



CHAPTER 1

The River Bank

The Mole had been working very hard all morning, spring-cleaning his little home. First he swept; next he dusted. Then it was up on ladders and steps and chairs, with a brush and a pail of whitewash. Finally he had dust in his throat and eyes, and splashes of whitewash all over his black fur, and an aching back and weary arms. Spring was moving in the air above him, reaching even into his dark little underground house. Small wonder, then, that he suddenly threw his brush down on the floor, said “Bother!” and “Oh dash it!” and also “Hang spring-cleaning!” and bolted out of the house without even waiting to put on his coat. Something above was calling him in the most demanding way, and he headed for the steep little tunnel which was his house’s

exit. He scraped and scratched, working busily with his little paws and muttering to himself, "Up we go! Up we go!" until at last, pop! his snout came out into the sunlight, and he found himself rolling in the warm grass of a great meadow.

"This is fine!" he said to himself. "This is better than cleaning!" The sun shone hot on his fur, soft breezes caressed his face, and after living alone for so long in his underground home, the singing of happy birds sounded to him almost like a shout. The joy of living and the delight of spring made him jump into the air, and he raced across the meadow until he reached the hedge on the further side.

"Hold on there!" said an elderly rabbit at the gap in the hedge. "It's fifty cents to pass through here!" The impatient Mole knocked him over in an instant as he trotted along the side of the hedge, jeering at the other rabbits as they peeped from their holes to see what the noise was about. "Onion sauce! Onion sauce!" he said mockingly, and was gone before they could think of a good reply. Then they all started grumbling at each other. "How STUPID you are! Why didn't you tell him—" "Well, why didn't YOU say—" "You might have reminded him—" and so on, but it was much too late.



It all seemed too good to be true. He rambled busily here and there through the meadows, along the hedges, and through stands of trees. Everywhere he found birds building, flowers budding, leaves growing—everything happy and busy. And instead of having an uneasy conscience bothering him and whispering “whitewash!” he somehow only felt how wonderful it was to be the only idle dog among all these busy citizens. After all, the best part of a vacation is not to be resting yourself, but to see all the other fellows busy working.

He thought his happiness was complete when, as he wandered aimlessly along, he suddenly found himself by the edge of a full-sized river. Never in his life had he seen a river before—this sleek, full-bodied creature, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh, then

flinging itself on fresh playmates. The Mole was bewitched. By the side of the river he trotted, just as a small child trots with the side of a man who holds him spellbound by exciting stories. When he was tired at last, he sat on the bank, while the river still chattered on to him. It told a babbling procession of the best stories in the world.

As he sat on the grass and looked across the river, a dark hole in the opposite bank caught his eye. Dreamily, he began thinking what a nice snug house it would make for an animal who wanted a riverside residence, above flood level and far away from noise and dust. As he gazed, something bright and small seemed to twinkle down in the heart of it, vanished, then twinkled once more like a tiny star. But there could hardly be a star down in the hole, and it was too glittering and small for a glowworm. Then, as he looked, it winked at him, and he realized it was an eye. Then a small face began gradually to grow up around it, like a frame around a picture.

A brown little face, with whiskers.

A grave round face, with the same twinkle in its eye that had first attracted his notice.

Small neat ears and thick silky hair.

It was the Water Rat!

Then the two animals stood and regarded

each other cautiously.

“Hello, Mole!” said the Water Rat.

“Hello, Rat!” said the Mole.

“Would you like to come over?” asked the Rat.

“That’s easy enough to SAY,” said the Mole, rather irritably, as he was new to a river and riverside life and its ways.

The Rat said nothing, but stooped and unfastened a rope and pulled on it. Then he stepped into a little boat which the Mole had not noticed. It was painted blue outside and white inside, and was just the size for two animals. It captured the Mole’s heart at once.

The Rat rowed quickly across the river. Then he held up his paw as the Mole stepped gingerly down. “Lean on that!” he said. “Now then, step in!” and the Mole to his surprise and delight found himself actually seated in a real boat.

“This has been a wonderful day!” said he, as the Rat shoved off and took to the oars again. “Do you know, I’ve never been in a boat before in all my life.”

“What?” cried the Rat, open-mouthed: “Never been in a—you never—well, what have you been doing, then?”

“Is it so nice as all that?” asked the Mole shyly, though he was quite prepared to believe

it. He leaned back in his seat and looked at the cushions, the oars, the rowlocks, and felt the boat sway lightly under him.

“Nice? It’s the **ONLY** thing,” said the Water Rat solemnly, as he leaned forward to row. “Believe me, my young friend, there is **NOTHING**—absolute nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats. Simply messing,” he went on dreamily, “messing—about—in—boats; messing—”

“Look ahead, Rat!” cried the Mole suddenly.

It was too late. The boat struck the bank hard. The dreamer lay on his back at the bottom of the boat, his heels in the air.

“—about in boats—or **WITH** boats,” the Rat went on calmly, picking himself up with a pleasant laugh. “In or out of ’em, it doesn’t matter. Nothing really seems to matter, that’s the charm of it. Whether you get away, or whether you don’t; whether you arrive at your destination or whether you reach somewhere else, or whether you never get anywhere at all, you’re always busy. And when you’ve done it there’s always something else to do, and you can do nothing if you like. It doesn’t matter. Look here! If you really have nothing to do this morning, suppose we travel down the river together, and make a day of it?”

The Mole wiggled his toes from sheer happiness, sighed in full contentment, and leaned back blissfully into the soft cushions. "WHAT a day I'm having!" he said. "Let us start at once!"

"Hold on a minute, then!" said the Rat. He looped the rope through a ring in his landing dock, climbed up into his hole above, and soon reappeared staggering under a fat, wicker picnic basket.

"Shove that under your feet," he told the Mole, as he passed it down into the boat. Then he untied the boat and took the oars again.

"What's inside it?" asked the Mole, wriggling with curiosity.

"There's cold chicken inside it," replied the Rat briefly; "cold ham cold beef pickled gherkins salad rolls cucumber sandwiches root beer lemonade iced tea—"

"O stop, stop," cried the Mole in ecstasies: "This is too much!"

"Do you really think so?" asked the Rat seriously. "It's only what I always take on these little trips, and the other animals are always telling me that I'm a stingy beast and don't bring nearly enough!"

The Mole never heard a word he was saying. Absorbed in the new life he was entering

upon, he trailed a paw in the water and dreamed long waking dreams. The Water Rat, like the good little fellow he was, rowed steadily on and didn't disturb him.

"I like your clothes awfully, old chap," he remarked after half an hour or so had passed. "I'm going to get a black velvet jacket myself some day, as soon as I can afford it."

"I beg your pardon," said the Mole, pulling himself together with an effort. "You must think I am very rude, but all this is so new to me. So this is a River!"

"THE River," corrected the Rat.

"And you really live by the river? What a jolly life!"

"By it and with it and on it and in it," said the Rat. "It's brother and sister to me, and aunts, and company, and food and drink, and (naturally) washing. It's my world, and I don't want any other. What it hasn't got isn't worth having. Lord! The times we've had together! Whether it's winter or summer, spring or autumn, it's always got its fun and its excitements."

"But isn't it a bit dull at times?" the Mole ventured to ask. "Just you and the river, and no one to talk with?"

"No one to—well, I mustn't be hard on you," said the Rat patiently. "You're new to it,

and of course you don't know. The riverbank is so crowded nowadays that many people are moving away. It isn't what it used to be, at all. Otters, kingfishers, ducks, herons, all of them around all day long, always wanting you to DO something—as if a fellow had no business of his own to attend to!”

“What lies over THERE?” asked the Mole, waving a paw toward the woodland that darkly framed the water meadows on one side of the river.

“That? Oh, that's just the Wild Wood,” said the Rat shortly. “We don't go there very much, we riverbankers.”

“Aren't they—aren't they very NICE people in there?” said the Mole, a trifle nervously.

“W-e-ll,” replied the Rat, “let me see. The squirrels are all right. AND the rabbits—some of 'em, but rabbits are a mixed lot. And then there's Badger, of course. He lives right in the heart of it; he wouldn't live anywhere else if you paid him to do it. Dear old Badger! Nobody interferes with HIM. They'd better not,” he added significantly.

“Why, who WOULD interfere with him?” asked the Mole.

“Well, of course—there—are others,” explained the Rat in a hesitating sort of way.

“Weasels—and stoats*—and foxes—and so on. They’re all right in a way—I’m very good friends with them—but, well, you can’t really trust them, and that’s a fact.”

The Mole knew that it is considered poor animal manners to discuss possible trouble ahead, or even to mention it, so he dropped the subject.

“And beyond the Wild Wood?” he asked “Where it’s all blue and dim, and I see what may be hills, and something like the smoke of towns, or is it only clouds?”

“Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wide World,” said the Rat. “And that’s something that doesn’t matter, either to you or me. I’ve never been there, and I’m never going, nor you either, if you’ve got any sense at all. Don’t ever refer to it again, please. Now then! Here’s our backwater at last, where we’re going to have lunch.”

Leaving the main stream, they passed into what seemed at first like a little landlocked lake. Green grass sloped down to either edge, and brown snaky tree roots gleamed below the surface of the quiet water. Ahead of them the foamy tumble of a dam and a restless dripping mill wheel filled the air with a soothing

*A stoat, also known as an ermine, is a carnivorous forest animal common in Britain.

murmur of sound. It was so very beautiful that the Mole could only hold up both forepaws and gasp, "Oh my! Oh my! Oh my!"

The Rat brought the boat alongside the bank, tied her there, helped the still awkward Mole safely ashore, and swung out the lunch basket. The Mole begged to be allowed to unpack it all by himself, and the Rat was very pleased to indulge him. He sprawled full-length on the grass and rested, while his excited friend shook out the tablecloth and spread it, then took out all the mysterious packets one by one and arranged them, still gasping, "Oh my!" at each fresh discovery. When all was ready, the Rat said, "Now, pitch in, old fellow!" The Mole was very glad to obey, for he had started his spring-cleaning at a very early hour that morning, and had never stopped for a bite to eat.

"What are you looking at?" said the Rat presently, when the edge of their hunger was somewhat dulled, and the Mole's eyes were able to wander off the tablecloth a little.

"I am looking," said the Mole, "at a streak of bubbles that I see traveling along the surface of the water."

"Bubbles? Oho!" said the Rat, and made a cheery, inviting sort of "chirrup" noise.

A broad glistening muzzle showed itself

above the edge of the bank, and the Otter hauled himself out and shook the water from his coat.

“Greedy things!” he observed, heading toward the picnic. “Why didn’t you invite me, Ratty?”

“This was just spur of the moment,” explained the Rat. “By the way, this is my friend Mr. Mole.”

“Pleased to meet you, I’m sure,” said the Otter, and the two animals were friends immediately.

“Such a lot of activity everywhere!” continued the Otter. “All the world seems to be out on the river today. I came up this backwater to try and get a moment’s peace, and then I stumbled upon you fellows! I beg your pardon—I didn’t mean that quite the way it sounded, you know.”

There was a rustle behind them, proceeding from a hedge still thick with last year’s leaves, and a stripy head, with high shoulders behind it, peered forth at them.

“Come on, old Badger!” shouted the Rat.

The Badger trotted forward a pace or two, then grunted, “H’m! Company,” and turned his back and disappeared from view.

“That’s JUST the sort of fellow he is!” observed the disappointed Rat. “He simply

hates Society! Now we won't see any more of him today. Well, tell us, who's out on the river?"

"Toad's out, for one," replied the Otter. "In his brand-new racing boat, with new clothes and new everything!"

The two animals looked at each other and laughed.

"Once, it was nothing but sailing," the Rat explained to Mole, "Then he tired of that and took to rafting. Nothing would please him but to raft all day and every day, and a nice mess he made of it. Last year it was houseboating, and we all had to go and stay with him in his houseboat, and pretend we liked it. He was going to spend the rest of his life in a houseboat. It's all the same, whatever he takes up; he gets tired of it, then starts on something fresh."

"He's a good fellow," remarked the Otter. "But no stability—especially in a boat!"

From where they sat they could get a glimpse of the main stream across the island that separated them, and just then a racing-boat flashed into view. The rower—a short, stout figure—was splashing badly and rolling a good deal, but working hard. The Rat stood up and called to him, but Toad—for it was he—shook his head and settled sternly to his work.

“He’ll be out of the boat in a minute if he rolls like that,” said the Rat, sitting down again.

“Of course he will,” chuckled the Otter. “Did I ever tell you that good story about Toad and the steamboat captain? It happened this way. Toad. . . .”

A fly swerved unsteadily on top of the current in the drunken fashion of many young flies. There was a swirl of water, a “cloop!” and the fly was visible no more.

Neither was the Otter.

The Mole looked down. The voice was still in his ears, but the grass on which he had sprawled was empty. Not an Otter could be seen.

But again there was a streak of bubbles on the surface of the river.

The Rat hummed a tune, and the Mole remembered that polite animals never comment on the sudden disappearance of one’s friends at any moment, for any reason or no reason whatever.

“Well, well,” said the Rat, “I suppose we ought to be moving. I wonder which of us had better pack the lunch basket?” He did not speak as if he was frightfully eager for the treat.

“Oh, please let me,” said the Mole. So, of course, the Rat let him.

Packing the basket is never as pleasant work as unpacking the basket. But the Mole was determined to enjoy everything, and although just when he had got the basket packed and strapped up tightly he saw a plate staring up at him from the grass...and when the job had been done again the Rat pointed out a fork...and last of all, behold! the mustard pot, which he had been sitting on without noticing...still, somehow, the thing got finished at last, without much loss of temper.

The afternoon sun was getting low as the Rat rowed gently homeward in a dreamy mood, murmuring poetry to himself, and not paying much attention to Mole. But the Mole was very full of lunch, and self-satisfaction, and already feeling quite at home in a boat, or so he thought. He was getting a bit restless, and he said, "Ratty! Please, I want to row now!"

The Rat shook his head with a smile. "Not yet, my young friend," he said—"wait until you've had a few lessons. It's not so easy as it looks."

The Mole was quiet for a minute or two. But he began to feel more and more jealous of Rat, rowing so easily along, and his pride began to whisper that he could do it every bit as well. He jumped up and grabbed the oars,

so suddenly that the Rat was taken by surprise and fell backward off his seat with his legs in the air for the second time. The triumphant Mole took his place and grabbed the oars with great confidence.

“Stop it, you silly ass!” cried the Rat, from the bottom of the boat. “You’ll tip us over!”

The Mole flung the oars back with a flourish, and made a great dig at the water. He missed the surface altogether, his legs flew up above his head, and he found himself lying on the top of the Rat. Greatly alarmed, he made a grab at the side of the boat, and the next moment—Sploosh!

Over went the boat, and he found himself struggling in the river.

Oh, how cold the water was, and how VERY wet it felt. How it sang in his ears as he went down, down, down! How bright and welcome the sun looked as he rose to the surface coughing and spluttering! How awful was his despair when he felt himself sinking again! Then a firm paw gripped him by the back of his neck. It was the Rat, and he was evidently laughing—the Mole could FEEL him laughing, right down his arm and through his paw.

The Rat got hold of an oar and shoved it under the Mole’s arm. Then he did the same

to the other side of him and, swimming behind, propelled the helpless animal to shore, hauled him out, and set him down on the bank, a squashy, pulpy lump of misery.

When the Rat had rubbed him down a bit, and wrung some of the wet out of him, he said, "Now, then, old fellow! Trot up and down in the sun until you're warm and dry again, while I dive for the lunch basket."

So the dismal Mole, wet and ashamed, trotted about till he was nearly dry. Meanwhile the Rat plunged into the water again, recovered the boat, fetched his floating property to shore bit by bit, and finally dived successfully for the lunch basket and struggled to land with it.

When they were ready to start once more, the Mole, limp and depressed, took his seat in the boat. As they set off, he said in a low voice, "Ratty, my generous friend! I am very sorry for my foolish conduct. My heart nearly stops when I think how I might have lost that beautiful lunch basket. I have been a complete ass, and I know it. Will you overlook it this once and forgive me, and let us start over again?"

"That's all right, bless you!" responded the Rat cheerily. "What's a little wet to a Water Rat? Don't you think any more about

it. And, look here! I really think you had better come and stay with me for a little while. It's very plain and rough, you know—not like Toad's house at all—but you haven't seen that yet. Still, I can make you comfortable. And I'll teach you to row, and to swim, and you'll soon be as handy on the water as any of us."

The Mole was so touched by this kind offer that he could barely answer, and he had to brush away a tear or two with the back of his paw. But the Rat kindly looked in another direction, and soon the Mole's spirits revived. He was even able to give a clever retort to a couple of ducks who were snickering about his bedraggled appearance.

When they got home, the Rat fetched the Mole a warm robe and slippers, made a bright fire in the parlor, planted him in an armchair before the fire, and told him river stories till suppertime. Very thrilling stories they were, too, to an earth-dwelling animal like Mole. There were stories about dams, and sudden floods, and leaping pike, and steamships, and about herons, and night fishing with Otter, or long excursions with Badger. Supper was a most cheerful meal, and very soon afterward the sleepy Mole was shown upstairs to the best bedroom, where he soon laid his head on his pillow in great peace and contentment.

This day was only the first of many like it for the newly liberated Mole. He learned to swim and to row, and entered fully into the joy of river life.