

# Otter Gets the Mail

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March 16, 2023\*

‘Hullo!’ It was Raccoon, stopping atop the crooked little bridge, one of three, that ran from the Crossing to the southern bank. Clutching something of a parcel wrapped in milky white parchment eagerly under his arm, Raccoon waved brightly, his characteristic flat cap in paw.

‘Hullo!’ cried Otter back. He was just about to pour the tea, but he set the kettle down for now and, brushing his paws quickly against the apron, made for the door. It was a brilliant morning: cloudless and optimistically blue—the kind of day that grants the belief that even the sunshine is a close friend, come to rest gently on one’s shoulder. A soft breeze came over the Downs from the northeast and swept the willow boughs into gentle dance, rippling across the Creek and swirling pleasantly through the open window, and the greenery waved in reflection upon the water’s surface. It was, in other words, just the right kind of Sunday morning.

Raccoon came over the water now to Otter’s yard, which was, embarrassingly, quite long overdue a proper trimming. The cold had been surprisingly tame this year, and the brush outside the hole had grown feverishly despite the winter.

‘Won’t you come in?’ Otter called as he strode across the cobble path. ‘I was just about to pour the tea, of the buckwheat kind, and have breakfast. Fried fish!’ It was his preferred morning meal on Sundays, when he felt it permissible to treat himself. He liked it best with toast and butter, which was, of course, not really butter but rather like it, for the County had no trade relations with any borough of cows, and Otter, for one, had certainly never even heard of the poor beasts.

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\*Last updated May 15, 2024.

‘Oh, thank you,’ Raccoon said, shaking his head, ‘but I am due at the old hole soon.’

‘Coming back from the Schoolhouse, is that right?’ Otter strove a guess, and the raccoon nodded.

‘Quite right, but a stop at the Post just after,’ he clarified, grinning widely. It was the kind of expression that told Otter—and any other fellow who made Raccoon’s acquaintance, for that matter—all that he needed to know.

‘*Elementary Lattice Theory*,’ pronounced the lecturer proudly, holding up the parcel. Closer now, Otter could see that it was in about the same dimensions as his own beloved *Definitive Bracken-speak Grammar*. ‘I had a colleague in Yonder-county—in Bocton down along the River, if you know it—he managed to secure a copy and mail it over last Harvest. It should have arrived by Wintertide, but you know how the post is these days: terribly inconsistent, and no doubt still recovering from the flood of work piled up from the strike late Summer. In any case, a notice came at last through the post yesterday, so I went to pick it up first thing in the morning after teaching duties.’

Otter wrinkled his brow. ‘Lattice theory—what is that? A manual for *rigorously* building thatched sheds?’ He emphasized *rigorously* in a facetious manner, for it was a word that the mathematician loved to apply.

Raccoon chuckled. ‘You know I’m hardly up for that sort of thing. It’s, well, how might I explain it? It’s concerned with how we *order* things, you know, how a tray of two cups of tea has more than one with only a single cup.’

‘More, but certainly not enough,’ Otter added. He thought back to his tea, now growing cold on the table.

‘Naturally. But such an example is, of course, not something for which you’d need an entire volume to explain, I’m sure. In any case you can really define notions of *order* for other things, more abstract ones, like an inclusion relation on sets, if you will.’ He was getting rather excited now. ‘It turns out that this study of *order* in general, *order theory*, that is, and in which a *lattice* is a kind of structure on ordered objects, can give us brilliant tools to reason about all sorts of mathematics—modelling logic, for instance!’

If he had been lost before—which was in fact the case since the word ‘abstract’ had been uttered—Otter was now groping the darkest groves of

the Wood. He was, as a rule, not the brightest in numbers, and certainly not when it came to the abstract nonsense in which Raccoon seemed to delight. He much preferred languages, which he could hear and speak himself, and therefore understand—better, at least, than a vague sense of ‘objects’ floating about in his head. *There* was an order, in subject matter, he supposed.

‘Anyways, I will be heading back to the hole now, where I suspect lunch is waiting—and turning unhappily cold while doing it.’

‘No doubt I won’t be seeing you for the remainder of the week?’ Otter quipped. ‘Nor the next, perhaps. I worry for your students, too. Will they be coming into the Schoolroom-at-Barren tomorrow?’

They laughed. ‘Oh, I suppose we shall see. Though one of the students, the son of—who was it again? The Foremole’s younger one, I think. He has also been on something of a wait for this old tome a while. If the teaching duties are inadequate to drag me out of the study, perhaps that will. And supper, of course,’ he added thoughtfully.

‘Oh, I had nearly forgotten,’ he exclaimed just as he began to turn east. ‘I saw something in your box at the Post today. A great big white envelope, alarmingly important it seemed, mind you. There was a seal, even, in an expensive-looking mahogany, though I didn’t recognize the design. Were you expecting anything?’

Otter frowned. True, it was of no question that he was behind in his correspondences: the most intimidating stack of envelopes grew larger by the day at the foot of his desk, despite, that is, a furious quantity of letter-writing each morning. Soon, they would tower even above the plants, becoming a pyre of mockery to the woodland Spirits, a true testament to civilization—or rather the absurdity of it.

But he could not recall anything that would merit something of an extravagance as that, unless some far relation was at last well and truly fed up with his slothfulness and could find no better way by which to call his attention. Otter loved languages, and writing, of course, but writing *letters* was something for which he had only a deteriorating fondness. It was an ill loop, for the mail accumulated endlessly because of his distaste for it, and he detested it all the more because of the Parchment Mound. No doubt there would be more peace on earth, he thought, if only he possessed less good will.

‘I’m not very sure,’ he admitted, shrugging. ‘Well, I suppose I shall

find out what it is all about when the post is delivered in the afternoon.'

'Aye, but the post doesn't come today, Otter,' reminded Raccoon. 'It's Sunday.' Indeed. It seemed as though he had not yet adjusted to that fact, despite having resided in Rear-county for nearly nine months now. Back in Mossbeam, anyway, the Office did not cease their activities, even the delivery ones, on any day of the week. 'And they're off tomorrow, too, have you heard? And the next.'

'Really,' Otter exclaimed, rather taken aback. 'Three days without post? Surely that's a sign of the end-times. Clearest one that could be made, I reckon.'

'Squirrel's son is down with something, I heard. A fever perhaps,' Raccoon shrugged. 'And there's no one else willing to take the job, it seems.'

'Well,' Otter cried, feigning indignity, 'surely he could just perform his rounds quickly between his bouts of coughing and relentless sniffing? I can sympathize, of course, but let us be practical: sympathy may only extend so far, and certainly not beyond that wholly uncrossable border into where my post is concerned. The mail must go on, after all!' He waved his paws wildly, and Raccoon let out an audible snort.

'The solution is obvious, Otter: there is nought else to do but to move back up north, where I suspect the service never ceases, even on holidays.'

'My cousins might suppose I'd gained some sense back at that!' Otter huffed. 'But that's a pity, yes, he'll have my best wishes, the young Squirrel, that is. I suppose if the letter seems that important, I'll go to the Office and fetch it after breakfast and tea. For once I feel quite overdue a stroll, anyway. The mail can do that to folk, you know.'

Raccoon nodded. 'Finally getting out of the old hole, eh? Well, good talking to you, Otter, I must be going now. And a fine morning it is!' He placed the hat back upon his furry head. 'Good morning!' he declared, and turned and went away east by the Creek-road. The raccoon lived several furlongs down, closer to the Barrowdene, which laid somewhat southwest. It was a strange name for the flatest region of the County—Near, Rear, or Yonder—though Otter supposed that if you added the two halves, together they gave something of a flat-land.

When Raccoon had finally disappeared around the bend, behind a line of maples, Otter suddenly realized. Why, he had not the slightest idea where the Post Office was. Since arriving in Rear-county, he had, of course,

always relied on the postal delivery. He had not gone to Town-on-Creek even once; the farthest north he had ventured yet was to the Library—the sole public construction of real interest to the philologist, though it was only a regional branch, and thus rather lacking in comparison to the Mossbeam establishment. But there were means by which to order volumes from the neighboring towns, and that sufficed for now, at least.

Wandering back through the front door, Otter was not quite sure what to do. ‘Well, I shall go to Badger’s house,’ he decided at last, ‘for surely he will know the way.’ He was truly hungry now, and he poured the tea and had his fish, which was getting dangerously cold—but delicious yet. Then, after tidying up the kitchen and shutting tight the windows, Otter headed out again, locking the door behind him. It was a habit left-over from when he lived in Near-county, and the southern folk all thought him peculiar for it.

Badger lived slightly northeast, just south of the copse of Elder Willows that concealed the Wood. The two forests had been standing long before even the oldest tribes of badgers had followed the River up west, crossed the Craggs and settled about Brocshire. That was a region in the North-riding, which comprised, quite naturally, the part of the County north of the Hulls. But they had wound about Rear-county on their journey, and some of the families had taken such a liking to the Willows and surrounding lands that they did not continue north with their kin. It was said that Badger descended of those folk, though no one really knew much for sure, and the farthest back the eldest residents could recall, anyway, was to the time of Badger’s grandfather, Brock.

It was straightforward to follow the Creek upstream to get there, and it was one of the few places farther than a few minutes’ swim from his hole that Otter frequented. The old fellow sat under the Willow outside his home, a house proper, built of hardy timber by Brock in his youthful years. The tree was even younger—grown from a seedling of the Willows only a few decades prior. Its low-hanging boughs, freshly green and soft, stretched out over the Creek and cast glimmering shadows upon Badger’s striped visage and his newspaper.

‘Hullo!’ Otter called brightly as he swam up to the bank. Badger looked up, scowling. He peered across the paper toward Otter, examining him scrupulously.

‘An’ what need mid be zo girt an O’er do intrude on this mornin’ vull a-booked—no’ a brigh’om to zpeare, mind ye—by *The Rear Speer* an’ my coffee?’

‘Then you must have ample time,’ Otter observed, ‘for I see no coffee!’ He squinted about facetiously. Needless to say, there was no coffee in Badger’s cup, nor, for that matter, the entire County, for there were no coffee beans in that land. He had once heard the word and ever since applied it to his morning beverages. Today, it was an alias for barken-wa’er, that is, barley-water.

Badger chuckled, folding the paper shut. ‘In oder words, a darned fine day it is today! I do zay,’ he continued, leaning back against the lawn-chair so much that he threatened to teeter over, ‘iv hebn do be, it ough’ “o be the joys o” zunshine an’ breeze a-manifolded by a thousand thousands!’ He nodded. ‘Vorget eal an’ scops an’ thwose oder things “at volk do always clamber ’boot: give to I thease cheair an” Sunday peaper, an’ I be conten’ed.’

Otter had encountered the Old Badger-tongue in his studies, of course, and the dialect of Common<sup>1</sup> which had received its influence. It was in that speech which Badger spoke. He had known the fellow for many months now, but investigating the sound-changes and probing old texts remained an altogether different activity from conversing in it. He did not yet feel quite ready to reproduce it himself, either, though he had tried (to unfavorable results) in times past. Nonetheless, he had become rather adept at understanding it spoken.

‘Do you suppose they’ll have daily paper in the heavenly realm, too?’ he jested.

‘Doobtlez, an’ I reckon the ’pinion columns be no lez dorny. Hear this,’ he replied, flipping the newspaper open and pointing to the farthest column on the right. ‘Thease blwoke do think we ough’ “o eeld to the beavers” demands to le’ em ha’ vree rik in the Creek, to baeld their dams daftest. ’pparently the gullies ben’t ’nough vor the greedy buggers.’

‘Why,’ Otter grimaced, ‘I wouldn’t be able to get very far with that going on. Surely the Mayor won’t listen to such rubbish.’

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<sup>1</sup>In the usage of this ‘dialect’ I have attempted to imitate the Dorset dialect, though probably to little success in my novice efforts. To this effect, I am referencing *A grammar and glossary of the Dorset dialect with the history, outspreading, and bearings of south-western English*, by poet and author William Barnes, a native Dorset speaker.

‘No ye wouldn’t, ’at be vor sure. Not ’at ye dost go much to pleaces anyway,’ he guffawed. ‘Ye an’ Raccoon bwoth, always a-cooped up in yer studies, one mu’erin’ balderdash like a drunkar’ an’ the oder drae’in’ the school-boy’s sheapes. Why, zee the zunshine, let the air vill yer lungs, touch zome graz, vor goodness zeake!’

‘Why,’ Otter protested, ‘I happen to be rather outside at the moment. And touching quite a bit more nature than you are.’ He patted the water.

The old badger clapped his paws together and snorted. ‘An o’er in wa’er. Why, I be truly impressed by yer display. The zoologists muts get their paws on thease specimen. Zend a message to Town!’ They laughed.

‘I doobt he’ll a-sample. Luckily vor ye, the o’ers “ave a-vired back—in the zame column, mind ye—wi” a pieace o’ their own, saucy. All civilized, o’ course, “ddressin” the beavers “zir”, polite like. Wonderin’ a-whiles iv they do think wi’ their brains or wi’ their prodigious teeth, an’ “at no good e’er came vrom litsenin” to “big-toothed cha’er”. Their very words, mind ye. Ha! the *Daily Hebn* ough’ “o be rin by a den o” o’ers, I darezay.’ Otter smiled, amused, for it was still surprising that those otter-kin who always tried their hardest to remain inconspicuous in conversation had such cutting tongues once they held the pen.

‘With that kind of control of the press, they must have the most well-maintained waterways up there,’ he offered. Otter-folk across the Creek-side boroughs had long been petitioning the County to build additional water-friendly transit lanes in the more urban areas, but the Assembly was always slow on those sorts of things.

‘We mid only wait vor hebn-on-earth, eh?’ Badger laughed. He took another drink from his cup. ‘But “tis good to zee ye oot an” aboot, O’er. What be the occasions? A visit to the Bookroom?’

‘Not this time, actually.’ On another day, though, such a guess would have had high odds of being correct. ‘I’m off to the Post, it turns out. Raccoon came by earlier and said that there was something waiting in my box. A great big letter, and with a seal, too. And that the post isn’t to be delivered until Wednesday, it seems.’

Badger frowned. ‘An’ why’s ’at?’

‘Squirrel’s son came down with a fever or the likes, says Raccoon. And no one wants to pick up the delivery job, can you believe it?’

‘The young’uns nowadays,’ Badger snorted. ‘Var too spoiled like, I zay.

When I wer ov em spry woones I drew *The Rear* to porches an' hwomes vrom Town to the Crwoak. Ten miles on the cycle zeat every Sa'urday, "at's the truth. Perhaps they ough" "o get the beavers to do it, vor they've the time an" mind to go under pseudonym an' write pieaces in the daily peaper... But iv ye bist goin' to the Pwost, O'er, you ough' "o know ye bissen headin" the rait way.'

Otter gave out an embarrassed chuckle. 'I came here, actually, just to see if you might know. How to, that is, well, get there.'

Badger roared with laughter, and the Willow seemed to shake above him, startled. 'Ye don't know where the Pwost is?' He went on laughing a while before it subsided at last. 'Well, ye hast come to ax the rait fellor. I've a-lived "ere o'er winters vowr and vifty now, ye know, an" my vader Brock an' his vader Brock avore en, avore thease Willor wer a-come, all the way "til Brock of Chester, head o" the Willor Brocks. "Twer my moder who'd a-vlited on Badger 'stead o" Brock, ye know, an' I've eet to crack 'at woone. But noo we've the Badger line—ye've not eet a-met my zon Badger, I think.'

'But, the Pwost, aye,' he recalled, clearing his throat. 'Firts time's vree o' charge, o' course. Why, juts vollow back the way ye came an' teake the oder route o' the vork, agean the vlow, the woone "at goes up to thik Bookroom, then to the brashy-land. The dumbledores be about vli'erin", noo. Zimple like, really. Go lon' the Creek north "til there's anoder vork. 'at's when ye teake the rait zide an" go 'til ye can zee the banner backzide 'top the cnaep.'

'Thank you!' Otter exclaimed, and he meant it. 'Up from the Library and then right. Well, in that case I shall be going, I think, and I will see you again, Badger.'

'At last!' Badger feigned a sigh of relief. 'He leaves! Noo back to my coffee.' He lifted the cup to his mouth, but frowned. It was empty. 'I shall be needin' to fetch another zwig,' he declared as he stood up, and waved at Otter. 'Good-day!'

With that, they parted, and Otter made his way back southward, returning to the main Creek-way. He then swam northwest, in time passing by the Library, which stood quiet per the Sunday morning. Soon, he entered into the Reedy Stretch, where the flowering stems grew tall and dense, hugging the banks, and behind, a field of wildflowers bloomed fresh. The Creek was wider in this section, and the current ran slower. Overhead, the sun hung high, for it was nearing noontime.



It was then that Otter heard song from afar. Not of the harmonious kind choralized by nightingale, but a ruddy sort of melody, and unquestionably out-of-tune. Altogether it left Otter with little doubt as to whom the singer was.

*Hey ho! The wind der blow!  
Spread the standard, break the fresbet  
O'er bough an' under leaflet!  
Yo do! To the bow!  
Come seek the new an' find us valor  
Time has come for 'venture dour!*

It went on like that, full of pomp and grandeur. The *Mor-ben*, a rather small vessel and plain (though that was more than altogether compensated by the lyric), came into view around the bend, brushing precariously along the vegetation. Otter dipped under the surface and glid swiftly ahead as the singing grew louder and yet inflated.

*For even the Dragon der fear  
That be taken him Hoard so dear  
We warriors fearle—gah!*

The Captain cried as the *Mor-ben* floundered wildly amidst the waves, the mild surface broken suddenly by an upward burst of force, spraying Creek-water into a high arc above. The mast swung back and forth fiercely, dragging the sail into furious ripples. 'Hold 'er fast!' he called to his apprentice as he lurched starboard, wincing momentarily as he stumbled on his left foot. 'We be assailed!' he roared, brandishing his lute by the neck and coming rather close to reeling overboard. It was a mouse's roar, which was closer to a squeak in the ears of other folk.

His apprentice, of much younger stock—one could tell, of course, by the unrefined whiskers—ran frantically about, grasping in vain for the ropes. Regaining his footing, the Captain feigned a series of thrusts. They were fruitless against the ethereal mist. 'Quick, draw ye blade, young'un! Today the villains o' the County, so long havin' terrorized its goodly folk, "Il taste the might o' the crew o' the *Mor-'en*! May the skies an' grasses grant we courage grea'er than us foes, that at last we from this realm might

evil smite an' lastin' peace bring to all the Ridings an' Yonder-county beyond!

He swung the lute in an upward arc. 'Aye, the fight'll be a strivin' struggle o' strength an' wit, have li'le doubt, an' the Enemy have the time and guile. But that be no reason to fear! For the Spirit der work by us side an' through we, to works grea'er an' wholly inconceivable to the treachery o' the wicked!' A fire flared in his eyes. '*En gar*—oh, it be ye, O'er.'

It was all too much for him to bear, and Otter erupted in laughter. 'Dear me, Captain! What if I'd be something of a *real* river monster, or one of those great tentacled fiends you're always telling tales about? I'd have snapped the *Mor-ben* in two before you'd a chance to even begin the speech. A very good one, by the way. Wholly moving.'

Captain pondered this for a moment, then turned to his trainee, who dropped the ropes he had managed to reach and snapped into a bewildered salute. 'Ye hear that, me boy? It d' seem we've need of much preparation ere we be truly prepared to defeat the foes yon thither.'

'Aye, sir!' the little mouse tittered, stiffening his pose.

'Prime!' Captain smiled. 'Startin' tomorrow, we begin an hour early, "fore the break o" dawn! An' we'll go 'til dusk.'

The salute wavered as the mouse winced. 'But sir, Mother says I must be back by supper, which is always at half-past-five. Not even crumbs will be left by dark.'

The Captain frowned. 'Can not ye bid "er delay the meal by bu" an hour? One may not arrive at his next repast on the regular when in Quest, mind ye.'

'But sir,' exclaimed the apprentice, throwing up his paws. 'You know Mother! She won't have any of that.'

Captain sighed. 'Well, I... shall speak with her.' He turned back to Otter, drooping his lute in resignation. He cleared his throat. 'Ye've yet to meet my sister, have ye? Very thankful I'd be. But what brings ye here 'long the great wide Creek? Come to observe the Captain in action?' He broke into a ridiculous bow and shifted his hat.

'Why but of course, oh-splendid Captain,' Otter humored, grinning as he bowed in return. 'But really, I'm going to the Post Office, to pick up a letter that seemed rather important.'

'Oh ho ho!' the mouse chuckled. 'A Quest, mayhaps?' He brandished

his musical club again before strumming a discordant line.

The otter raised an eyebrow. 'I would probably doubt it. Surely then the letter would not have been in my box, but that of a worthy adventurer's. I'm not quite sure, truthfully, what it is exactly, but it seemed curious enough, from what Raccoon was saying. Enough, at least, to get me swimming all the way out here.'

Captain laughed, shrugging, 'It rather der deepen me doubts o' ye claims to le'er-loathin'. How can one know them own heart so li'le? "Tis that evident ye possess an adoration o" the craft secret yet indelible, for how it der draw ye so! Halfway to Town, matter o' fact!'

Otter waved his paw dismissively. 'No, no, don't be ridiculous, Captain. I assure you, not a soul in the County possesses a more fervent dislike for the entire enterprise as much as I do. It is solely out of necessity, that is all. And especially around the holidays, when it seems that everyone feels that they must write else their paws start itching horribly. Now it's alright, at least. I may still enjoy a few, through very few, mind you, of the pale hours of the morning.'

Captain laughed and shook his head. 'I can only take ye word for it. Truly, a sorry use of they wee hours. I der tell ye: they be the best for sailin' the Creek. Why, the low fog, the dew-dripen reed and flower, the whistlin' bough—an ideal time to set out on Quest, I daresay.'

'Worry not, Captain, few would doubt you on that front. But they are *also* the best hours for reading, I'm afraid.'

'Perhaps they be the best hours for readin',' he countered, 'but be readin' the best for they hours? That be sailin', in truth.'

'As how this argument must be the best for the fading morning,' grumbled the Captain's nephew suddenly, gazing up at the herd of grey clouds that had begun to march across the once pleasant blue canvas and push the sun into retreat. Soon, little sign of the chromatic morning was left in the overcast Rear-county.

'Surely it's not going to rain,' wondered Otter. He figured that he must have unwittingly made a plea for rain in some unknown language, for then the raindrops began to fall, and the Creek broke once again into a buzzing crowd of restless ripples. The young mouse scrambled under the tarp near the stern and peered out, frowning. Captain alone seemed undaunted. 'What der ye hidin' under there?' he turned and called sternly. 'The *Mor-*

'en fearn't a quaint drizzle, an' nor der we! Steel yeselves! There'll be storms a lake to this meagre puddle 'yond the County.'

Otter shrunk a little into the Creek to avoid the rain, rather unsuccessfully. 'Well, I think I must get going now, then,' he broke in, 'lest this rain turn for worse before I make it back home.'

The mouse nodded, shrugging. 'Fair 'nough.' He threw the lute back behind his back, and began to stroll back to the center of the vessel. 'Der let me know what it be, eh? The le'er, that be. 'specially if it be a Quest!'

'That I will,' Otter called, already shivering. A wind had picked up, too. 'Good-bye!'

'Aye, good-bye!' And, as quickly as they had met, they parted in the rain, Otter swimming again northwest while the *Mor-ben* steered opposite. Ere long, he came to a fork in the Creek, and the rain was yet pouring down, harsher even than before. He took the path of the right as Badger had instructed, going slightly northeast now. The Creek was wroth in the rain and only more so in this part, which wound into a dense forest of towering oaks and thrust through cramped bramble. Otter wondered at this, for it felt as though he were not nearing Town but straying from civilization, perhaps, though he hoped it was not the case, into the Wood. Soon, too, a mist began to settle on the surface of the water, and his vision became yet more obscured. The Creek grew murky. 'How pleasant the morning was!' he grumbled.

Even under the surface, he could see little ahead, and the sky seemed to turn ever dark. Otter sighed. 'And how will I know when I've arrived at the Post in this visibility? It is as the Lede's crossing into the Combe,' he ruminated, recalling the famous lines from *Priory*. In that most ancient and revered of the legends of ferret-folk, the band of exiles, ambushed by the owls of that wood amidst impenetrable fog, had fought fiercely through the Ancombe. Having finally broken the last line of trees, they waded the slippery river, which thenceforth was known as the Fleam, for the owls would not dare to cross it in pursuit, and they did not so much care to once the ferrets had left their protected grove. When the Lede, fewer in number than when they had come, reached the far bank and rested at that precipice, for the hill soon descended steeply into the Combe, the fog began to lift and unveil a sunset of brilliant red in the Far West, and between the crimson sky and blood-washed flow, they mourned for their lost brethren.

Shuddering, Otter dearly hoped that he was not in the midst of a reenactment of the episode. But it was due to such musing that he did not notice the gnarly root that was soon to be the target of a head-on collision. ‘Ouch!’ he yelped, surfacing hastily as he clutched his head. The fog had faded slightly now where he was, and Otter saw that he had reached something of a pond, where the Creek’s flow became easy, almost still, save for one opening in the flora where the water cascaded thin into a woodland brook. The rain yet beat down, though subdued, and coursed thick upon branches as if by aqueduct into a basin.

‘Well,’ Otter observed rather astutely, ‘this is certainly not the Post Office.’

He glanced about, surveying the shore, which seemed to draw a nearly perfect circle around the pond. Under the dense foliage that crowded aggressively about the oaken trunks, one could make out the pale gravel bank—but see little further into the darkness. He scanned east, and soon his eyes came to rest upon another’s. He froze, and swallowed. Bright, glistening circles they were, flashing out from the shadows. A roar burst through the rain, and Otter found that his legs would not obey him as a coat of angry brown emerged onto the edge of the water.

The grizzly beast extended its head, gashed and pitted and raw to the sight, towards him and sniffed cautiously. Its jaw fell slightly open, a slow, fizzling breath escaping from the jagged maw. It seemed to heave laboriously. At that moment, Otter felt that he must taste rather delicious, and he struggled to think how he might become less so, his heart sinking fearfully with each passing breath. Stepping forward again, the bear let out another growl, deep and harsh, as though he spoke in the notched tongue of the wolves, and the sounds of the forest seemed to cease in great dread.

At length the bear stayed his snuffing and, raising his head, looked vaguely out across the water, though not quite in Otter’s direction. ‘Hullo!’ he hollered cheerily, the sharpness altogether gone from his voice. All at once Otter felt his breath whistle out faintly, and he felt the strain in his bones, so tense he had just been. But he was yet hesitant and did not move, lest a splash be made.

‘Hullo,’ he called tentatively.

‘Hullo!’ the bear said again, in great joy, it seemed, that his greeting had been returned. ‘Hullo! I do not believe we have met, have we? Forgive

me if we have—my memory is no longer what is used to be.’

‘I do not think we have,’ Otter replied timidly. ‘I am rather new to these parts, and certainly to this pond, I am afraid.’

The bear was delighted. ‘A new face! Though I cannot see faces, really. But a new voice, that is for sure! A pleasure to meet you! Call me Arth, or Arthur. It is the first that is my real name, mind you, but folk do not seem to be very fond of monosyllabic ones, for some reason. Who, and—please pardon these old eyes—what are you?’

‘I go by Otter,’ Otter said, ‘and, as you might expect, I am an otter.’

Arthur roared with laughter. ‘Finally, someone with a bit of sense! An otter named Otter! Excellent!’ It seemed that his mirth had no end, and that did not help to put Otter at ease. ‘When I heard disturbances in the pond, I had thought that the Captain was come to visit. But the smell was rather different. Much less... mouse-like, shall I say,’ he remarked when the laughter had abated at last.

Otter was fairly surprised. ‘You know the Captain?’ he asked.

‘Why, yes. A small but boisterous one, the Captain. I have known him for years, well before even when he made that long journey into the East, to the great mountains yonder. He may have even reached the Sea on that side.’

‘Why, never has he spoken about such a journey,’ Otter wondered.

‘It was all in that little boat of his. A wee vessel. I should never be able to fit, mind you, but hardy and one that has seen a fair bit of the world about. What does he call it? I cannot remember now,’ he frowned. ‘Southeast long the Creek before it meets the River, and then winding that way. I can hardly recall the details anymore now, though he would never cease to discuss it many years ago. Then one day he stopped all of a sudden and since has never brought it up again! I have always wondered about that, though Arthur knows better than to ask. Then he stopped coming to visit at all for a time. But, happily, they have resumed recently. He brought back all sorts of gifts, you know, exotic things of lands afar. I liked best the jar of a rather strange variety of honey. The coffee was excellent, too, and the small baubles and mathoms and...’ The bear’s speech faded into a mumble, and he seemed to daze about, unsettled on his feet. ‘Much too small for my paws, anyway.’

Otter pondered over this. ‘Are you sure we speak of the same Captain?’

he issued, quite unprepared to suppose that the mouse was capable of such feats. He had always supposed that the Captain was simply a fellow of lively fancies, more of a comedian, or something in that realm, more than anything else. ‘Perhaps’, he ventured weakly, ‘there are two mice in Rear-county who call themselves Captain.’

Arthur shrugged. ‘The honey was just exquisite, you know. Altogether unlike the taste we have around here. There was a tad of bitterness, but the kind that fits. An overly sweet honey is for the young bears, and I am far gone beyond that. Something of a spice, I must guess, that really adds dimensions to the flavor. What a pity it was so little, though I tried to ration it. Yet it was gone in a week, and I have missed it ever since. Do tell the mouse to sail that way again soon, will you? I simply must have another sample.’

‘I shall certainly be curious to ask him about it,’ Otter said. ‘And I will put in a word. But,’ he quickly added before the bear could continue—and never end, it seemed—his discussion of the strange honey, ‘I must admit that I did not intend to come here, yet I found myself crashing into your oaks nonetheless. The rain and fog, you see. It has been excellent to make your acquaintance, of course, but might you know how to get back to the main Creek-way, by chance? I had come from the south, for I am in something a hurry to the Post Office, on errand.’ Now that the moments of danger had fully passed from his body, Otter felt cold anew, and it made him think of the fire at home and eager to be on his way back.

The bear rubbed his nose and sniffed twice. ‘Huh?’ He shrugged again. ‘Well, I doubt I may be of much service there. A great many winters since I last left the Wood. I mainly stick about the pond, in fact. But I recall the days when I trekked all about the County, you know, from the Barrowdene south to Boxwood and Trendelstone and Hlafeld and the like, then east over to the Hulls and North-riding.’

‘I am not sure that geography is—’ Otter began, but then thought it better to not say much. Arthur went on, evidently having heard nothing. ‘Have you seen the sun-spindles that bloom to the southeast, in that place they call the Swan-camp? Extraordinarily beautiful.’ Otter frowned, for he was rather sure the Swan-camp, a location of great significance in the otter-lore (with which he was of course intimately familiar), lay sharply northeast. But he only nodded. ‘I have yet to go there, though I would like to very

much.'

Arthur continued. 'In summer—'

'Forgive me,' Otter interjected, rather unable to hold himself back anymore, 'but I really must be going.' He was beginning to grow rather weary of all the swimming, and his stomach murmured a low rumble. The sun remained hidden above the clouds, but Otter supposed that the afternoon was swiftly slipping away.

Arthur smiled apologetically. 'I am sorry, it is a poor habit of mine. I seem to forget everything else once I begin to ramble. Yes, an errand, you said? I am afraid it may not be of much avail, but you may have taken a wrong turn to reach here.' He scratched his head as he struggled to remember. 'The two branches of the Creek do merge somewhere south of here, I believe. One comes through the Town, while the other passes through the Wood. Might you have taken the latter?' This was indeed the case, for Badger had rather forgotten to specify that it was the second right to be taken; it was common sense, after all, that one did not swim into the Wood without cause!

But this Otter knew not, and he wondered at the bear's words, half in doubt, half in fear of the Wood. 'Thank you, it might just be so,' he hurriedly said, nonetheless. 'Then, I shall get going. Good afternoon!'

'Alright, good-bye!' Arthur waved as Otter turned to swim toward the mouth of the pond. 'Do come visit again!' But Otter could not hear him under the surface. This was turning out to be a very stressful day, he thought, thoroughly irritated by the rain, the detour, and his empty stomach. His head still ached from the crash, too, and so he spared Arthur little thought at the time. It was rather unlike him to do so, and he would look back upon it unhappily the next day.

He swam west, out from the dense grove into an area of sparser forest, whose twisted trunks entwined eerily together, as though coarse threads in a crude weaving. The fog had lifted much now, the rain a mere sprinkling. By the sights, it seemed that there was no explanation other than that he had wandered into the Wood, and it shaped great anxiety in him. Learned though he was about many things, Otter knew little of its true nature and succumbed, still, in fear to the fables and old wives-tales that were known across the County. Nervously, he went faster, reaching the main Creek-way before long, where soon the familiar maples and willows dominated the



banks, and the earthy water became fresh.

Following the route that went upstream into Town, Otter began to feel lighter. The trees grew thinner, and houses lined the grassy slopes, docks jutting out into the water with their dangling nets and fishing tackle. Intermittent fences accompanied the Creek-road. But the streets appeared mostly empty, save for a few folk hurrying about under umbrella and a group of young shrews kicking ball in the mud. In due course, he spotted the Post Office, which stood on the western bank. It was unassuming and rather unidentifiable if not for the shabby banner that dangled from the overhanging roof: an envelope served the centerpiece in fading brown, above the letters REAR-COUNTY. Up from the dock and footpath that gave water access stood a bicycle rack, and there the Postal Cycle was set, subject to the elements for many winters over. Rusted, both seemed in danger of falling over momentarily.

Otter hoisted himself up from the Creek. Pushing through the water-side entrance, he was blasted by the stuffy air of the Office, trapped inside from the rain. It was empty, and Otter wondered, for folk bustled ever in and out of the Mossbeam Office, even on rainy holidays. 'Out for tea-time,' read the sign on the receptionist's desk. To the right, he spotted his name amid the mailbox shelves and, just as Raccoon had said, the great white letter was tucked therein. Retrieving it, he found that it was even larger than he had supposed, and a foreign-looking name of which he had never heard was engraved in the wax seal. Curiously, no return address had been given.

Otter was eager to return home at last, and, tucking the envelope best he could (a three-way fold, for he did not wish to crack the seal) into his pocket, he hurried out of the Office and began his journey home, high in hopes that his return would be rather shorter than his coming. The rain had now entirely ceased, and the clouds had dispersed slightly, allowing the rays of a sinking western sun to blink across Town and shimmer in the water. Happily, a pleasant, dewy after-rain scent filled Otter's nose.

He dove south, back by the Town Hall and past the children jovial at play. He swam back through the outskirts of Town and merged with the Wood-route, then into the Reedy Stretch and by the Library, where rosy-gold lights diffused warmly from the windows. At length he saw the Crossing in the distance, and it was nearly twilight when he reached his

hole. Otter was deathly hungry, so much so, in fact, that he forgot about the letter altogether! It remained in his pocket until after a hearty supper, and he resolved to have a second later to make up for the missing lunch.

Too weary to wash the tableware, Otter moved to start the study's hearth and roost in his preferred rocking chair. As his eyes wandered habitually over to that relentless heap of correspondence, he remembered it at last. 'Oh!' he exclaimed and fished it out. Why, it was rather soaked from the Creek! And his address had become a scarcely legible smudge. Gingerly breaking the seal, he slid out the crinkled letter, whose smeared lettering was difficult—but not yet beyond recognition.

*Dear Mr Otter*

*I have a matter of great import to discuss with you. As heir to the great Stoa family, with whom you are of course acquainted, I have a business venture of mutual benefit for which I believe I may trust your discreet assistance. To this end, I require from you only an advance of—*

Otter hurled the letter into the fire. He needed rest, he decided, and fell into deep sleep.