I don’t know how, but things seem different now.” He pulled himself upright. “But this I can be sure of – I never made a better move than the one that brought me here!”

The Wayfarer nodded slowly. “That’s how it is, sometimes,” he said “and I won’t say you’ll get used to it. But you can come to terms with what happens, almost always.”

“But by the way,” Rat remarked, in quite a different tone. “What was that business you think I shouldn’t know about? I don’t like to pry, but can’t you give me a clue?”

“If you like,” his friend chuckled “how about ‘*the kettle is boiling, watch the borderlands*,’ That’s part of the clues I picked up, but you won’t make much sense of it for a while yet. Everything in its own good time.”

The two descended from the rapidly darkening battlements, and the Wayfarer started to have definite hopes for Rat. Would he be one of the few, the very few, who were called to the Old Ones? (* 3) He had become very fond of his friend, and sincerely hoped so.

(* 1) *Oh dear. Beware of mysterious strangers suddenly bursting out into prophecy at the drop of a hat. Actually, there was far less of this going on in 1981, since when I’ve read several metres shelf space of hefty fantasy novels. But I had definite ideas on character development, as you’ll see. Note that nobody has picked Rat’s pocket, assuming he has one, or invited him to come in and meet their sister. I was trying to stay in the original tone of the books, which sadly explains a severe lack of female characters in this tale – something I’d definitely fix.*

(*2) *This may look like a reactor refueling but umm, it’s appropriate Tech. Radium was the wonder-metal of the time, and contemporary Jules-Verne type tales were packed with Radium power plants. As late as the 1930’s they were in service in the original Flash Gordon series spacecraft, with gangs of stokers shoveling the stuff into the Radium Furnace by hand!*

(* 3) *NOT the Old Ones I’ve since written about from the Cthulhu Mythos. A different bunch entirely, these.*

When they reached ground level, he said aloud, “And now, we’ll find a place to celebrate our arrival. It isn’t much compared with some of the houses in town, but we can always be certain of a real welcome.” With that, he led Rat down to the first and busiest level of the city, where an old hinged iron grid kept the large and the curious out of a low brick passage that dived underneath the ancient houses.

“An old storm drain,” the Wayfarer explained as their footsteps echoed in the cool evening air, a blessed relief after the hot, dry afternoon “this place can get cut off completely in the Winter, when the rains really start. But that’s not for a month or two, at least.”

From the main passage they followed one of several tributary pipes, climbing to the left. For a few yards they had to stoop under the low roof, but then they emerged into a small brick-lined chamber where a spiral stair began. Ascending it, they saw that the stair had been cut through stone and ancient timber, black with age and neatly cut.

“An elaborate staircase,” remarked Rat as they squeezed round the eighth turn.

“It had to be,” his friend panted, stopping for awhile to get his breath back “they had real trouble with pirates when this place was built, a few years ago. And so it’s not just hidden, but fortified. Imagine trying to storm this place with a cutlass and sea boots!”

Around the tenth turn, the stair ended in a small, bare hallway that was closed at one end by a dull grey door that Rat guessed was made of solid steel. “Wait here,” the Wayfarer replied, and knocked a complex tattoo.

A small flap opened at eye level, and a beady eye could be dimly seen behind thick glass. “Allegiance?” a voice asked softly.

“The Mountain,” replied the Wayfarer, and the door swung open.

Behind it stood a tall lizard, dressed in a neat one-piece green suit. “You can’t be too careful,” he said, executing the same unusual handshake that Rat had seen in Henschell Port back in England.

They entered the room and found it to be really large, fifty metres or so across. “This place must take up the whole top floor,” Rat said softly.

“It does.” The Wayfarer smiled, standing next to him. “Here, you can meet some really amazing people, from all over...” he broke off, as if he had been about to make a blunder, and finished off hurriedly, “all over the world, I mean. It’s more than a rest-house, it’s more of a family.”

Standing by the door, Rat could see much that was happening in the crowded room. Nearest to him was a group of otters in brightly-coloured headscarves, earnestly moving counters on a five-sided board. The game was like both cards and chess, as far as Rat could see; each player concealed a selection of the multi-coloured counters in his hand, and moved them cautiously around the table, which was curiously inlaid.

In the alcove next to them a weary-looking squirrel sat hunched over the table, his head nodding. Rat went over to him, and the squirrel nodded a greeting before collapsing again. Rat noted the animal’s fur was stained and matted, as if by salt water.

“What happened to you?” ventured Rat “You look shattered.”

“My name’s Shoreton,” the squirrel said in a flat, drained voice. “Last Spring I left my home on the Humber coast for the Netherlands, and journeyed at leisure up the Rhine into the hills. I spent many days wandering along the mountain pathways, staying sometimes in those ancient castles, nests of turrets and towers in the sky. Then through Switzerland, crossing the long blue lakes and the high Alps, where the snow lies in the passes all year round. From the pass the road led down, through the vales of Tuscany to the Sea.”

The squirrel sighed, and turned to look at Rat with tired eyes. “And from there I took ship again, in an old three-master that no other animals were sailing on. I know why, now. Half-way across, past the Balearic Islands, there was a storm. Not even a bad storm, as they happen at sea. But the seams had leaked from the start, and by the time we’d rounded Gibraltar the hold was a metre deep in water, filling faster than the pumps could shift it. In the last hours we piled on all the sails in the storm, and tried to run for land. We never stood a chance of making it. Before land was even in sight, the starboard side stove in like an eggshell with the force of the waves. The ship went down in minutes, and I only had time to tie myself to an empty barrel before the deck broke up under me. For the whole night I clung to the barrel, trying to keep my head above water while the waves drove me towards shore. When I hit the beach the barrel nearly killed me as it broke up, but I managed to crawl up out of the surf to a fishing village. Only today I found this place where you can eat, rest and find your way ahead.”

Rat was silent for a while. A week ago he would have instantly blurted out sympathy, idle condolences that would have meant nothing. Instead, he beckoned the Wayfarer over from the far side of the room and explained the matter to him in a few words.

“I see,” his friend smiled, sitting down beside Shoreton. “Believe me, it happens all the time around here. These seas are tricky to keep afloat on, if the ship’s not trim and sound.” A far-away look came into his eyes. “I was wrecked once in the Tunis coast, with the Pirates on the shore to dodge when some of us did manage to swim ashore.” His gaze snapped back to the squirrel, who had started to sit upright and listen carefully. “But right now, perhaps you could do with a guide around the place, until you find your feet again. You’ll be all right, if you keep on the right-hand path and don’t let them get to you.”

Rat looked, puzzled, as the squirrel and the Wayfarer stood up slowly, and recited a peculiar, soul-shifting verse in perfect unison:

“Light shines, the Thunder-bearer’s mantle
The ocean deep, the Old King’s beard
Help age-old forces keep Earth sacred
Night should not be beloved, or feared

“For under daylight, under starlight
Those who seek, the Truth will find
Let them link hands around the Master
United in the common mind.”

The noise of conversation had stopped dead at the first line, and the large room was completely silence – although there was no way that the animals on the far side could have heard the rhyme. The two completed the ritual with the handshake, and sat down. The buzz of noise snapped back as if a switch had been thrown, or a moment taken out of time and suddenly dropped back.

Rat was, by this time, almost bursting with curiosity. Evidently, he thought, here was something like the familiar “panic” system he was used to, where certain apparently nonsensical words and verses could almost guarantee a safe passage through the Wild Wood.

The Wayfarer read Rat’s thoughts without much difficulty, and smiled to himself. For he knew the Wild Wood better than Rat had ever done – and many other woods of deeper mystery and danger. In fact, he mused, there were still quite a few really black spots left, where no amount of verses or symbols would save you.

Aloud, he said, “Shoretton here understands, Rat. I hope you don’t mind, if he comes along with us for awhile.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you’re perfectly welcome to join us,” said Rat, still a little confused. “but, where are we going?”

“Anywhere you like,” the old Sea Rat told him. “But right now, I’d like to turn in, after I meet a few more friends, and find out just what’s going on. I’ll see you in the morning.” With that, he wandered off.

Rat turned to his new friend, and made what was possibly the biggest choice of his life. “Come on, Shoreton,” he said “Let’s show this town what English animals are made of!”

That night the two of them explored the town, which seemed to have both grown and woken up since that afternoon. Gaily tinted lanterns cast a splendour of reflecting hues onto the whitewashed walls, now rapidly cooling after the heat of the day. As they strolled into a dimly lit taverna, Rat caught sight of one rather fat individual who was leaning against the bar. Surely, in that immaculate white suit, it was Toad? Rat blinked, and saw it was not the animal he knew, though perhaps a close relation. He edged closer through the brightly-dressed crowd, until he could hear what the toad was saying to the world in general:

“... Well of Course, I never travel anywhere without my Baedeker guide to the world. No, there’s no point in drifting along, not knowing where you’re going and what you’ll see when you get there. All the best hotels are in here, of course, where you can enjoy yourself properly and eat real food, without having a crowd of foreigners getting in the way and spoiling the view. I’ve gone all round the world – there’s not a worthwhile thing that I haven’t seen, and crossed of the list ...”

Rat sighed. This must be, he decided, a very close relation of the Toad he knew. Perhaps his brother? Somehow, he felt a curious lack of interest in finding out.

Shoretton returned, carrying a bottle of red wine and two sturdy yet graceful beakers that bore the emblem of the sun on their smooth sides. “Your health!” he said gravely, raising the cup so the emblem glinted in the firelight. “Who’s that pompous beast over there, nearly pushing the bar over? I’ve never heard anyone talk so much and say so little.”

Rat shrugged as he sipped the strong, coarse peasant wine. “I haven’t seen him before as such, but I think I know his type ... unless the Toad I know’s charged a lot, I know the type more than I like to.”

“I think I’ll take a closer look,” mused Shoreton, “thank Him-What-Done-It-All, there aren’t many of his type around this part of the world.”

From what Rat could hear (and since the toad was possessed of an extremely loud voice, he missed little) the toad was on the last stage of a Grand Tour, having missed absolutely everything that Rat would have found interesting in Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna, Rome, Marseilles and finally Cadiz. It seemed, as Shoreton later explained, that he had been following his guidebook letter by letter all the way, without even noticing it was all ten years out of date. Eventually even Shoreton gave up and returned to Rat, who had been watching with amusement.

“Enlightening?” Rat asked in a musical tone.

Shoretton laughed. “You can’t have day without night,” he said “so how would we appreciate the rest, without animals like him as a contrast? As it goes, *Night is not to be beloved, or feared.*”

Rat was suddenly silent, as the line struck a chord deep within. “That verse,” he said slowly “the Wayfarer would never tell me anything about that, or the “family” with its handshakes and sayings, or a whole lot of other things. He kept saying I ‘wasn’t ready’ for it yet. Will you tell me, now that I need to know?”

“Need to know?” Asked Shoreton, half puzzled. “Why do you need to know? Most animals live and die without even suspecting what’s really happening – and that’s in their interest, most of the time. There’s a lot you need to learn to get by, if you start in this at all. It takes some swallowing, too.”

“I need,” said Rat earnestly, leaning over the table towards Shoreton, “I need to know what’s really going on. I’ve broken out of a small world into a big one, and I’ve just got to know what’s out there, and where I stand.”

Shoretton considered this deeply, and turned away to think. When he turned to face Rat again, his eyes had changed. An odd light had entered them, and he seemed to glow with an intense energy.

“He says I can tell you a little,” he said “but there’s some of it you might not like at all.”

Morning came to the fields and meadows, and the linked alarm clocks in Mole’s house all rang. As he lay half asleep, still snug in his bunk built into the concrete walls, the Mole automatically reached out and turned the alarm off. The noise gradually faded in the house as Badger and Otter woke up, until at last only the shrill clatter from Toad’s bunk could be heard.

The Mole opened a bright eye, and gazed at the ceiling with it for awhile. After that while, he opened the other one as well and watched the Autumn sun slant through the deep window-shafts, picking out the tiny motes of dust and fur that hung in the air.

“I suppose,” he said aloud “I’d better get up.” And, when he had lain back again to the sound of Toad’s alarm still ringing, he added, “I’d better get Toad up, too.” So he rolled out of bed, washed with a splutter of cold water at the basin, dressed and trotted down the hall to waken Toad.

As might be imagined, Toad was unaccustomed to sleeping in a warm, sweet-smelling bed after months of scanty, louse-ridden straw on a cold stone floor that was so damp that clothing grew mildewed overnight. And so he was reluctant to abandon his new-found comfort, despite the Mole’s best efforts and intentions. It took both Mole and Badger to haul him out into cold daylight and send him staggering to the bathroom for a wash.

“Well,” Badger was saying later, when they were sitting in the narrow, brightly-lit kitchen to the accompaniment of Otter frying gammon and eggs, “I suppose you’ll want to come out on patrol today, Toad, to see how they’re running your estate without you. Mind you, it’s a good idea to keep your head down after you get through the woods and in range of those automatics the Ferrets carry.”

“I thought we were going to ... er ... stop all this, now we can get it all over next week?” Toad asked hopefully, thinking what a bad thing it would be if he was wounded before he could personally take back Toad Hall.

“Stuff and nonsense,” Badger snorted, serving out the food. “For one thing, it’d make them suspicious if after all this time we ‘give up’ just before the banquet. And for another – it’s about time you, Toad, saw what we’ve been doing for you, every day since almost midsummer.”

After a hearty breakfast, Otter went home to his family for a few days. He had been working solidly in the past week, keeping a dozen stoats and ferrets in bed with sore heads as a result of his sniping. “I’ll be back in time for the showdown,” he promised, and handed his slingshot over to Mole.

“Well, off you all go,” said Badger cheerfully, giving Mole an encouraging slap on the back, “and Toad, keep your head down! The rest of you’s hard enough to hide, as it is!”

There had been a frost that night, and white ice still clung to the shaded sides of walls and hedges. As they walked along the river bank, its plants and animals settling into their Autumn slumbers, the Mole chatted gaily about the times they had had, scouting around and laying siege to Toad Hall. “It’s quite funny, really,” he was saying as they approached the screen of trees that covered the approaches to the house, “fifty ferrets alone, all armed to the teeth, diving into their foxholes whenever a twig snaps, in case it’s us come to get them. And just the three of us!”

When they reached the trees, Mole motioned Toad to get down out of sight, and crawled away like a snake with surprising speed through the long, grey November grass. In a minute or so he was back, smiling.

“Trip-wire,” he whispered. “Come on now – I’ve cut it.”

Toad, moving less like a snake than a terrapin, humped his way through the grass – a poor shelter he thought, from the hundreds of prying eyes he imagined staring at him through gun sights from every tree and window. The frost was only slowly melting, and his clothing was soon saturated with freezing water. Before he knew it, Toad had sprawled head-first into a muddy ditch, cracking through the eggshell-thin ice into shatteringly cold water! He barely suppressed a surprised yell, and the splutter that did escape brought the Mole scuttling over. Seeming to scarcely move a blade of grass as he crawled.

“Look, over there,” hissed Mole, pointing along the ground to the terrace, where a group of ferrets, stoats and weasels were lounging, “that’s their Chief, over by the balcony.”

Toad looked where his friend was pointing and saw, less than a hundred metres away, the usurper of his house and habitat. Lounging in a sure, casual pose against the brightly painted railing, the mysterious figure loomed head and shoulders above even the tall stoats. He turned round to gaze nonchalantly at ‘his’ grounds and Toad, for an instant, was looking right at him. The narrow, slanting face had a colour scheme, Toad could not help but notice, like some evil badger’s.

Even as Toad recoiled in horror from what he saw in those glinting eyes, all uproar broke loose. The ferrets dived indoors for their weapons, the stoats ran out onto the lawn towards them and their Chief prudently ducked indoors.

“Run for it, Toad!” Mole cried, leaping to his feet and making at full speed for the shelter of the grove “We’re spotted!”

My! How Toad ran, out across the field where he had so often sunbathed, seemingly an age ago! How his speed suddenly doubled, then the first volleys of twenty-millimeter shells whipped past! (* 1) Ahead of him Mole was running in zigzags, partly to dodge the wildly aimed shots, and to give Toad a chance to keep up. When the two crashed through the hedge into the cover of the trees, Mole grabbed Toad with surprising strength and swung him into the shelter of the hedge-bank.

“Now, watch this, Toad,” he panted, unclipping the panniers he carried on his belt, “you’d have thought they’d have learned better by now, eh?” From the two satchels he pulled out half a dozen grapefruit-sized metal spheres, pitted all over like an oversized golf ball. Quickly he thumped one on the ground with a loud crack, cupped it in his paw for a second and bowled it overarm at the charging stoats. (* 2)

With a squeal of dismay the stoats scattered and dived to the ground, but too late. There was a dull “Pum!” sound as the sphere came down, showering them with strands of glistening material that hardened instantly. By the time the stoats had discovered themselves to be completely trapped the second and third grenades were in the air, accurately binding the pursuers to the ground and to each other.

- (1) *Yes. Right. Ummm – it’s a naval type Nordenfeldt or Hotchkiss one-pounder “pom-pom”, perfectly contemporary. Toad gets fired on in the original book, and I failed to resist the temptation to upgrade things. If Kenneth Grahame had rifles, I wasn’t going to pass the chance to bring in heavier artillery...*
- (2) *Bad guys can’t shoot straight, and good guys respond with non-lethal violence when possible. Cliched, I know ...though interestingly, this tech is almost here in 2002, though it was pure sci-fi when I wrote it!*

The Mole stood up, laughing. “Spider-traps,” he said. “Badger has a friend up the river who knows what we’re doing, and lets us have as many as we can use.” Suddenly he sniffed the air and stiffened in alarm.

“Ferrets!” He said in surprise to the still-cowering Toad, “They must have known we’d deal with stoats, so they sent the armed ferrets after us!” With a length of green twine from his pocket, a “Spider-trap” and a few twigs, Mole threw together a trip-wire arrangement that would be triggered by the next animal to use the path. Pulling Toad to his feet again, the Mole trotted gleefully along the edge of the wood. There were shouts behind them as the ferrets spotted them, a few wild shots, and then the muffled thump of a spider-trap.

The Mole halted beside the River, tears of laughter trickling down his velvet. “They never know what’s hit ‘em!” He chortled, and he and Toad almost went into fits as they heard the cries of their enemies, who were hopelessly stuck.

“It needs a very hot knife to cut those strands,” Mole explained, when they had recovered somewhat. “they’re tough as rubber, and as strong as steel.” He suddenly frowned through his mirth. “The trouble is, though,” he said worriedly “they’ll never solve our main worry; taking Toad Hall back. We’ll just wait to solve that one next week.”

Toad was looking out over the fields to where a large and glaring extension had been built onto his beloved boathouse. “Look at that!” he cried indignantly. “What have they done to my boathouse? The Wild Woodlanders don’t know a thing about boats!”

“Look for yourself,” offered Mole, handing him the binoculars. “They only finished it a week ago, to house the rabbits they keep hauling in each week to do their housework. The rabbits had to build it, too, though it’s much too big to hold the numbers they need to work in Toad Hall.”

Toad raised the powerful instrument and scanned the boathouse. He saw and wondered at the narrow windows, the heavily guarded door and the surrounding wire fence. What he failed to see was the little fleet of four converted coal-barges moored low in the water, hidden from view. When enough rabbits had been captured to fill them to bursting point, they were to be herded into the leaking, windowless craft and floated by night downstream to the port on the fens where larger ships could dock and their various fates awaited them. But whatever happened after that, nothing would ever be heard of those rabbits again.

But Toad did not see the barges, and knew nothing beyond the name of the “Great Plan”. He sighed at the infamy done to his boathouse, and passed the binoculars back to Mole.

Rat’s head reeled as he tried to digest what Shoreton was telling him. Much of it made perfect sense and proved many of his beliefs about the world; some seemed sheer madness. But there it was.

The Earth, Shoreton told him, was staggeringly old, and had been lived on by creatures – no, call them Forces – almost since it had cooled from a ball of molten rock. Those forces drew on all sorts of power to live – heat, lightning, and the magnetism in the rocks – and once they started, lived forever. Or almost. For every now and then would come a surge of a particular sort of energy from the Sun, which broke down the shields the forces had made, enabling some to eat the others and become stronger. (“Although ‘eat’ is probably the wrong word, it’s the best I’ve got,” Shoreton had said.) Animal and plant life had grown up as an experiment and allowed to continue under guidance, since animals could make palatable the energy stored by plants who took it from the Sun. (* 1)

“These forces aren’t good or bad, though they’re all the gods, demons and spirits we know,” Shoreton said, “It’s just that some of them are in favour of keeping us, and some of taking over again in full. But although they can’t do much against each other most of the time, they can use us like counters against each other, if we let them. They’ve a lot to give: some of them say there’s a way, if the right things are done, to make any animal – or human – into something like themselves. But although the price is high, some are trying it, and if they succeed it will be the end for all free animals.”

“But if there’s always been these forces and always been animals, why, in all this time, haven’t they done it yet?” Rat asked, baffled.

“WE – that is, those of us who know, and the forces on our side – have always stopped them,” Shoreton replied. “For example, around five thousand years ago they were based on a place of real power, an island in the Greek seas. From our place nearby came an animal who had volunteered to act as a sort of lens for all the energy we could supply. Their ritual had already started, when through that animal we sent all the power the free ones of the world could muster, crackling like lightning across the sea and to their island – I believe today it’s called Santorini. They had a shield against us, but it was run through slaves – and unless an animal agrees to do that of their own free will the effects are terrible – and so their shield went down. The whole island, the temple, the stored energy all flared into burning dust and gas, leaving a huge crater glowing white-hot. The sea rushed in, sending a wave a mile high across the lands – which, by the way, is where both the stories about the Flood and Atlantis came from.”

“And until recently,” Shoreton continued, “They didn’t try to do a lot – their operation’s not the kind of thing you can do in a cave or anywhere small enough for us not to notice it in time. But now they’re back, though their tactics have changed. Some governments have been taken over, and to go with that there’s another group of them who start revolutions and suchlike that their governments can crush and pretend to be doing good. Right now, we think their leader is someone who must be travelling around the world, since we never catch up with him.”

“The Imperial Mariners,” Rat ventured, “whose side are they on really?”

(* 1) *Hang on a bit! This is awfully close to H.P.Lovecraft’s elder Aeons cycle, isn’t it! I’d forgotten this section. Elder Entities using mortals as pawns until The Stars Are Right. Oh dear. At least none of the famous names (with too many consonants) turn up in this tale. Promise.*

“Ours,” said Shoreton proudly. “They track down more brigands and pirates than anyone, and they aren’t limited to the Sea, either. They can get anywhere, if they’re after something important enough.”

“So your side (ours, since I’d like to join) stands for the old, good ways rather than all this modern stuff which is pulling the world apart, does it?” Rat asked, taking a sip of wine.

“Only partly,” Shoreton replied, “we need the new things, though. How much could the Imperial Mariners do, without their new ships? Even the humans haven’t got as far with some of the things they use. The human towns and machines will help in the end, since we will have to leave the Earth before the next time the forces are disturbed, or risk the other side winning forever. (* 1) It may be,” he said, “that we are on the wrong side, for we are ruining their chances of improving themselves. But I believe – I know, within me, that we are right.”

There was a minute’s silence between the two animals, while the toad was thrown out head-first into the street by the infuriated customers.

Then Rat spoke. “I thought that I knew,” he said softly, “I thought that I knew right from wrong, what was rules and what had to be done. I took my own standpoint without looking round to check if it was right – I was life from a hole in the bank, in fact. But now, now...” he breathed in deeply, “I can see that it was all, before tonight, just standing on the shore, while the great river of... of truth, of life, of meaning, just flowed on past me.”

Shoreton nodded silently. “I’ve told you all I can,” he said “and that was the first thing you had to find out by yourself.”

The two left the tavern, and emerged into a crowded, festive street bright with torches and whirling dancers, dazzling after the dim firelight indoors.

“It’s no particular day today,” said Shoreton, laughing as they danced with a happy crowd of townsfolk around a street bonfire, “but every now and then, they let themselves go, like this!”

The party, a laughing, shouting band, moved dancing, reeling and somersaulting up the hill, chords of guitar and accordion ringing past as they moved in an avenue of light between pale, glowing houses and midnight black skies. As they padded along the street the houses burst open, rope ladders spinning from windows, clatter of feet on stairs, sudden eruption of cellar hatches and light flooding out from underground bedchambers, workrooms and laboratories.

“Come, be merry!” The shout went out into the night. With a clatter of boots, a black-suited group burst from an oddly glowing trapdoor above an archway. One of them wore a ridiculous yellow top-hat and a chipped monocle, and whooped with delight when he saw the party, beckoning his comrades, hopelessly lost in time, to join in. The first thing they did was to rip off the insignia from their caps and helmets. (* 2)

At the top of the hill a grinning, red-faced innkeeper staggered out, carrying a heavy cask. “All yours!” he yelled, and set the iron-bound cask rolling down the hill towards the throng.

“Catch-as-catch-can!” Shoreton shouted from the other side of the cobbled street, “It’s a full wine-cask!” The party split to each side as the barrel rolled past gathering speed, its hoops sparking on the cobbles.

Rat found himself sprinting after it, hurtling downhill at breakneck speed with a dozen or so others behind. Drawing almost level with him, one of the black-coated group charged forwards, but an instant before, Rat dived onto the barrel.

He really should have thought of a way to slow that heavy, tumbling barrel before grabbing hold, really he should. As it was, Rat was flipped over onto his back with a bone-shaking jolt, and found himself in the most uncomfortable position of a live brake-block, skidding in front of the barrel down the rough cobblestones. Thankfully he skidded to a halt with no bones broken, clutching his prize and hearing the deafening cheer burst out from up the hill. The small black-suited person – he was not an animal, but a human altered somehow – helped him to his feet, smiling.

“Alors, comrade,” he grinned, gold teeth flashing in his wiry face, “that was some run you made...” he broke off as he looked at Rat closely, and at the animals pressing round, getting their breaths back. “You’re a rat, aren’t you?” He said half-accusingly, yet with unutterable wonder in his voice.

“I certainly am!” Said Rat proudly, starting to roll the barrel back up the hill. “Why, what are you?”

The short person tore up the hill to where his comrades were standing clustered, and went into a huddle to confer. “Hey, is this that Allah’s pad you’re always telling us about?” The tall one rumbled, “I just hope he doesn’t send us back after this.”

“It’s not as the book says, but it’ll do!” Said the one who had raced for the barrel, “so let’s enjoy it as we can!” With that they vanished down a side-street, and Rat never saw them again.

In the meantime, Rat had brought his load back to the hilltop and the ring of grass below the castle, many willing hands helping on the last few steep metres. Ceremoniously the bung was drawn, and Rat raised his cup to the night sky in thanks for his victory. The draught was cool and sweet: it was Madeira port and was passed from hand to hand, fur, skin or scales holding the pewter pots that had appeared as if by magic from the houses nearby.

At the top of the hill Rat looked up from the sea of torch-lit faces, out into the skies around him. The faint touch of blue over the sea had gone as dusk faded; now a star-strewn dome of primal colour, black and white, reached from horizon to horizon, vague shades that touched the jet black and diamond of infinity.

Shoreton and several of the others were now gazing starwards as well, caught in the rapture of the universe. Rat was drawn to them as he stood there, and for an instant out of time the crowd ceased to exist, leaving only his friend, two otters and a dimly gleaming lizard separated out as they stood, on black ground under the black and diamond void. Rat could feel a presence behind him and so he turned to see a vast multitude, each one distinct as they faded into the night.

(*1) I’ve no idea where THAT came from! I assume Shoreton was speaking on a Cosmic time scale.

(* 2) I might save myself some embarrassment by keeping quiet about this bit – but anyone who’s read the Sven Hassel WW2 series would give the game away eventually. I have literally no idea why I dropped this bunch in as a cameo, except perhaps as the least suitable characters IMAGINEABLE to mix with Rat and the other gentle denizens of River Land. Or possibly – “Because I CAN.”

He stirred to look again and the torchlight, town and warm noise of celebration swept back. Draining his mug he went over to Shoreton, whose bushy tail was standing locked rigid. There was an insubstantial quality about him, as if at any time he would step back and enter fully the world of starlight that Rat had left a minute – or a century – ago.

Eventually the expression returned to the squirrel's face, and he smiled. "The dreamtime," he whispered softly, so softly that Rat was amazed to hear him above the noise of the crowd. "We can all step into it, at any time. Sometimes the door opens from their side, and you can look through. But sometimes," and his eyes kindled with an intense blue-white glittering "sometimes, if you train and practice, you can go right in and stay there for awhile. There the Olympians have their being, and through their eyes you could see the world as it really was, and is, and could be. The dreamtime can take you to places people saw and remembered, as a story or a dream. And if the other side ever finish their plans, they will close the door forever, except to pull in those they need for slaves and food."

He shrugged. "Come on, let's get back to the Wayfarer."

The next morning dawned clear and early. Sunrise saw Shoreton, Rat and the Wayfarer trotting down the steep cobbles that paved the narrow lane winding down between shuttered houses and the harbour.

"The best bet might be to get aboard the Fermi, sailing for Marseilles this morning," mused the Wayfarer, as they abruptly left the confines of the street and emerged onto the quayside, "there are small ships enough that'd take us to Algiers, Tunis and Gibraltar, but right now Marseilles is probably the better place if you really want to see the Mediterranean."

"Marseilles," said Rat, as if startled, "remember, you once told me about the shellfish of Marseilles, and almost broke down with missing them, back in England?"

His old companion chuckled, and a maze of wrinkles shook his weathered fur. "They're not as good in England," he smiled, "Or – anywhere else, for that matter." He pointed to a ship rocking at its moorings, as if eager to sail on its own. "There's the Fermi," he said, "And, by His pipes, it'll be good to look up at a masthead again!"

Rat looked up at the dizzying height of four masts, each one set with ropes, rigging and tackle, topped with a gaily fluttering triangular pennant.

"No need to worry about this one," The Wayfarer was assuring Shoreton, "I've asked and checked, and she's as sound a ship as a sailor could wish." Suddenly he frowned. "Our first problem is, that the gangplank's already drawn and she sails on the tide. I can run a rope easily enough and you've done it before, Shoreton my friend. But what about you, Rat? It's a tricky business."

Rat looked up at the taut rope that ran from a bolard on the quayside to the ship, over the deep, choppy grey water churning below. One slip and he would fall four metres into that surging swirl of currents from which, strong swimmer that he was, there would be little hope of rescue. Looking at the tense, expectant faces of his friends and the beckoning hole in the prow that the rope led to, Rat made his mind up.

"Let's get going!" He said.

Five minutes later, he was losing much of his confidence. The rope, which had from the shore looked so steady, was in reality being stretched and relaxed as the ship swayed against its moorings to give an unnerving up-and-down motion. Halfway across, he clutched the rope breathlessly, trying not to look at the threatening water churning noisily in the depths below him. He thought, as he often did in times of trouble, of the placid River as it wound past the calm reaches of Toad Hall. Though Rat did not know it, at that moment Toad Hall was anything but placid, the stoats and weasels having already taken it and his friends fighting to get it back. (* 1)

But as he gratefully accepted Shoreton's paw and a pull through the hole into the shelter of the capstan, thoughts of his River faded rapidly from the Rat's mind. "That was a close thing," he panted, standing up on the deck as the Wayfarer effortlessly pulled himself on board.

"I'll go and arrange some quarters for us," the old rat said, and vanished down an open hatch in the deck.

"Well," Shoreton said, looking around the deck with his tail twitching "so this is what a trim vessel looks like! The last one I sailed with – and it nearly was my last one – was covered with tar and barnacles, and hardly had an unfrayed rope aboard her!"

They were forced to dodge as a cry of "Cast of forr'ad!" came from the wheelhouse and the rope came skipping past them, the heavy knotted end dancing dangerously through the air before it hit the spinning capstan with a solid clunk and dropped to the deck.

There was a thunder of flapping canvas in the sky above them as two sails on the foremast unfurled, snapping taut in the freshening breeze. Under the steady pull the Fermi began her stately glide out, along and away from the harbour wall.

Rat and his squirrel friend were standing in the bows looking out across the sparkling waters beyond the harbour mouth, all its terror lost in the warm morning sun that lit the curl of white foam around the prow. Shoreton turned as the Wayfarer approached, looking pleased.

"I've managed to find us some bunks, right in the bow," he said "that means we'll have the freshest air in the ship. (* 2) We'll be glad of that if there's a leak – the cargo's liquid ammonia!"

The rest of that day they spent wandering around the ship, the Wayfarer teaching them a strange new tongue of fore and aft, jibs, booms, main, gallant and top sails.

(* 1) Time check! Remember that Rat's plot line starts months earlier than Toad's here – although the two are converging. And if Toad Hall had been occupied by the time Rat met the Wayfarer, he wouldn't be free to run off Adventuring. Assume Toad Hall occupied at end August, and Rat is boarding the Fermi in late September.

(* 2) Oh no it isn't, not on a sailing ship! There's a good reason why the Captain's cabin is at the stern and the toilets are called "heads" in Naval terminology - they're at the bow.

The Fermi was indeed a trim ship, with her four strong masts, a clean lined hull and the decks as neat and tidy as any working ship could be. Just after sunset Rat clambered up the rigging to the crow's nest on the highest mast, following the bushy red tail of Shoreton as his friend climbed effortlessly up the ropes. From the top, after Rat had squeezed in, the horizon stretched effortlessly before them.

“That’s Gibraltar,” Shoreton said, peering out to port, “And to starboard, Africa.”

All Rat saw was two shadows darker than the sea, spacing out the skyline around him. But as he entered the Mediterranean Sea, a feeling first of awe, and then of fur-tingling warmth, crept over him. The blurs on the horizon became no clearer, but for an instant he saw them as they were, a tiny segment of the vast globe he was crawling across. Below the crow's nets the ship was sailing into the night. But Rat was swept up into the rolling sea-spell, the unutterable weight of his planet, the company of the billions of others that shared it with him.

In such a trance he drifted with the ship, down the winds to Marseilles. Although they only passed a week there, Rat soon knew the town and those hills behind it, the slopes of vine and olive that ran steeply down to the warm sea. For at each turn in the paths of those golden hills of new horizons, he seemed to remember some faint knowledge as if memories of years passed there were breathed from the rocks themselves. When he would return to the city before the siesta hour, the Wayfarer could see a strange glow in his eyes, as if his vacant mood was only a cocoon for a light that slowly spread within.

From Marseilles to Pisa the three of them traveled, drawn East and South by some unspoken command that urged them onwards. By October they were in Sicily, Rat and Shoreton climbing the baked rock and earth of a steep hill that rose behind the port of Syracuse that faced the dawn. With them was a large silver lizard, Guerritz by name, who had joined them in Pisa.

They reached the summit, a dome of eroded limestone that fell steeply down to the head of the valley below. Guerritz's scales rasped over the summit rocks and he stood still, his body against the wind and his tongue flicking in and out as overheated lizards will.

Acting as one, the three animals turned to gaze into the East, where a heat-shimmering horizon held promise of – what? Rat strained his eyes to try and see what lay behind that cloaking haze, but the time was not yet ripe.

“Something over there we need,” commented Shoreton, “you’ve felt it, haven’t you, Rat, ever since we left the Atlantic?”

“Yes, and before,” said Rat in a dreamy monotone. “There’s something important to do, something pulling us South, and then Eastwards into the heart of itself. It’s something I’ve felt before, once – it seems a very long time ago, and far away.”

They rested for a long time in the shade of a large red rock that thrust put of the earth where the soil was thinnest like the crown of an ancient and balding King. They talked of much, of their homes, and journeys, and dreams. Guerritz told of his adventures on far tropical isles, of the companions he had met, of the treks without food or water across vast deserts of dust and rock that he had made. He told them too of his journeys over the high cold mountains where few lizards dare to go, the months of travel by land and sea, and finally his submarine emptying its water tanks to rise up through the waves under an azure Mediterranean sky.

Rat lay under the friendly shadow of the rocks, his shade from the blazing sun that turned the valleys below him into ovens of shimmering haze and dust. Only on the hilltop was there a whisper of breeze, murmuring in a strange tongue that he yearned to understand. Shoreton and Guerritz talked on, without needing to think of their words, which came rolling in calm and smooth as the waves on the clear warm sea below them.

The three drifted into the afternoon siesta, and from there back down the hill to the town, the tavern and the Wayfarer, sitting smoking his long pipe on the quayside. He smiled as he saw them coming down the hill track. For he knew where they were being drawn to, and who was drawing them. But there was plenty of time – all the time they could wish for, if they knew how to get it. Or who to ask for it.

Mole was sitting by a roaring blaze of apple-logs, savoring the sweetly-scented warmth, when Badger and Toad came in. He looked and saw what he had dreaded for a long time; both of them were covered in snow.

“Snowing hard, and freezing hard,” Badger announced, shaking stray flakes from his whiskers. “We passed half a dozen stoats on the way back, leading four times their number of rabbits into Toad Hall. The stoats didn’t see us until we stuck them down like wasps in a treacle-jar. And what do you think those stupid asses, the rabbits, did? Run away? No, not them,” he said bitterly. “All they had to do was bolt, but they just stayed shivering in the guardhouse until another lot of ferrets marched up and herded them off.”

Mole snorted angrily, and tossed another log on the fire. “Well, that’s the rabbits for you,” he said “always too worried about their own skins to do anything, take any risks, even when they can see they’d be helping themselves.” He pushed his chair back to help Toad, who was in the last stages of exposure, regain some warmth. Then a thought struck him, and he returned after disappearing from the room, carrying a sheet of paper neatly covered in sums.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said timidly, “we’ve always assumed they’ve just been rounding up rabbits, putting them to work for a while, letting them go and then finding some more, haven’t we?”

The badger nodded, as he took off his coat. “That’s the only decent thing they could be doing, yes.”

“But nobody’s ever seen any rabbits coming out, after the first month, have they?” Mole appealed. “I’ve been counting the numbers going in, and there must be nearly two hundred of ‘em in there!”

There was a stunned silence while Badger checked Mole’s sums, only broken by the chattering of Toad’s teeth. Suddenly the Badger gave a long, low whistle. “You’re right, Mole! And that means that somewhere out of sight there are an awful lot of rabbits being kept for – something.”

Toad, who was learning the hard way about not quickly thawing out frozen fingers, suddenly had an idea. “W... w..what about that boathouse they’ve rebuilt?” He stuttered through chattering teeth. “It’s the only t ..thing big enough to hold them.”

Badger dismissed it with a wave of his paw. “No need to use that,” he said patronisingly “when they’ve got all those cellars under Toad Hall. And you know they wouldn’t dare take them out of the district.”

Ah! If Badger had only thought awhile on what was really “Possible”, he might have hit upon the final, numbing answer there and then! But still, even the most intelligent animal, if he is brought up in the small and secure world of an English farmland, will see the world as being like the small and secure part of it that is all he knows. The world of the new “Chief” of Toad Hall was a far wider place, stalked by powers and conflicts that simply did not, and so could not exist from Badger’s viewpoint.

And so Badger’s ideas that night ran down one blind alley after another. Though it was his own fault, Badger could not be blamed. It was just that he was incapable of believing half the truth about the Chief of Toad Hall.

The next day started with Toad getting up early for a change, making preparations for the liberation of his ancestral home, though that was still two nights away. He scampered round four rapidly growing piles of kit on the floor, chanting out every item as he added it.

“Body armour for the Otter, Body armour for the Mole, Body Armour for the Badger, Body armour for the Toad. Here’s a cutlass for the Otter, here’s a cutlass for the Mole, here’s...”

Badger was leaning back in his chair with a paper over his head. The Winter close-season was fast approaching, and so he was resting now to make up on what he would miss later. Whatever he did, it would be a great strain so late in the year, after so much effort and hardship.

“...And a chainsaw for the Toad. Here’s a Sten gun for the Otter, and a St...” Toad’s work was interrupted by the Badger, who woke up with a loud snort. He smiled approvingly at Toad’s efforts.

“Never mind all that,” he yawned. “When I get in there, I’ll do all that needs doing with this here stick.” He affectionately patted a steel-shod oak club that at the moment was propping up a corner of the chair. “But still, it amuses you and it’s not hurting me.” He threw the paper over his head again, and resumed his nap.

“But Badger,” Toad’s plea went unheard, “this is important! You know I wouldn’t like to have you find I’d forgotten anything? Especially since we Are outnumbered thirty to one, stoats, weasels and all!”

The Mole entered, shaking fine snow off the white suit that covered him from paws to snout. He made a bee-line for the cheerfully glowing blaze in the hearth, rubbing his paws together in glee.

“O my!” He exclaimed, taking of his snow-caked gloves and setting them to steam on the warm hearth stone. “That’s cold outside, as cold as I’ve ever known it! You know, the River itself is starting to freeze, down by the banks.”

“How did you get on, Mole?” Toad asked eagerly, dropping the power packs he had been holding and helping his friend wriggle out of the snug down suit that was becoming much too hot indoors.

“Well enough, for me alone,” Mole laughed. “I got further in than ever, covered by the snow. The ferrets found my tracks and tried to track me, but I got ’em with a spider-trap. The whole bunch was following some tracks I’d made running backwards – hit a tripwire linked to one of those new spring-launchers – it threw a spider-trap with its fuse lit, and glued ’em all to a snowdrift! Won’t they have cold feet, by the time the next patrol cuts ’em out! But with them out of the way I could get through the grounds, right up to the house.”

“And?” Queried Toad. “You did splendidly, Mole. Nearly as well as I might have done myself, but we won’t go into that. What did you see? Anything to do with those rabbits?”

“Maybe, and maybe not,” Mole said slowly. “There was a window I could open on the ground floor, and a big desk by the window. And on the desk – this.” He produced a small sheet of cardboard with what seemed to be a ladder, or a string of boxes drawn carefully on it. Each square was numbered, and the last one was shaded red.

“What does it say?” Toad asked, looking at a series of handwritten notes at the side of each square. The writing was clear enough, but it was in no language he knew.

The Badger had woken up, and studied the card with interest. “Although I don’t know this language,” he mused, “there are a few things that make sense on it. These numbered boxes are divided into sevens, you see? Days of the week! It ends on this red block, which should be December the first. And since the only foreigner we know of in Toad Hall is that “Chief” of theirs, I think it’s his, and therefore important.”

“December the first,” Mole put in quietly, “that’s the party, isn’t it? Two days time.”

The Badger beamed and patted Mole on the head with a friendly paw. “Exactly. And do you see what he’s written on that last day? ‘*U regeu nyul Tovabb. Skraembl.*’ If “Skraembl” doesn’t translate as “scramble” I’ll eat my boots. I think he’s leaving then, or at least stopping whatever he’s been doing so far.” He turned back to the Mole. “Tell me, did you see anything else interesting while you were round the house?”

The Mole shrugged. “Nothing spectacular,” he said “there’s a map of the world stuck full of pins in the next room, and a really huge radio with all sorts of gadgets and boxes wired up to it. Oh, and by the way, there’s a few barges tied up by the river. Probably taking supplies in for the party.”

Badger grunted approval, and returned to his chair to doze and study the mysterious chart. Mole hunched over the fire regaining warmth, while Toad busied himself distributing spider-traps, flails, body armour and other gear until even he realised it would be far too heavy to pick up, let alone use. With a sigh, he picked out most of the stuff and began again.

The small boat was rocking gently under an intense blue sky as Rat, Shoreton and the Wayfarer lay fishing in a sheltered channel between two steep, rocky islands. They had made good speed across the timeless Sea, and with each mile Eastwards,

every minute as new horizons emerged round cliffs and headlands, the strange pull strengthened. Shoreton felt it, and called it “the pull of the Places”. But for the moment they were resting, waiting for the wind to change and blow them along the last lap.

“I’ve got one!” Rat exclaimed joyfully, striking with skill and “playing” the fish as the line went taut, flicking jewels of water high in the air. The other two crowded to his side to help, and between them they managed to pull the fish, a magnificent three kilo sea trout, into the boat.

An hour later the delicious scent of roasting fish was wafting from shore to shore of a tiny sun-soaked island, pungent with wood smoke and wild thyme.

“Ah, that’s much better,” Shoreton sighed as he finished his portion and tossed the bones back to the sea. “This really is the life! You could live here forever sailing these islands if...” he broke off, coughing as smoke from the driftwood fire billowed and blew back in his face.

“The wind’s changed, at last.” The Wayfarer said quietly “And yes, you could live here, in more peace and happiness than anywhere, if you were born to it. But you, my friends, are far from your own lives here. This wind is the one to blow you where you are to go.”

They did not hurry, but as the fire died and the wind freshened, they cast off from the little island and surged forwards over the clear warm water that surged around the sharp prow of their little boat, with its keen eyes painted on the prow to look out over the wide horizon.

All that night they sailed, the Rat taking his watch by the tiller while his two friends slept. All around him was the open sea, while above a dome of stars brighter and more numerous than he had ever dreamed of wheeled slowly across the sky. The only noise left in the world was the slap of waves against the hull, mixed with the creak of ropes and timbers as they stretched in the steady breeze.

Just after midnight the Wayfarer awoke with the inbuilt alarm clock that all animals, especially seafaring animals possess. Without needing a word he took the tiller and Rat stepped down, suddenly tired. With a last look up into the wheeling dome of the heavens above him, the Rat slept.

The morning was breaking warm and clear, as the little craft neared land at last. Rat awoke to the cry of the gulls and to a quiet nagging voice within telling him there was something not to be missed. He looked up, and his eyes confirmed what the dream had told him of.

The Mountain. It rose up, out of the breakers and the golden sands ahead, in two great steps, which were ridged and folded like a great cloak. Up, up, the eye was drawn, past the high woods to the uppermost walls of sheer rock and the bank of cloud that hid the very summit, concealing its secrets in a glory of reflected rose and crimson of dawn.

Shoreton awoke beside Rat and stood up, his snout raised up to the spectacle before them. He swallowed nervously. “Well,” he managed to say, “this is it – this is what we’re here for.” The Rat, transfixed in his wonder and happiness, could only nod in rapt agreement.

Under the practiced guidance of the Wayfarer, the boat swung past the rocks to ground on an empty beach. For mile upon mile the golden carpet lay, between the first steep slopes and the waters they had crossed.

“Which way do we go from here?” Shoreton asked, looking at the vast bulk rising seemingly pathless before them.

“The Wayfarer shrugged as he stepped out and made the boat fast to a tree trunk that lay half buried in the sand.

“Up,” he said “from here on in, you’ll scarcely need a guide. My task is over, at least for a while. Still,” he said, waving down the protests of his friends, “I’ll be taking the same road a little further, though I doubt you’ll need me from now on.”

Rat awoke from the half-dreaming trance he had been in almost since Cadiz into a poise of new awareness, as if the cool air flowing down the Mountain had been an icy splash from his River. “All right, then,” he said grimly, taking a deep breath as he shouldered his bag “this is what we’ve come for; this is what we need. So let’s get moving!”

“Amen to that!” Shoreton shouted joyfully and, grabbing his knapsack, he followed his friend to the foot of the Mountain.

For more than three hours they stumbled up through a hell of pathless thorn bushes and vicious mosquitoes. They had to rest every few minutes as the slope was so steep, but no sooner did they do so than a swarm of stinging insects settled round their eyes and ears. Shoreton was all for turning back to the shore and trying to find another path up the slope, but Rat pressed on, forcing his way up with knees and paws through the stubborn thickets that blotted out view and wind, but not heat. Under the tangled scrub it seemed there was nothing but dust and round stones that rolled underfoot, dropping them back two paces for every three they climbed. And all the time, the blazing sun beat down upon them without mercy.

“We’ve got to go on, whatever happens,” Rat gasped, wiping sweat and flies out of his eyes “it’s the only way, after this.” His satchel caught on every bush, pulling the straps to bite into his shoulder and swinging wildly at each step. But just as he felt his legs were about to give way and send him sprawling into the thorns, the end came. Though the airless heat had taken its toll and the hillside was swimming round him, he plunged through one last thorn bush and it was the last one! In a few metres the steep, densely wooded slope went over a band of rock and changed to a gently rising plateau with short, smooth grass that rippled in the cooling winds singing down from the heights above. Rat staggered over to a limestone boulder and collapsed panting, while Shoreton finished his own ascent and the Wayfarer followed him.

When they had rested, nearly exhausted for half an hour, they could see that the plateau linked them with a whole range of lesser hills to the North. Ahead, the middle section appeared to have been carved by some master sculptor, carved and fluted as it was with wooded valleys. The very top was still obscured by cloud, glimmering oddly in the afternoon light.

“Come on,” the Wayfarer sadly said, as if the sight had moved him deeply. “There’s a kind of place for travelers in the woods, and we must get there by night. It wouldn’t be... safe, for you two to wander around up here when the moon’s up.”

Rat and Shoreton shouldered their loads and followed their friend over the gently rising grass which was flattened here and there as is often the case where there has been dancing. After taking advantage of a stream where it disappeared into the rock, they came at last to the second part of the “step”, clothed in woods of oak, cypress and olive.

It was growing dark in the woods, and they noticed that the paths were broad and well-trodden; many people had used them this far up, though oddly enough no two had apparently taken quite the same route from the beach to the plateau.

At length the Wayfarer stopped, passing his hand through a crashing waterfall. “This is a way in,” he had to shout above the noise, “but I won’t be leaving with you tomorrow.”

He explained further when they were walking along the well-lit passageway behind the waterfall. “This place, as you might have felt, is the centre of a world – my world, at least, and the world of those who work with me. Rat, Shoreton didn’t tell you a tenth of what the world is, or means. But now I think you should be ready for anything, both of you. Take a good rest – you’ll need it tomorrow – and keep your eyes and ears open. I’m here for a rest, the kind I haven’t had in years.”

They came to a plain steel door that seemed quite featureless, but as they approached it opened like a camera iris, starting to open in the centre and the hole widening until they could step right through. Apparently hollowed out from under a spur of the mountain, there was a vast cavern like some colossal empty egg in the rock. The interior was ringed with thousands of balconies, all linked by suspended bridges and platforms. From each of the thousands of balconies ran a passage like the one they had emerged from.

“They run everywhere,” the Wayfarer said quietly, following Rat’s gaze “and most aren’t just holes in the rock, either. They come out in places that don’t exist as we know it, though they might someday. But this is where they all come to meet, before the last stage of their journeys. Didn’t Shoreton tell you, the world is bigger than you think? And remember this – not is the Universe stranger than we know, it is stranger than we can know.” With that he walked out into the crowd, and Rat never saw him again.

Shoreton shrugged, as if he had been expecting it. “He’s right, you know,” he said, and smiled. “Come on, let’s see what’s so special about this place!”

The great cavern was thronged with a crowd of animals of all kinds and appearances. In fact, there were so many different creatures that Rat was already in the crowd before the nagging thought struck him. He stood still as Shoreton bumped into him, and whistled softly. “The common factor! Look, Shoreton, around here I can see sailors, scientists, explorers and a few who look to me like painters. What have they all got in common?”

Shoreton thought about this while a monkey in a down suit, heated gloves and double boots went past, pulling a trailer full of oxygen cylinders. “Of course, yes!” He burst out. “They’re all seekers, like us! The people who can’t be happy unless they’re doing something really original – climbers and divers going to new parts of the world, and the artists and scientists making things that they, and only they can.”

“And remember what the Wayfarer told us?” Rat said “We’ve all come to rest here before we finish what we’re doing – whatever it is.”

Shoreton shrugged again. “Then let’s make the most of the place, and get rested,” he said “there’s a lot of mountain ahead of us yet.”

They made their way over to where a member of the Imperial Mariners was sitting in conversation with a lean fox dressed in a travel-stained green cloak. As they approached, the fox got up and seemed to instantly vanish into the crowds.

“Ah, you’re Rat, aren’t you,” the Imperial said, taking his jacket off. “I’ve seen you on a fleet Telecast, with that young Vantor. I’ve always wanted to meet someone from your part of the world. Such a ... borderline area.”

“Borderline?” Queried Rat, sitting down next to him. “Between what? The River lands are as ordinary as anywhere – except to me, of course,” he added.

The Imperial, whose shoulder badges proclaimed “para-science research”, pressed his hands together and looked at the distant roof as he chose his words carefully. “It is on the ... the balance, you see, between two opposite areas of influence so powerful that the fate of the world itself, and every creature in it, will be decided in the struggle that we know is soon to come – though “soon” is a relative word, where the Old Ones are concerned. On hand, up the River and to the South of you there is a certain... how shall I put it? A certain force that I serve, as does every animal here around you. This force brought you here for its own ends – which, I might add, are your own. Against this is the force that is trying to take over our stewardship of the world for its own enrichment – which is most definitely not the enrichment that free animals like yourself would want.”

He drew himself up, and looked searchingly into Rat’s eyes. “And, believe it or not, Rat, you are a free animal by birth, completely neutral and so potentially powerful. You, or any of your neighbours, could swing the balance one way or another, with certain preparation. For our part we think the training too rough and too dangerous to ask any animal to do it – and it has to be either a free animal’s choice, or that of an animal with very weak mind, for whom the costs are terrifying. In fact, when the other side try to complete the ritual they have to force an animal to accept, and that animal never survives – although with a large enough number, at least one surely would. If that happens, our cause is lost, forever.”

“So really we’re important just because we’re unimportant, and not bound by birth to either side?” Rat asked uncertainly.

“That is what it boils down to, yes,” said the officer, whose name was Voltenorr, sounding highly pleased “and so we watch over the River lands and the stranger places upstream, only stepping in when something really important needs to be done. Even then the Old Ones have to cover their tracks, or they’d disturb the balance they’re trying to save.”

Shoreton returned to the table with a large straw-bound bottle of rich, dark wine. Rat explained as best he could, and the squirrel’s tail twitched in surprise.

“So that’s it!” He whistled softly. “That explains a lot – for example, how you could feel this place pulling before any of us. No wonder: if you’re that balanced you must be a Sensitive, and a good one.”

“By the way,” said Rat, turning to Voltenorr, “who was that Fox you were talking to when I came in? I mean, he just seemed to – vanish.”

Voltenorr laughed. “If you saw him at all, it’s only because he’s off his guard in here, one of the only places that’s really safe anywhere. He’s one of our Intelligence people, just walked through that door from Heligoland Base to report.” He

broke off, and frowned. “I don’t like the news he brings, not one little bit. All the top scientists and techs of the other side have disappeared, from the Channel and Dutch coastal areas. A lot of their fleet’s dropped out of sight too. Something big’s in the wind, and I don’t know what. Excuse me, I have to go and make a report.” With that, he stood up and crossed the bridge to the far side of the cavern.

“Your health!” Said Shoreton, pouring Rat a generous goblet of wine. “And mat the guardians of your River never sleep!”

After that, the two of them lost all track of time as they wandered around talking to the vast section of the animal world that thronged the cavern and its many side-chambers. Although they must have taken several days to do it all, outside only a few hours had passed.

“Time’s like a River, if you like,” explained one white-coated owl to Rat and a sea-diving otter, “and it behaves as such, not like a solid thread as most people expect. Imagine yourself as a twig, moving helplessly in the current along with everything around you. Now, if you get caught up in an eddy you’re still moving at the same speed, but in a different direction. And when you come out, you’ll be further upstream – earlier – than if you’d kept in midstream. This place is a time eddy; work out for yourself who’s stirring it.”

Rat learned a lot that night, if night it was. But at last sheer fatigue overcame him, and he knew he had only a few minutes left before he fell asleep on his feet. With rapidly dimming eyes he sought out a dimly lit side chamber, where some other figures were sprawled asleep. Finding the floor thick with warm, soft cave moss, he curled up and was asleep in seconds.

Such a deep and restful sleep the Rat had never known. It was far more than rest; it was a complete cleansing of all his fears, aches and worries. When he awoke, it was with a feeling like a plunge into his River after a hot and sultry night.

Shoreton had managed to find him before he slept and awoke, yawning, on the far side of the cave. “Is it morning?” He asked, digging his pack out of the deep moss.

Rat shrugged. “Everything outside looks the same, and everyone’s watches show different times,” he said “but I’d think that for us at least, it’s morning.”

They shouldered their packs, which had been refilled while they slept, and crossed the bridge to the tunnel they had entered through. Both animals walked in silence down the rock-hewn passage, thinking quietly about what they had learned and what they were to do. At length they re-emerged, just above the plateau, with steep wooded slopes rising around them.

Rat looked up to where the summit must be hidden, nearly a mile above them. He swung his well-worn satchel onto his back, and found some reluctant words.

“That’s a big mountain,” he swallowed, “so let’s get moving!”

For six hours they plodded along a crest between two streams, climbing fiercely until their muscles ached with a clean fire, resting by some silver cataract, and moving on once more.

“We’ll have lunch on the top of that,” panted Rat, pointing up to where a huge block of limestone towered above the slope, clean as if just prized out of the rock and hurled from the cliffs above. When they had scrambled around the side to the top they found it to be quite flat, and jutting out above the treetops. From their resting place they could look out over the plateau, over the beach and, further and fainter, the Sea that stretched out island beyond island to the limits of the Earth itself. The two animals sat and looked for a long time before they felt ready to eat.

“You know,” Shoreton said with his mouth full, as he munched one of the light but satisfying wafers their packs had been supplied with (*), “it’s a good thing that we started so early today. I mean, by the Sea at this time of day it’d be blazing hot, and we simply couldn’t climb this fast.”

“But as it gets later and hotter, we get higher and cooler,” Rat nodded, reaching for a bunch of cool grapes. “In fact, when we reach the top – however long that takes – it could be definitely on the chilly side. I think I even saw snow up there, from the boat yesterday.”

When they had finished eating and washed it down with a draught of pure cool spring water, Rat and Shoreton set off again, rest by rest, step by step up through the light woodland glades. As they climbed, the olive trees that grew near the coast made way for hardier and more home-like trees; groves of great oaks and antique holly that spread their gnarled branches as a green roof over the broad pathway. Even though Rat knew that it must be late Autumn outside, the leaves and scents were of a freshly budding grove in the May time.

All through that afternoon they climbed, only stopping for briefer and briefer rests, and to drink at the crystal waters that sang in the valleys. As they drank, weariness and pain flowed out of their tired limbs, to be replaced by strength and determination. At last the oaks, firs and holly trees thinned out, and they looked in awe upon the final towering wall of rock, climbing in indomitable cliffs to the absolute summit, beyond sight in its eternal cloak of mist that streamed away down the wind.

Without a word they crossed the short stretch of flower-starred turf leading to the foot of the seemingly invincible rock. Though even there the path continued; a narrow crevice widened inside to reveal a rough ladder of holes that were cut in the living rock, climbing out of view and imagination to the top and whatever awaited them there.

There they paused. On the lower slopes night was creeping; both remembered the Wayfarer’s warning about being outside shelter in the moonlight. Only their great height, more than a mile above the beach, kept them for a while above the great shadow.

“You go first,” Rat suggested, “you know more about what’s head than I do.”

Shoreton laughed. “When things just can’t BE understood,” he said, “‘Knowing’ more or less makes no difference. Besides, you’re the one they called first, and from furthest off.”

(*) *Suspicious minds (even those who don’t know I was started on The Lord Of The Rings at age 4) might spot Tolkien’s elven snack Lembas here. But it might just as well be Ryvita. Honest!*

So the Rat climbed. Although the holes in the rock looked rough, they fitted his reach perfectly. Behind him he could see, through the crack in the rock chimney, the globe of the Sun apparently hovering, the tiniest fraction away from the edge of a world that was already in darkness below him. Above, the holds faded from sight in the mist that glowed a dangerous red in the last few seconds of light remaining. Feeling his way almost blindly, he edged up the vertical face with Shoreton's ragged breathing following behind as the strain on his friend began to tell. Rat's own muscles ached like fire as hand by hand, foot by foot, he ascended.

Suddenly Rat felt that he could go no further. He had tried his hardest, tried till every nerve shrieked, but there was simply no way that he could will his body further. Teeth locked, paws desperately jammed in the holds, he fought the leaden stupor that was pressing on his mind and limbs.

And beyond hope, beyond strength, Rat climbed. One hold, two holds, and the chimney ended. Rat crawled forward a little way and slumped forward onto warm rock, invisible in the billowing cloud. As he lay there emptied on the roof of the world, the force that had pulled him on through every cell of his being for so long faded to nothing, leaving him free.

And so it was as a free animal that Rat struggled to his feet and walked forward into the suddenly blinding whiteness that shields Olympus from all sight. In that great unseen throne room he bowed and was smiled upon by the Protector, the great Emperor that the Mariners served. What Rat was told there, all that happened is a story of its own, and one that will never be told in full. Of the Great Danger he was told, the true and complete story of the struggle that had raged between the stars since before the Earth cooled. Finally he was offered his part to play, a way that he, Rat, could help in delaying the final reckoning for some years – a lifetime, maybe. But it was time that was being bought, a respite in which to grow strong again.

"But now," the mighty voice told him at the end, sorrow and laughter mingling, "your journey is almost over, for a little while. Go now, to your task and to your rest."

And knowing what he did, the Rat was not in the least surprised to find himself shivering in a snowy field, with his River only a few hundred metres away through the bare hedge-banks and willow trees.

It was noon, and Otter had just taken leave of his family to take part in the liberation of Toad Hall planned for that evening. Turning away from the River to cut across the big loop it made upstream from his house, he saw a figure ahead of him on the road – it was Rat! With a yell of recognition the two River-folk ran towards each other and collided, laughing.

"Where've you been, Ratty?" Otter asked him, when he had got over the shock "I mean, you just walked out three months ago and vanished. What happened?"

"A lot," said Rat, grinning broadly. "I've been places and done things most animals couldn't dream about. I've learned a lot about the world, about myself, and I've learned to love the dear old River again, more than anything. And if you love it, tell me what's been going on while I've been away. There's danger here, more than you know."

While Otter explained, Rat's face grew grave as the pieces of a terrible jigsaw fitted into place. When Otter mentioned the last "trivial" details – the barges Mole had seen, the chart with that day's date underlined in red, the raid they were to make that night on Toad Hall – Rat stopped him.

"You can't go on that raid tonight," Rat told Otter "It'd take too long to explain why, but I've got to take your place."

"What?" Otter gasped, astonished. "You mean that after all my work dodging traps and bullets all season, I won't be in on the finish? That's..."

A sudden change came over Rat; he seemed to grow immeasurably. Silencing Otter with a Gesture that none without the right can ever use, a voice that Rat had never possessed spoke.

"Go down the River, and deal with what you find there, if you hold this land dear to you. I, the Protector, order it so by the services I did for Portly the Otter, your son. Do my work this day, as I once did yours."

Otter bowed, pale and trembling. Then a sudden panic took him and he sprinted off in the direction of the River, soon to be lost to sight.

Rat jerked as one waking up, and looked around. Otter was gone to play his part, and now it was Rat's turn to play his own. Quickly he summed up the situation and set off, not for Toad Hall, but towards the Downs.

Travelling in almost a straight line across the snowy fields, he was on the lower slopes in less than an hour, speed keeping him warm as he crashed through the wind-sculpted drifts. After toiling over the ridge Rat found he could jog almost effortlessly along the gentle slope that led to the very summit, luckily laid bare of snow by the driving wind.

"If this doesn't count as an Emergency," he muttered to himself as he reached the top, "nothing does." With that he cast about for signs of the "Emergency Station" that Captain Vandor had told him of aboard the Barracuda, seeming now so long ago that it might have belonged to another age of the world. Recalling the instructions after an effort, he stood by a vast, unnaturally flat slab of rock on the very summit and said aloud "X J Forty-two."

There was a moment's silence, only broken by the moaning of the wind and his own heart racing. And then with a smooth hum, a large rock to his right sank into the ground to reveal a round concrete shaft set into the hill.

Rat raced over and almost dived down the shaft, three times his height with a ladder set into one wall. At the bottom he ducked under a heavy lintel and emerged into a small room that was dominated by a complex control board covering a whole wall. His entry had set off a whole chain of automatic preparations, so when Rat entered a paper tape rattled out with the words "READY READY READY READY." A flashing arrow pointed to a typewriter keyboard set in the wall nearby.

"Weisshut leaving from Toad Hall tonight down river," Rat typed clumsily with cold fingers, "Has numerous rabbits from area in five barges. Please help. Urgent." He pressed the "Message End" key and the paper tape clattered out with

"PRESS RED BUTTON. ONE MINUTE TO VACATE. URGENT. GO GO GO GO GO GO GO....."

Rat punched the red button that flashed prominently in the centre of the panel, looked up for an instant at the blinking lights he had set in motion, and ran. As he scrambled out of the shaft the cover was already sliding up behind him to seal the chamber untraceably once more.

As Rat watched from what he judged to be a safe distance on the crest of the hill, the huge rock slab on the summit split down the middle. The centre half reared up in the air at a steep angle, while what had been the ends tilted down into the ground before both halves slipped free of their pivots and slid out of sight on squealing long-idle rollers.

In the deep circular shaft now exposed to the sky, all was now ready. A cylinder of tough white waterproof plastic began to accelerate up the shaft, pushed by cold pressurised gas released behind it, snapping tubes and wires that had connected it with the control panel, safely distant in chalk and hard concrete. (*)

The cylinder popped out of the shaft like a cork from a bottle. As Rat watched it slow down and hover, about to crash down again, a sudden red glow lit up the base.

It exploded like an eggshell, for that was its function, a giant shell to keep its contents safe for what could be decades before it was used. As the white plastic segments spun into the air Rat had a glimpse of a tall, needle-nosed rocket hovering for an instant with its first stage engines just balancing the weight. Then with a thundering roar it was gone, sprinting away from the launching pad with three sleek finned stages to carry his plea out into the wide leagues of the outside world on a screaming tower of blazing white exhaust gas.

When Rat reached the bottom of the slope he looked back, but all that could be seen was a slowly fading column of steam drifting in the wind. For after the first few seconds those engines had been roaring with half a million kilos of thrust, accelerating through the speed of sound in as much time as Rat had taken to turn round and look. In less than a minute it had shed its first stage and was travelling flat out through the upper atmosphere where the skies were black, its generators sending a radio scream of birth that every Imperial Mariners ship and base could hear from past Iceland to Cadiz. Out-running chasing missiles that sprang up from similarly hidden pits far down the River past the great City, its electrical “brain” recognised a trusted signal from a heavily disguised ship in the Channel, and poured its precious message out to the Imperial ship in a narrow beam before it dived and was destroyed by the frightful air friction at twelve times the speed of sound.

The afternoon was wearing out and shadows were lengthening before Rat reached Mole’s house. He paused for a moment by the door, thinking of all that had happened since he had left the River banks. Could he rest here content again, knowing what he knew? He had seen the world from that Mountain, and much, much more. But of all of it, this was his place, he now knew, though this was not the time for reflection.

“Now for action,” Rat said softly, and knocked at the door.

There was one thing, however, that Rat had not considered. He was not the only animal with eyes to see the messenger rocket blasting off, nor were the Imperial Mariners the only ones with radios. Although the Chief of Toad Hall, Weisshut by one name, could not read the message in the rocket’s memory banks, he could guess it easily enough. Of all the things happening in that part of the world, he was the only reason that an emergency rocket would be sent to the hated Imperials. Cursing venomously in a strange language, he quietly hopped onto the last barge as it slipped away from the dock to be caught in the steady current of the River.

“Hooray, Rat’s back!” Mole shouted gleefully, throwing the door wide open. Badger leaped to his feet with a paper in hand and his mouth open in surprise, while Toad came bouncing in off the walls, floor and ceiling as he struggled to control his steam jet-pack. After the briefest of explanations, Badger cut aside Toad’s excited questioning.

“Glad you’re here, Rat old friend,” he said warmly, shaking his hand with a firm grip – which told Rat more than any words of welcome ever could. “If you say Otter’s work is more important than this, we’ve glad you’ve come back in time, if only to help with Toad Hall.”

“We’re almost ready to start now,” said Toad excitedly, steering Rat over to where enough kit to fill an armoury was piled up, “pick what you think you’ll need to fight off thirty angry ferrets, and we’re leaving as soon as it gets dark outside.”

As evening fell, the four fateful friends put on shapeless white capes and crossed the wide, open fields to the River, Mole diligently brushing out their tracks in the snow behind them. Badger was in the lead, carrying his club. Mole had a sack full of spider-traps and other, newer grenades as well as an ironwood staff for close-up work. Rat felt himself heavily laden with helmet, body armour and flail, but Toad had gone all the way. He was encased in a complete suit of the latest Krupp “Dreadnought Armour” with a bulky steam jet pack on his back. From head to foot he was laden with clubs, “spider-traps”, a long semi-mobile pom-pom naval cannon and two cases of ammunition. All in all he weighed four times more than usual, and sank deeply into the snow with every step.

() There are things you should and shouldn’t include in a 1910 scenario, and cold-launch missile silos are definitely in the second category. As to the function of this one, I scratched my head, asking myself “What WAS I thinking?” and eventually went back to the original manuscript, which this 1981 print differs markedly from in places. There was half a page back under Olympus where Voltenor explained that in Rat’s “special” part of the world, some technologies work and some don’t. Hence from some areas you’re in a radio “dead spot”, and the only way to signal out is to take the radio out towards the outside world before transmitting.*

That being so, I probably put it in because I thought it was cool at the time, and I was tired of writing about Olympic mysticism and cosmic forces by that stage of the story. Time to burn some propellant! Mea culpa.

I was awfully tempted to rewrite this bit out. But the text you’re reading is as I originally wrote it, a testament of sorts. I’ve always liked Tech, I’ve always liked anthropomorphics. It’s decidedly hard luck on Rat and Mole and the rest that they happened to be the open project at the time – so whatever I liked writing about fell into the mix regardless, you might say.

“Here we are, I think” Badger announced when they reached the River bank, and swung over the edge into a narrow tunnel that the overhang hid completely. Mole and Rat managed to follow quietly enough, but Toad now weighed so much that the roof he was holding onto broke, sending him staggering back into the icy River!

Rat dived in after him, heedless of the weight of his own armour. Steel clashed against steel on the river bed, and after fumbling for a few seconds Rat at last grasped the control of Toad’s steam jet pack. With a roar the two of them boiled out of the water on a column of steam, and clanged down inside the tunnel mouth.

“Well, Toad, that was a pretty stupid thing to go and do, wasn’t it?” Badger remarked scathingly after they had pumped the water out of him and set his suit heater on maximum, “you know how much that armour weighs, don’t you? If Rat here hadn’t acted so fast, you’d have stayed down there till the mud turns to rock and they quarry you out!”

With Toad firmly in the lead and the steam lines to his boiler disconnected, the party set off along the dark and airless passage. Here and there some deep-growing root had entered the tunnel since it was built, partly blocking it, but in his powered suit Toad could brace his feet against the walls and push with the force of a five-tonne jack. Not many obstacles lasted long under that strain.

As they passed under the banqueting hall, they could hear the sound above them of hundreds of feet stamping the floor, and a massed chorus of “Oooray – Oooray – Oooray – Ooray!” to some unheard song. Mole trembles as he heard it, and Toad positively rattled.

“They Are going it, those weasels,” Badger remarked mildly, clenching and unclenching his paws around his club as he readied for action. Soon there was a clang ahead, which meant that Toad had run into the passage wall. Past the banqueting hall the passage turned sharp left and began to climb a little way on rough stone steps they had to fumble for in the darkness. Suddenly the noise of celebrations swelled to a roar, and the four animals found themselves in a small room with tiny chinks of bright light showing the single thin wooden wall that was all that separated them from over a hundred stoats, ferrets and vicious weasels!

“Let me at ’em,” gritted Toad, the safety valve on his backpack hissing steam as he built up to full power.

“Wait!” One of the stoats is saying something, and I think it’s important,” Badger said, with an ear to the wooden wall and his hand on the catch to the secret door. This is what they all heard:

“...not here tonight, he is here with us in spirit, as we are with him in the fruits of our labours that have made possible the Great Plan. Now that plan is almost complete, and we have been promised the land of the Wild Wood, the River, the fields and the Downs, to be ours, and every animal in there. Ours! Forever ours!” The cheering and savage yells rose to drown the ending of the speech.

“The time has come!” Badger cried “Follow me!” With his sudden weight on it the door crashed open and the four friends burst out through the paneling, right in the centre of the banqueting hall!

For an instant the Wild Woodlanders sat frozen with astonishment, and in that instant Mole, Toad and Badger went into a frenzy of fast, efficient, practiced action. Four of Mole’s spider-traps were in the air at once, sealing the doorways with an impenetrable web, followed by a large flash grenade that dazzled the Woodlanders for a few vital seconds. Badger hurled the nearest great table onto its side, pinning a dozen stoats under it while he dived for the rest on the other side, his club whistling above his head. Toad shrieked into the air balancing on his steam-jet and thundered across the room to deal with the armed sentries at the door. One weasel opened up with his Mauser, the steel-cased bullets shattering on the armour of the thundering figure, just as Toad turned off his power right on top of him, landing with enough force to push the weasel’s helmet down over his ears as he strode over to throw the other sentry out of the window.

My! What a battle that was, for battle it became once the remaining stoats and weasels fought back after losing half their number in the first minute! There was Badger, his club a swinging blur as he closed on the remaining ferrets trying to escape through the sealed doors, windows and chimney. There was Mole, wielding his quarterstaff valiantly and filling his enemies with terror with his ringing war-cry of “A Mole! The Moles are upon you!” Toad, when his steam jet faded as the boiler pressure dropped, became a true walking dreadnought, an unassailable fortress of flesh and rivets, steel and power. With his steam-boosted strength he would leap into the centre of hard-pressed groups of stoats, scattering them like chaff in a hurricane. Two weasels would he pick up struggling above his head and send them hurtling down the tables, then two, then two more. And there was Rat, wild-eyed and frenzied as he dueled with Weisshut’s second in command, a large and vicious foreign stoat who fought with the speed and strength of three, and wielded a spiked club. As Rat’s flail disarmed him, he whipped out a concealed assassin’s crossbow and fired – the venom-dripping bolt stuck harmlessly in Rat’s armour like a dart in a dartboard. Rat’s next flail stroke whipped it out of his hand, bringing the stoat down with a two-handed blow as the flail swung back.

In five minutes there were only twenty stoats and weasels left on their feet, bunched at the drawing-room end of the hall. “Charge!” The biggest one screamed, “We’ve still got them five to one!”

In that final struggle the four friends met their sorest test. Although Rat’s flail and Mole’s staff flattened three of the mob before they reached them, all were tiring fast and the weasels still fought with desperate energy. Twice a chair splintered on Rat’s helmet, but luckily each time Mole or Badger was there to hold off the attack while the room stopped spinning. After one last fiercely pounding scrum of fiercely pounding wood and steel on fur, it was over. The last Wild Woodlanders burst out through the windows, leaving some thirty of their number sprawled unconscious on the floor. Those were hauled out beyond the estate boundary, and left for the cold snow to wake them.

“We’d better free those rabbits now,” said Rat wearily, unfastening the dented body-armour that had saved his life, and slinging his helmet into a corner of the room. “Their Chief got away, but he’s had practice at that. At least nobody had time to launch those barges since we came in.”

So Mole and Rat, after resting against each other for a few minutes, staggered round to the converted boathouse where they had seen the rabbits being kept – and it was empty. With growing alarm they looked for the barges – and the barges were gone.

“Blast it!” Seethed Rat, eyes shut tight and teeth gritted, “So that’s what that weasel meant, his chief’s “here in spirit.” He never meant to stay to the feast at all, and I was thick-headed enough to think he’d stay around until we came to get him. I deserve a good kick, Mole, for being so stupid.”

When his friend had obliged, Rat staggered to his feet. His expression brightened as a sudden thought struck him. “Otter!” He cried, “that must be it; that’s why he had to go downstream, that’s where the Chief’s gone! I’m glad, Mole, that we can count on someone with a lot more sense than me, to watch over us.”

“If we can’t do any more around here, we can at least find out what’s going on out there,” the Mole said sensibly. “Now the Chief’s gone, he won’t be needing that great big radio any more. Come on, it’s only just inside the house.”

As the two friends returned to the liberated Toad Hall, they stopped for a minute, suddenly compelled to look up at the stars shining bright in the suddenly clearing skies. In that instant they knew – were told, in fact – that theirs had been a job well done.

Far off at the River’s estuary, two fleets were rapidly closing on each other. Rat’s signal had been instantly flashed from ship to ship, base to command along the Imperial Mariners’ relay chains, and now every available ship had set course to try and seal off the River mouth. The Chief of Toad Hall, they knew, was leader of far more than scattered bands of gullible Wild Woodlanders.

At the River mouth, the fast cruisers received a check as cannons roared from the banks and a whole flotilla swung out from hidden docks to bar the way, cannons blazing! Although these ships were less modern and worse organised than the Imperial Mariners, there were far more of them. For in the past week, nearly every Pirate in the Atlantic had been reminded forcibly of their secret oaths of allegiance, and had mustered there disguised as merchantmen before they pulled into shelter of deep channels dug in the mud banks by hundreds of slaves. They sought only to buy Time – time for their Chief to get to the nearest laboratory and unholy site suitable for the purpose – to twist at least one of the Rabbits into a doorway for powers not seen on Earth since the days of the Titans.

Still three hours away from his laboratory, Weiss shut the nameless cursed the crawling speed of the barges as he directed the captains of his fleet over the radio. He was already out of the area where suitable test subjects could be acquired – but a long way still to those places suitable for his needs. When the reports listed the strength of the Imperials that had arrived so far, he permitted himself a slow, acid chuckle. He had foreseen everything; by the time the unstoppable super-dreadnoughts arrived from their patrol grounds in the North Sea, it would be too late. As to the fast cruisers that had arrived so far, what of them? They were heavily armed and armoured and were sending his ships down with long-range shell fire and Whitehead Torpedoes, but no matter. He could lose a crew a minute and still win.

For Weiss shut the nameless had the finest mind of any animal on his side, and used it to the full – he had to, or else a more efficient operator would have made shark-bait of him long ago. After double-checking his facts, he concluded that he was, logically, quite certain to succeed. And of course there could not, in his scheme of things, be success without hard and unyielding logic.

He did not hear the quiet splash as Otter slipped into the water from the bank, swam easily underwater to the leading barge and caught hold of a trailing rope to watch and listen, hidden in the moonless dark.

Back at Toad Hall, the four friends pressed into what had been a guest room on the ground floor, to listen to the large radio console that took up most of the floor and wall space. Somehow, when he thought about it Rat realised he knew the command frequencies of both the Pirates and the Imperials, and so they could get a good impression of just what was taking place. He knew, but did not let slip to his friends that the Pirates were more than that – although they rarely sailed as a fleet, they were swayed by one purpose and followed one Plan.

“It’s a full-scale battle!” Rat Breathed softly with the headphones on, before switching in the loudspeakers for the benefit of his friends “They said something big was in the air, but I didn’t think it would be this!”

“Imperial command, calling group fourteen,” a faint voice came over the airwaves, “Group Epsilon converging with you now, course 195 degrees, speed twenty-six knots. Estimated time of arrival two hours. State your position. Over.”

“That’s their leader,” whispered Rat as he changed channels to hear the reply. “It seems like they’re throwing everything that floats after Weiss shut this time.” He was silent as a louder, clearer voice cut in.

“Radar reports and scouts confirm a fleet of superior strength blockading the Rive mouth, protecting a small number of specialised ships, type unknown, anchored behind them. Many of the vessels are of obsolescent design, except for four new ones that appear to be unarmed and carrying unusually heavy equipment. Their fleet is being controlled from a slowly moving point over the horizon, possibly a ship on the River. Am holding position outside enemy firing range after initial encounter – twelve enemy ships confirmed destroyed, five disabled. One light cruiser, the Rayfish, holed by mines and withdrawing from action. Otherwise no losses.”

“Ouch!” Said Rat, grimacing “It looks as if the Chief’s more important than we thought. If those “specialised” ships are what I think they are, and if he gets there with those rabbits, we’re all sunk. Listen...” And told them something of what the “Great Plan” really meant.

There was over a minute’s shocked silence as the enormity of it sunk in, while Rat swiveled the aerials to find the Pirates’ signals.

“Captain Krendall to Number One,” snarled the loudspeakers, “Those filthy Imperials have stove in fourteen of our boats and are lying outside the range of our cannon. Only the shore batteries are getting hits, and those just bounce off the armour. And what’s more, their dreadnoughts and super-dreadnoughts are coming at us as fast as they can shovel Radium into the converters. If you can’t put those shield-ships to work, I ‘umbly suggest you go talk to the sharks and take that so-called “Grand Plan” of yours with you!”

“This is Number One speaking,” said a smooth, cold voice that immediately silenced the Pirate captain “do not deceive yourself that your – temporary – rank will save you from the usual penalty for insubordination after the victory. As to the battle, you have sufficient resources against the forces facing you. I shall have time to complete my work. And then, let the Imperials come! But as to the shield-ships – they are to be used when and only when the enemy close to four kilometres. That is my order, and I will call up you-know-who aboard any ship that breaks it. You will carry out your orders, exactly as the Plan dictates. Remember this if you value your hide – the only thing forbidden is failure!”

From the leading barge the Chief directed the battle ahead with coldly calculating skill. Over the horizon the first traces of the great clash were visible: brilliant flashes of light reflected off the clouds as ship after ship fell victim to the aerial torpedoes of the Imperial Mariners, homing in at sea level with their duodecanol warheads primed. (*)

Briefly he considered ways to prolong the battle and give himself more time. His laboratory ships he ordered upstream until they were right at the edge of the suitable area; the centre of the fleet he ordered back upstream so the line formed a V that would catch any attacker in a deadly crossfire. Frowning as he received further reports, he dispersed the screen-ships into a loose formation, making them a harder target. For the long-range weapons of the super-dreadnoughts were starting to find the range. Several miles above the fleet there would be a flash that would signal the end of several vessels. For the flash was the splitting of thirty-inch shells as they entered the denser part of the atmosphere, releasing five sleek shapes to fall free, invisible as they extended steering fins and accelerated down towards the target fleet. At a height of two miles there would be seen a shower of brilliant white streaks in the night sky, and pirates would dive overboard and swim madly for shore in the final seconds before the missiles homed in on their ships, rocket motors screaming before armour-piercing tips crashed through the decks into fuel tanks and powder magazines.

Otter, hanging onto the trailing rope in the darkness, tried desperately to work out what was happening. The “Chief” of the Woodlanders was doing far more than kidnapping, he knew, but what the rabbits were intended for, he was at a loss to guess. Had he known, he would have acted, far, far sooner.

The Chief turned to the radio again. “All ships, drop mines and retreat to block the estuary, screen ships forwards and prepared to switch on at my order.”

A worried voice crackled back. “South Group here. How are we supposed to leave, with the exits mined?”

“Here’s the plan.” The Chief smiles, his tail twitching. He had arranged the frequencies so that the two groups could not talk to each other, only to himself. “We will leave through a channel left by North Group, over and out.” He keyed the other switch and gave North Group exactly the equivalent instructions.

Turning to his Wolverine pilot, the Chief’s expression was a mask of sardonic amusement. “That should keep the Imperials busy fishing mines for awhile. And as for those Pirate scum – I won’t need them afterwards, and they’ll fight to the last rather than surrender, if their escape’s blocked.”

“We’ll have to increase speed to make the schedule,” the pilot told him “The water’s rougher than I expected – and the tide’s about to turn.”

The Chief thought of the answer in a flash, and nodded. He only had time now to try and convert a dozen or so rabbits, so why not lighten the cargo a little? “Bring up six rabbits,” he ordered “The youngest ones, they’re least use. And find something you can use as a plank for them to walk.”

“Yessir!” Wolverine teeth gleamed in a savage grin, and he returned in a few minutes herding six frightened Woodland rabbits “Shall I make them hop now?”

“Yes, and bring up more of the surplus creatures. We have plenty.”

At this, Otter acted. Hurling silently out of the water like a leaping salmon, he glided down the shadowy deck, grabbed the fat wolverine from behind and, stifling the desperate cry before it emerged, threw himself and his foe over the side with an echoing splash.

“Ah, two at once,” noted the Chief, his sharp ears flicking as he stared ahead, intent only on the screen and the battle ahead. “Time for another, though.”

“Yes. You!” A voice came from behind him in a tone that made the Chief spin round on instant reflexes.

It was Otter, moving steadily along the deck, motioning the rabbits to stay clear with one hand while his eyes, glowing with a clean blue-white light, fixed on the Chief and bore him down that no mere otter possessed.

The Chief sprang, striking with a deadly speed that would have taken the head off any animal, no matter how skilled. But Otter was now far faster and stronger than his own mind and body – it was not the Otter of quiet life dodging the blow, but the hour’s champion of a cause aeons old. He ducked and butted the Chief under the jaw with a blow that should have thrown him clear across the deck. But the Chief had also asked for help and received it, and a blood-red glare shone from his eyes as he sprang back into the fray.

(*) Oh dear, oh dear. Some time half-way through writing this tale I discovered the cosmic scale space-opera works of E.E. “Doc” Smith, and was immediately enthralled. I still think it’s a fine series of ripping yarns, some of it almost contemporary with the original *Wind In The Willows*. His first book, “*The Skylark Of Space*” was © 1913, and has some very notable spacecraft. When you’ve got anti-gravity going, you needn’t worry about using lightweight materials and can put enough metres of nickel-steel armour on starships to take a hit from a brick-sized meteor at half light-speed.

Anyway, “Doc” was the first master of the really cosmic-scale sci-fi. The sort of “We’ll let the first 12 billion units of the enemy fleet get into that galaxy, then blow the whole thing up!” enthusiastic scale. Just something to bear in mind when reading this bit ... I got rather carried away at the time, and let my first space-opera crush run riot...

The two stood crouched for an instant and turned into blurs of vicious motion, chops and kicks landing with no thought of defence, palm-edges slamming into soft spots and joints ineffectually, the deck ringing with blows as they stamped their feet and threw each other expertly, only to spring back seemingly unhurt. Now and then a blow was deflected against the wheelhouse wall; stout oak shattered like matchwood and the paw would swing back faster than the eye could follow.

Three minutes later, “Otter” caught an instant’s gap as the Chief bounced off the deck and leaped high in the air to place a two-footed kick. As he came down where Otter’s head had been a millisecond before, Otter with the speed of a striking snake swung a two-knuckle punch to the weak spot behind the polecat’s jaw. Before he could recover Otter grabbed him in a bear-hug, and together they toppled backwards to disappear with a splash into the icy River.

“Things aren’t looking too good,” a worried Rat confessed, looking at the pebbles Mole and Toad were moving on a chart of the estuary they had found; white pebbles for the Imperials, red ones that moved when the pirates’ reports came in. He pressed the preset button tuned to the Imperials, and discovered that the situation was getting worse.

“... have retreated, laying mines. Their front line is now the five modern vessels, seemingly unarmed but resisting all fire our light cruisers can bear ... wait a moment! They are extending booms, nets of parallel bars that touch the ship next in the line, blocking the channel from shore to shore.” There was a sudden pause, where the distant Captain talked excitedly with someone just out of hearing before returning to the microphone. “Lieutenant-Captain Hengest, reporting to command. I see what they do, Sirs – they are generating a zone where our aerial torpedoes explode, fifty fathoms in front of them – shells are just turning white-hot and detonating, before they get anywhere near. Sirs, the River behind them is completely shielded from us!”

There was a long pause on all channels, except for the Pirates congratulating each other that the “shield-ships” were doing their jobs.

Ah yes, those “Shield-ships”, the first and only time they were used in the age-long battle between the mortal champions of the Olympians and those of their foes! Every bar was a magnet of huge power, its field flickering with unguessable power hundreds of times a second. The big ships were little more than floating generators to feed the magnets, with engines powerful enough to get them in position and armour enough to protect them till the screens switched on. Any piece of metal entering that swirling storm of energy heated up, the faster the hotter. Torpedo warheads heated until their explosives detonated, while fast solid steel shot melted, boiled and flashed into vapour long before it touched the ship!

But the Imperial Mariners knew of the idea, although they had always thought it unworkable. Radio waves bounced around the world, and in minutes they had dozens of the finest brains cracking the problem like termites riddling a piece of timber – soon it was sure to fall.

“Imperial group Epsilon,” came a voice some half hour later, “Now in range of our Dreadnought’s main guns. Proceeding to fire over the shield, at position of enemy fleet centre. Over.”

In the estuary, night was turning into day as the pirates charged out to the shields which were turned off to let them fire, then back to cover their retreat. One of the Imperial cruisers hit a floating mine which ripped the screws and rudder off, leaving it sinking helplessly. But it would not go unavenged for long. When the reports from the scientists came back predicting a weak spot in the shield, the rest of the fleet turned the long barrels of their machine-cannon at the top bar of the middle ship, and fired. Seven ships hurled an almost solid fan of heavy shells, concentrating on just one particular spot. The screens were not designed to handle the impact of fourteen six-inch shells arriving every second, and instead of scattering the maelstrom of blinding, swirling ionised gas it trapped it, letting it grow like a sun to cast long black shadows behind the screen-ships. Flaring tongues of vaporised metal lashed out as pressure grew in the magnetic “Bottle”, nearer the supercooled magnets with every second as more steel flew in to feed it and more power went to heat it.

Suddenly the white fireball flashed green as the copper coils of the magnets flashed out of existence. Huge currents arced across the gap, and the combined firepower of seven imperial cruisers was suddenly hitting bare metal, with results better imagined than described.

From twenty kilometres up the river, Otter was dazzled as the sky lit up and battle closed with five columns of brilliantly glowing steam rising where the shield-ships had been. The light cruisers surged forward at full power to meet the pirates at close range, armour on both sides sparking brilliantly as shot and shell bounced off. And then the super-dreadnoughts moved in, flattening the heavy concrete forts on shore and the underground power rooms. The commander of the South bank fort, seeing all was lost, threw every switch to overload and poured every scrap of power left through the transmission beam, straight at the bows of the nearest super-dreadnought.

That hellish beam burned through the metre of steel and ceramic armour of the “Stonefish” like a white hot rod through wax, cutting right into the engine-room with its Radium converter already at emergency setting. For an instant the ship was lit up like a flash-bulb from within – and then it was gone, in a rising cloud of gas and metal vapour that could be heard at Toad Hall. Before the cloud had cooled to red heat, every tube, cannon and launcher in the fleet swung towards the shore stations, only stopping when they were reduced to bubbling volcanoes a hundred yards across. And as the laboratory ships upstream were returned to their isolated atoms – the battle was well and truly over.

The next day, Mole and Toad were cleaning up the debris from the fight that littered Toad Hall. Rat was just finishing his breakfast when Badger walked in from the terrace, shepherding a dozen or so ferrets at bayonet-point.

“This lot came over to apologise, and to bury the hatchet,” he said cheerfully. “Apparently it was nothing to do with them, all the Chief’s fault, and so on. The usual story. Anyway, Mole, they can help tidy up the mess and put things straight again, the way they ought to be.”

As the ferrets were set to work, a steady engine-note wafted in on the breeze from the River.

“Otter!” cried Rat joyously, vaulting over the balcony with his friends following across the frost-sparkling fields down to the willow-lined bank to welcome home their friend.

It was Otter, standing on the square prow of a landing craft whose gun turrets swung away from Toad Hall as the four figures were spotted waving on the bank. Otter jumped down into the shallows as the hinged prow splashed down to make a ramp to dry land for a hundred and seventy rabbits to stream out in a living tide, shouting with joy to be home and free at last.

The landing-craft was made fast against the boathouse wall, and with Otter came a lone Imperial Officer, one Voltenorr whom Rat had spoken with in the wider world, under the roots of Olympus.

It was a strange meeting, Otter almost dancing off with Mole, Toad and Badger as they each told how the other had done so well (except for Toad, who was rapidly convincing himself that he could have done better alone.) But as Rat met the “Para-Science Officer”, he could see that the owl’s face was gloomy.

“What’s the matter?” rat asked him “You’ve won, haven’t you? Sent half the pirates in the Atlantic to Davy Jones’ locker, and their Chief with them? What more could you hope for?”

“Yes, we’ve done all that, and more,” the owl sighed, “and won ourselves a breathing-space – but I’m afraid that’s all it may turn out to be. Weissshut was more important than you think, Rat – it had to be him who worked on those rabbits, because only he could do the transformation. But his secret wasn’t lost with him.” He pulled out a grey envelope from his pocket, labeled neatly in waterproof ink “To the Enemy.”

Voltenorr raised an eyebrow. “We found this in what was left of his jacket. You have to credit him, he really did think of almost everything. He never shared the power his knowledge gave him – but he left a copy of his book for his side to find. They’ll be looking for it, you can be very sure.”

Rat looked ill. “So – what can we do?” He asked.

Voltenorr shrugged. “Search,” he said “Although there’s not much chance, he may have posted it to China for all we know. The crew of this craft are all foxes, hand-picked for this job – if they can’t find it, nobody can.” He did not mention the other part of his orders – that he was to assume that it was hidden in Toad Hall and, if it had not been in friendly paws, to flatten the place.

At a blast of his whistle six foxes slipped ashore and began to comb the grounds thoroughly – all the time closing in on Toad Hall.

That night there was a banquet, a feast on the Chief’s choicest provisions to celebrate his downfall. Rat was pushed, protesting, to the head of the table, and forcibly sat down in the place of honour. Voltenorr was there with his crew, who sat down glumly to eat without having found a trace of the Chief’s papers in the grounds or the house.

Toad, as host, was called on to give the toasts, which he did almost modestly under Badger’s watchful eye.

“First,” he said, “to the great victory we all share in, and to the brave animals – and Toads – whose valor made it possible. Wassail!” The guests all raised their cups at the ancient toast.

“Secondly,” he went on, “To the Rat, without whom the Imperial Mariners would never have tracked down in time the infamous Weissshut, enemy of such sacred rights as freedom – and private property,” he could not resist adding under his breath. “Wassail!”

“And thirdly,” he finished, “to the one who planned our victory, who loves and cares for this peaceful land of wind and water, wine and willows – to Him! Wassail!”

As the company rose, drained their glasses and sat down to eat, Mole suddenly remembered something. Timidly, awkwardly but with the simple grace of an animal, he went down the table where Voltenorr and his crew were sitting, picking glumly at the excellent food as they tried to work out what would be the first sign of Weissshut’s successors having the book – for they would search till they found it.

“Is this what you’re looking for?” Mole asked shyly, fishing around in his pocket and pulling out a faded sheaf of grey papers, “I found it when we were in the secret room behind the paneling, but then with the fight and everything I quite forgot about it.”

Voltenorr took the papers with trembling wingtips, unfolding them to reveal clocks of closely spaced writing and symbols chemical, mathematical and magical which he shuddered to read.

“This is it.” He said hollowly, staring at Mole with awe and amazement “Mole, my dear fellow, you’ve just done what stalled the entire Imperial Fleet and every animal of our side around the world!” Then Voltenorr’s wonder turned to joy, like the flicking of a switch.

“Yippee!” He hooted, leaping up onto the table “Do you realise what this means? You’re safe! It could take a thousand years before anyone finds this accursed secret again!”

The feast flared into an outburst of cheering and celebration that burned well into the dawn. On the stroke of midnight the papers were flung into the roaring fire, to blaze in seconds into harmless, unreadable grey ash carried away on the wind.

As dawn broke late in the December skies, Rat drew Voltenorr to one side after the others were asleep. “You remember you told me you needed a volunteer for our side to win, once and for all?” He asked, “but you can’t ask anyone?”

“That’s right, but there’s no hurry now,” Voltenorr smiled, all the gloom in his face and voice gone now “but someday we’ll have to start looking for one.”

“Don’t,” the Rat told him “because I’ll be around when you want me. Someday.”

And afterwards? The five Riverland animals settled down once more to their former lives, so rudely broken in upon. And yet, having seen and been part of the wider world for a time, they found out their grass truly was greener, their skies the clearest and that their River, their own River, meant more to them than it had ever done.

Even so, from time to time, especially when the swallows were calling him and the leaves losing their freshness, Rat would disappear from the fields and woods and not be seen for many months. But he would always return to sit with his friends before the fireside, resting while the hard frost bit the land and the Sea churned in its winter storms.

“You know, Mole,” he yawned one night as he sat with his paws steaming, just in from the rain and darkness outside, “as I always say – there’s nothing, just Nothing like simply ... messing ... around ... in ... boats...”

But there was no reply, for the mole, too, was snoring gently in the warm firelight.

The End - finished September 1981

.....
And there you have it. My first story of its kind, rather a mixture. If I was doing such a tale today, I’d have less of the inappropriate technology – I have my own series that are based on such things, without dragging Rat and Mole into it. But the whole concept was based on a promise of Rat emerging into a wider world, which was frustrated in the book. I thought it was right that he should get the chance, and one rainy evening decided I could do something about that.

I might have revised the tale over the years. Changed the names and characters slightly, established a “legitimate” start rather than what some folk would see as a hijacking. I might have re-cast it as a sequel starting the next year – which would have avoided re-telling basically the same events on the Toad Hall plot line, and giving me more freedom to work in. Other writers have certainly done sequels that diverged a considerable way from the first book!

But I preferred to leave it as it is – warts and all. If nothing else, the bits that I cringe at reading now can remind me that I’ve hopefully learned something from it – and that’s always worthwhile. So I dedicate it to Rat and Mole and the rest – other folk might have done more for them, but I gave it my very best shot.

Simon Barber, 2002 A.D.