

OTTER GETS THE MAIL

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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 quietly on one’s shoulder. A soft breeze came over the Downs from the northeast and swept the willow boughs into a 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 in spite of 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 meal for Sunday mornings, when he felt it more permissible than usual to treat himself. He liked it best with toast and butter, which was, of course, not really butter but rather like it, for the

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County had no trade relations with any borough of cows, and Otter, for one, had certainly never even heard of the poor beasts.

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

‘Coming back from the School-house?’ Otter ventured, and the raccoon nodded.

‘Quite right, but a stop at the Post just after,’ he clarified. He began to grin 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 *Comprehensive Bracken-speak Grammar*. ‘I had a colleague in Yonder-county—in Bocton down about a hundred miles up the River, if you know it—he managed to locate a copy among acquaintances farther north 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 of last 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 garden trellises?’ He emphasized *rigorously* facetiously, for it was a word that, in his mind, the mathematician employed altogether too liberally.

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

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

‘Right. 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, certainly different kinds of numbers, or—and this is where it begins to get a little bit interesting—more abstract objects, 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 particular structure on ordered objects, can give us tools to reason about all sorts of mathematics—modelling propositional logic, for instance! Some years ago a fellow by the name of Hayton had devised a particular kind of distributive lattice—they are beginning to call them Hayton algebræ after him—which formalises a rigorous basis for the intuitionist school of thought, that is, of course, among, the philosophers of mathematics, a prominent constructivist position, Brewer at their head. I myself am half-convinced.’

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 very bright with numbers, and certainly not when it came to the abstract nonsense in which Raccoon seemed to delight. He much preferred the study of languages, which he could hear and speak himself, and therefore grasp by some natural instinct—far better, anyway, than a vague sense of ‘objects’ floating about in his head. Natural language was abstract in its own way, he would readily grant, but in a poetic, animated sense. For all the mathematicians’ talk of intuition, he could find nothing intuitive about it.

Now this Hayton, whose name was certainly a compound of ‘hay’ and ‘ton’, from which came ‘town’, must have been a rabbit, or perhaps even a horse, Otter supposed. It was difficult to imagine a horse engaging in mathematics at the blackboard.

Raccoon’s rapid speech trailed off, and he smiled apologetically. ‘Well, Otter, I will be heading back to the hole now, where I suspect my lunch and wife are waiting. Then, the entire afternoon is before me.’ He patted his parcel eagerly.

‘I suppose I won’t be seeing you for the remainder of the week?’ Otter laughed. ‘The entire month, perhaps. I worry for your students. Will they be coming tomorrow into a barren schoolroom?’

They laughed. ‘Oh, I suppose we’ll see. Though the Foremole’s younger one is nearly as keen as I am to see this tome. She said that she would like to come by in the morning to have a look.’

‘She’s really taken to the subject, hasn’t she? Yet she can hardly be bothered to glance for even a moment at the Molespeech books her mother implored me to lend to her.’

Raccoon nodded. ‘If teaching duties are inadequate to drag me out of

the study, perhaps that will. And my wife,' he added.

'Oh, I had nearly forgotten,' he exclaimed just as he began to turn east. 'I saw something in your box today. A great big white envelope, awfully important it seemed, mind you. There was a seal, even, in a rather lavish mahogany, though I didn't look too closely. 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. Somehow, his acquaintances and strangers had found his new address, and the flood of mail seemed at its highest tide, with no sign of waning. Soon, they would tower even above the potted plants, becoming a pyre of mockery to the woodland, a true testament to civilization—or the absurdity of it.

But he could not recall anything that would merit such extravagance, 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. He had wedding fatigue. Surely it was not a call to jury duty? He groaned at the thought. A question from a reader? Otter loved languages, and writing, of course, but writing *letters* was something for which he had only a deteriorating fondness. He wished to respond to each letter in earnestness and seriousness. Yet it took so much time! It was ill-fated, for the mail accumulated endlessly because of his avoidance of it, and he dreaded it all the more because of the Great Pyramid of Parchment. No doubt there would be more peace on earth, he thought, if only he possessed less good will.

'Well, I'm not sure,' he finally shrugged.

'Might it be another request from the publisher? Just recently a letter came from Press with the errata for my last article in *Annals*. It wasn't terribly long, thankfully.'

Otter furrowed his brow. 'As you might expect, even before moving here I was hardly halfway finished with the last book, and now I think I've misplaced some of the drafts. They're beneath all the letters, for all I know.'

'Ah, the one on lutrine phonology, or something like that.'

The philologist nodded. 'Sound changes throughout the late tribal period. It's terribly inconvenient, since many of the relevant manuscripts are scattered about Near-county. Now it takes over four weeks for a facsimile to be delivered. But what else can one do? The doctor was just about ready to

drag me by the tail down here himself. Hedgehogs can be oddly frightening sometimes, though you'd never have guessed it. But I have to admit that the warmth of the south has been thoroughly rejuvenating.'

Raccoon nodded sympathetically.

'Well, I suppose I shall find out what it's all about when the post comes in the afternoon.'

'But the post doesn't come today, Otter,' reminded the raccoon. 'It's Sunday.' Indeed. He had not yet adjusted to that fact, despite having resided in Rear-county for nearly nine months now. In Mossbeam, anyway, the Office did not cease their activities, even the delivery ones, even on most holidays. 'And they're off tomorrow, too, have you heard? And the next.'

'Really,' Otter said, 'three days without post? A sure sign of the end-times.'

'The younger Squirrel is down with something, I think. A fever maybe,' Raccoon shrugged. 'And there's no one else willing to take the job.'

'Well, 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 fiercely, and Raccoon let out an audible snort.

'The solution is clear, Otter. Forget your health and move back up north, where I suspect the service never ceases, should even the Great Acorn fall through the roof.'

'I daresay then the hedgehog would bring the Great Acorn down on my head. But that's a pity, yes, he'll have my best wishes, the young Squirrel, that is. I suppose if the letter seems important, I'll go to the Office and fetch it after breakfast and tea. For once I feel quite overdue a stroll, anyway.'

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 Barrow-dale, which laid somewhat southwest, stretching for several miles in all directions until the base of the Wide Hills. It was a strange name for the flattest region of the County—Near, Rear, or Yonder—but Otter delighted in the irony. Raccoon once remarked that if

one adds the two parts, flatland seems proper.

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 delivery. He had not gone into Town-on-Creek even once. He no doubt passed through it when he had first moved, but he had been asleep in the carriage. The farthest north he had ventured yet was to the Library, the sole public construction of real interest to the old scholar.

Wandering back through the front door, he was not quite sure what to do. ‘Well, I can go to Badger’s house,’ he thought at last, ‘for surely he’ll know the way.’ He was truly hungry now, and he poured the tea and had his fish, which was getting dangerously cold. It was still delicious. Then, he tidied up the kitchen and shut tight the windows and 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 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 Brochshire. 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 even the eldest residents could recall, in any case, was to the time of Badger’s great-grandfather, the careful and stalwart 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 and peered across the paper toward Otter, examining him scrupulously.

He scowled.

‘An’ what need mid be zo girt an’ important an O’er has t’ intrude on thease mornin’ vull a-booked—no’ a brigh’om to spare, mind thee—by *The Rear View* an’ my coffee?’

‘Then you must have ample time,’ Otter observed, squinting about, ‘for I see no coffee.’ 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 called his morning beverages so. 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 heabm 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 me thease ztool 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 which had received its influence. It was the latter 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 the past. Nonetheless, he had become rather adept at understanding it spoken.

‘I suppose they’ll have daily paper in the heavenly realm, too?’ he asked.

‘No doobt, an’ I reckon the ’pinions be no lez fine. Hear thease,’ Badger said, flipping the newspaper open and pointing to the farthest column on the right. ‘Thease blwokes do think we ough’ ’o give in to the beavers’ demands to le’m have free rik in the eastern inlets, to meake their dams. ’pparently the gullies ben’t enough vor the greedy buggers.’

‘Why,’ Otter frowned, ‘I wouldn’t be able to get very far with that going on.’

‘Noo thou woulden, thik be sure. Not thik thou dost go much to pleaces anyway,’ he guffawed. ‘Ye an’ Raccoon bwoth, always a-cooped up in your studies, one mu’ering balderdash alik’ a maggoty satepoll an’ the oder dra’in’ the school-boy’s sheapes. Why, zee the zunshine, let the air vill thy lungs, touch zome graz, vor goodness zeake!’

‘I happen to be rather outside at the moment. And touching somewhat

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 thy display. The Zoologists muts get their paws on thease specimen. Zend a message to Town!' They laughed.

'But th' Assemblers wouldeen a-sumple. Luckily vor thee, th' o'ers have a-vired back—in the zame peage, mind thee—wi' a pieace o' their own. All civilized, course, addressin' the beavers "sir", polite like. Wonderin' all the while iv they think wi' their brains or wi' their teeth, an' that no good e'er comes vrom litsenin' to "big-toothed cha'er". Ha! the *Daily Heabm* ough 'o be scratched by a den o' o'ers, I zay.'

Otter laughed, ever amused that it was precisely those otter-kin who tried their hardest to remain inconspicuous in their physical existence had such cutting tongues once they held the pen. His own great-aunt on his mother's side had carried herself timidly all those years in Old Lutarum. But when it came to local polity, her name had appeared in just about every edition of the weekly paper for three decades.

'With such control of the press, they must have the finest waterways up there,' Otter said. The otter-folk across the Creek-side boroughs had long been petitioning the Town to build additional water-friendly transit lanes in the more urban areas, but the Assembly was always slow to allocate funds for those sorts of things. In the last several years, a coalition of otters, ducks, and other water-reliant creatures had developed and become something of a substantial voting bloc. Otter still did not know much about them, but it seemed that they had already achieved startling success, having driven just over the requisite threshold an amendment to the Town Charter requiring Assembly meetings to take place at locations with suitable water access, in particular, some 'public square no more than ten yards of a shore of the Creek.'

Even its staunchest opponents would have admitted in private that the proposal was thorough-going, having included as many as thirty-four locations which satisfied, in addition to the existing conditions, this amphibious obligation. Many of the established land-folk, especially the old guard that represented the Willow Badgers, long accustomed to the traditional locus near to the western edge of the Willows, were not happy about a provision that forced them to travel twice as far to attend meetings. There had long been talks to splinter off the Willow community into its own proper borough, and the passage of the amendment had only intensified such debates.

Some of hardline brocks regarded Badger, an unexpected signatory to the original resolution, as somewhat turncoat. ‘Eh, le’m pelt all they want,’ he would say.

‘We mid only wait vor heabm-on-earth, eh?’ Badger laughed. He took another drink from his cup. ‘But tiz good to zee thee oot an’ aboot, O’er. What be the occeasion? The Book-room?’

‘No, 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?’

‘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 nooadays,’ Badger huffed, ‘spoiled, I zay. When I were ov ‘em spry woones I drew *The Rear* to porches an’ hwomes vrom Town to the Crwoak. Ten miles on the cycle zeat between dewbit an’ breakfast, thik be the truth. Mayhaps they ough’ ‘o get thwose beavers to do it, they’ve the time an’ mind to scratch zo many pieces in the peaper... But iv thou bist gwain to the Pwost, O’er, you ough’ ‘o know thou bisen heading the right 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 snorted with laughter, and the Willow seemed to shake above him, startled. ‘Thou don’t knwow where the Pwost be? Best if thy letter were a map!’ He went on laughing a while before it subsided at last. ‘Well, thou hast a-come to ax the right fellor. I’ve a-lived ‘ere over winters vovr and vifty now, thou knwow, an’ my vader Brock an’ his vader Brock avore en, avore thease Willor were a-come, all the way til Brock o’ Chester, ol’ patriarch o’ the Willor Brocks. Twer my moder who’d a-gone vor Badger ‘stead o’ Brock, thou knwow, an’ I’ve eet to crack thik woone. Gramfer didn’t like it. But noo we’ve the Badger line—thou haven’t eet a-met my zon Badger an’ his wife an’ zon Badger, I think. They be out gwain to zee their gramm’er in the south Brochshire over the winter. They’ll be back zoon enough, though.’

‘But, the Pwost, aye,’ he recalled, clearing his throat. ‘Firts time’s vree o’ charge, o’ course. Why, juts vollow back the way thou came an’ teake the oder route at the vork, agean the vlow, the woone which goes up to thik

Bookroom, then to the brashy-land. Simple alik'. The dumbledores be about vli'erin', noo. Go long the Creek north til there be anoder vork. Thik's when thou mussen teake the left zide but teake the right zide an' go til thou can zee the banner backzide atop the house. Speaking o' which, I ought 'o tell the young Veare, the young Weasel I mean, to get zome letters at the Pwost. Vrom th' Assembly, thou zee. Thou knwowest en, yea?'

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

'At last!' Badger feigned a sigh of relief. 'He goes! Noo back to my coffee.' He lifted the cup to his mouth, but frowned. It was empty. 'Another swig,' he grunted, standing 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 early Sunday afternoon. 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 just past noontime.

It was then that Otter heard song from afar. It was not of the harmonious kind choraed by nightingale, but a coarse 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 freshet
O'er bough an' under leaflet!
Yo do! To the bow!
Come seek the new an' find us valor
Time's a-come for 'venture's hour!*

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.

Woah oh! Wherefore thy fear?

*Face 'em foes with boundless spirit
Those fools, they won't eve—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. The mast swung back and forth violently, 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 his wispy whiskers that he had not yet reached the age of maturity—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, 'll 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!' The apprentice stumbled and fell as the boat lurched again.

The Captain 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 spirits der work by us side an' through we, to works grea'er an' wholly inconceivable to the treachery o' the wicked!' A fire gleamed in his eyes. '*En gar*—oh, it be ye, O'er.'

The otter laughed and fell back onto the water. 'I'm sorry. I'm too old for such antics. But what if I'd been something of a *real* river monster, or one of those great maritime devils 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 good one, by the way.'

The mouse seemed to ponder this for a moment, then turned to his trainee, who had somehow gotten up and reached the ropes at the mast. He dropped them 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!' The 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've to 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 might 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 her! She won't have any of that.'

He sighed. 'I... shall speak with her.' He turned back to Otter, shrugging. 'Ye've yet to meet my sister, have ye? 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 of course, O splendid Captain,' Otter said and 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, then strummed a discordant line. 'In me olden days I were called onto the Trail more than a few times by letter. Aye, the first time 'twere from this rich fellow came the idea to sail over to the Spiral Down with a couple o' other hardy explorers. A funny bloke he were, with a fancy for all things botanic. Now the name o' that place were true in two ways, Sir Philologist. Aye, 'twere this great broad hillock, like a hefty pie, and the river flows north to the base and then spirals upwards, can ye believe it, 'long the ridge of the till it finally finds nowhere to go at the top. But then it drops inside, down this long shaft. The smoothest chute ye'd ever seen, and upright, no way 'twere dug by a mole or some other ordinary fellow. Somethin' beyond natural. It goes to a grotto sort o' place far below, by me reckonin' even below the sea's level, full o' caverns and cavi'ies. Nearly lost we way in there, pickin' out weeds and herbs and brambles the likes o' which none o' we'd ne'er seen before. It's dark, aye, but brighter than ye'd think, as though there were a million holes and cracks in the ceilin' t' let in the light o' so many lamps. Like we're atop a mountain 'neath the stars an' the heav'ns 'stead o' rock and rubble. Now, how'd that letter go? "To The Most Honorable Sir Captain

Mouse” or somethin’ or other.’

His nephew frowned. ‘But how could you sail down a vertical shaft? That’s impossible!’

The Captain waved his paw dismissively. ‘Don’t mind he, he be goin’ through a phase o’, er, skepticism I guess ye’d call it. Ye know how it be with young’uns nowadays. Can’t trust a man just cause he be yer uncle. I’ve to tell ye another time how ‘twere we got inside. Ho ho, that be a story alright.’ The young mouse and Otter glanced at one another.

‘In any case,’ Otter said, ‘I doubt it’s much to do with questing. 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.’

The Captain laughed, shrugging, ‘It rather deepens me doubts o’ ye claims to loathin’ letters an’ the like. How can ye know yer own heart so little? It be evident that ye possess an adoration for the craft secret yet indelible, for how it draws ye so! Halfway to Town, in fact.’

Otter waved his paw dismissively. ‘Don’t be ridiculous, Captain. I assure you, not a soul in the whole County possesses a more fervent dislike for the entire enterprise as much as I do. It is solely out of necessity, that’s 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 can still enjoy a few, through very few, mind you, of the pale hours of the morning.’

‘I can only take ye word for it,’ the mouse laughed. ‘Truly, a sorry use of they wee hours. I tell ye: they be the best for sailin’ the Creek. Why, the low fog, the dew-dripp’d reed and flow’r, the whistlin’ bough—ain’t a better time to set out on a Quest, I daresay.’

‘Worry not, Captain, few would doubt you on that front. But they are *also* the best hours for reading.’

‘Perhaps they be the best hours for readin’, but be readin’ the best for they hours?’

‘And this argument must be the best for this 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 won’t rain,’ muttered Otter. In that he must have unwittingly made a plea for rain in some unknown tongue, 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. The Captain alone seemed undaunted. ‘What der ye hidin’ under there for?’ 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.’

‘Well, I wish you adventurers well in your braving the rain,’ he broke in, shrinking a little into the Creek to avoid the rain. It was rather unsuccessful. ‘I think I must get going now lest this drizzle 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! Come, lad! We voyage onward.’ 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 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 murky haze? It’s 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 forest Ulum. Having finally broken the last line of trees, they waded the slippery

river, which thenceforth was known as the Fleam, and the owls would not dare to cross it in pursuit nor did they care to once the ferrets had left their protected grove. Then 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, and 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 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 from a woodland brook. The rain yet beat down, though subdued, and coursed thick upon branches as if aqueducts stretching toward a basin. Somewhere, the low groaning of a toad resounded mournfully.

‘Well,’ Otter observed, ‘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. Indeed, it was terribly dark now under the trees. Below, their roots struck deep under the water into the steep banks. Their branches arched high above, as though reaching and grasping for each other in a tangled dome.

He scanned east, and his eyes came to rest upon another’s. He froze, and swallowed. Bright, glistening circles they were, flashing out from the shadows. A raggedy huffing echoed 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 the 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 sank fearfully with each passing moment. 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 the arrival of its terrible baron. Otter had never met a bear.

At length the bear stayed his snuffing and, raising his head, looked vaguely out across the water, though not quite in Otter's direction. 'Hello!' it hollered cheerily, the sharpness altogether gone from its breath. All at once Otter felt his breath whistle out faintly, and he felt a soreness in his bones, so tense he had been. But he was yet hesitant and did not move, lest he make a splash.

'Hullo,' he called tentatively.

'Hello!' the bear said again, in great joy, it seemed, that his greeting had been returned. 'Hello! I do not believe we have had the pleasure of meeting, have we? You must forgive me if we have—my memory is no longer what is used to be.'

'I do not think we have,' Otter said timidly. 'I am rather new to these parts, and certainly to this pond.'

The bear was delighted. 'Ah, a new face! Although I cannot see faces, in truth. But yours is a new voice, that is for sure. It is a pleasure to meet you. Please call me Arth, or Arthur. It is the first that is my real name, but folk do not seem to be very fond of monosyllabic ones. I still find that rather puzzling. But 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 boomed with laughter. 'At last, someone with a bit of sense! An otter named Otter! How excellent!' It seemed that his mirth had no end, yet that did not help to put Otter at ease. 'When I had heard disturbances in the pond, I had thought that the Captain had come to visit, but the scent was different. Rather less... mouse-like, in any case.'

'You know the Captain?' Otter asked, surprised.

'Why, yes. He is a small yet 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. I suppose he may have even reached the Sea on that side.'

'Really?'

'It was all with that lilliputian vessel of his. I should never be able to fit, of course, but it is hardy and one that has seen a fair bit of the world. What does he call it? I cannot remember now,' he frowned. 'I can now hardly

recall the details of the voyage, though he would never cease to ruminate upon it many years ago. One day he suddenly ceased and has subsequently never mentioned it, not even by the faintest allusion. Of course, I have always wondered about it. Then his visits discontinued altogether for a time... But, happily, they have resumed recently. In those days he carried back a diverse assortment of gifts, the exotic things of far-off lands. I relished most of all the jar of a rather strange variety of honey. The coffee was most excellent, too, and the quaint baubles and mathoms and...' The bear's speech trailed off into a mumble, and he seemed to daze about, unsettled on his feet. '... much too small for my paws, in any case.'

Otter pondered over this, quite unprepared to suppose that the mouse had really accomplished the sorts of feats to which he claimed. He had always supposed that the Captain was simply a fellow of lively fancies, a comedian, or something in that realm.

'Are you sure we speak of the same Captain?' he ventured weakly. 'I had thought him something of mere poet.'

Arthur shrugged. 'Mere poetry? Where are bricks without straw, and homes without bricks?'

He yawned. 'Now the honey was exquisite, altogether unlike the varieties one can find locally. In spite of the popular supposition that the ontology of bearhood must be inextricably tied to the vocation of honey connoisseurship, I must confess that I know very little about what goes into the substance's production and those qualities of environment which engender modulations in aroma and texture. The flowers must be different, I can only suppose. There was a hint of bitterness, but of the sort that blends superbly. An excessively sweet honey is for the tongues of cubs or ursae minorum, and I am far gone beyond that.' He let out a deep, sonorous laugh. 'What a pity it was a meagre portion. I attempted to ration it. Yet it was vanished in a week, and I have remained in want ever since. Do tell the mouse, if you see him, to sail that way again soon, will you? I simply must have another taste. O what warmth!'

Now that the moments of danger seemed to have passed, Otter felt cold anew, and it made him think of his own fireplace.

'I will 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 conclude, it seemed—his meditations on foreign honey, 'I must admit that

I did not intend to come here, yet I found myself crashing into your oaks nonetheless. The rain and the 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 came from the south, since I am in something a hurry to the Post Office, on errand.'

Arthur rubbed his nose and sniffed twice. 'Hm?' He smiled apologetically. 'I am sorry, but I doubt I may be of much service there. It has been a great many winters since I last left the woodland. I stay primarily around the pond, in fact. But I can still recall the days when I roamed about all the County, from the Barrow-dale 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 the bear 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? How extraordinarily beautiful!' Otter frowned, rather sure that 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, shivering. 'I have yet to go there, though I would like to very much.'

'In summertime--'

'Forgive me,' Otter interjected, '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 apologised again. 'I am sorry, it is a poor habit of mine. I am easily carried away, and all else is soon forgotten. Ah yes, an errand, is that right? I am afraid it may not be of much avail, but you may have taken an erroneous turn along the way.' He scratched his head as though struggling to remember. 'The rivulet here is a tributary of the Creek, confluencing with the main course somewhere south of here, if I am not mistaken. Might your object have been to follow the latter, which comes through from the northwest?' This was indeed the case, for Badger had rather forgotten to clarify 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, eager in any case to depart from the place. 'Then, I shall get

going. Please forgive me. Good afternoon!

‘Good-bye!’ Arthur waved as Otter turned to swim toward the mouth of the pond. ‘Do come 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. He would look back upon it with some regret 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 really 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 POST OFFICE. 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. ‘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. Curi-

ously, no return address had been given.

Otter was eager to return home at last, and, tucking the envelope best he could 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 tea-time he had missed.

Too weary to wash the tableware, Otter moved to start the study's hearth and roost in the 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! 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 Stoat 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.