



warned, 'that we haven't arranged this meeting to provide him with a wonderful opportunity to gorge himself. Remind him that every creature attending an Assembly is strictly bound by the Oath of Common Safety.'

'Your father introduced that, I believe?' Fox queried.

'He did,' replied Badger seriously. 'It was very necessary, to prevent the possibility of bullying or fighting. Do you think Adder will listen to you?'

'As much as he ever does,' Fox replied evasively. He shrugged. 'But I think even Adder respects the rules of the Assembly.'

They stood a little longer; then Badger turned to go. Fox called him back. 'What about Mole?' he asked.

'Oh, don't worry about him,' Badger managed to laugh. 'Once he hears all the feet running overhead, he'll soon surface to discover what all the commotion is about.'

Fox grinned. 'Till tomorrow then,' he said.

'Till tomorrow,' said Badger.



II

THE ASSEMBLY

By eleven o'clock Badger felt that everything was ready. Since he had risen, he had been busy enlarging one of the unoccupied chambers of his set to a size which would accommodate everyone who was likely to attend the Assembly. Even with his powerful digging claws, it had been exceptionally hard work. The soil was dry and hard, and he had to remove all the loose earth into one of the unused corridors. Then, outside, he had gathered together several mounds of dry leaves, and dragged them down, backwards, into the chamber, spreading them evenly over the floor.

When he had finished, he had sallied out again, this time to the borders of the wood. Underneath the hedgerows he gathered together a number of glow-worms, which he tucked



into the thickest parts of his fur, in order to transport them back in bulk. Back at the set, he stowed the little insects at intervals along the entrance corridor, and with those he had left over he illuminated the Assembly Chamber, placing them in tiny clusters, just as he had watched his father do before him.

At length, satisfied with his evening's work, he left his set again to dig up a few roots and bulbs for his supper, which, garnished with a number of beetles, made a welcome meal. It was now eleven-thirty, and Badger decided to take a short nap before the other animals started to arrive.

He did not seem to have been dozing in his sleeping-chamber for more than a few minutes when he heard the old church clock strike twelve in the distance, and simultaneously he heard voices outside. He jumped up and wriggled his way quickly to the exit. It was Weasel, who had arrived with Fox.

'Go straight down the corridor on your left, Weasel,' said Badger. 'After a little way it turns to the right. Take the first turning left after that bend into the Assembly Chamber, and make yourself comfortable. I'll join you in a moment.'

Weasel followed his directions and the glow-worm lights, and had only just disappeared from view when more voices could be heard approaching. They belonged to the rabbits and Hare and his family. Just behind them came the fieldmice.

'Fox, will you go down and keep Weasel company?' Badger asked. 'I'd better stay here to direct the others.'

'Of course,' said Fox and, bowing his head, he eased



himself into the tunnel.

'This way, everyone!' called Badger. 'Straight in there.' He used his snout to indicate the entrance. 'Just follow the little lights.'

The rabbits, in their particularly timid manner, were unable to decide on who should be the first one down the hole, and they began quarrelling until Hare, with some impatience, said, 'I'll lead.' He nudged his mate encouragingly. 'Come on dear. And you, children! Our cousins and the fieldmice will be right behind us.'

The lizards were next on the scene, though Badger did not notice them until they were darting around him like individual threads of quick-silver. After the squirrels, hedgehogs and voles had arrived, only Adder and the birds were missing.

The latter arrived together, led by Tawny Owl. He had rounded up Pheasant and his mate, and even Kestrel, who spent most of his time hovering high in the air above Farthing Wood, had agreed to attend.

'I didn't deign to invite the other birds,' explained Tawny Owl. 'Blackbirds, starlings, pigeons, thrushes – they're all half-domesticated. They thrive when humans are around. The more humans there are, the better they like it. No purpose in them coming. They don't really represent Farthing Wood at all.'

'Do we have to go in there?' Pheasant asked Badger in some alarm. 'Soiling our feathers with all that dirt?'

'My set is quite spotless!' Badger retorted. 'I've spent all



evening getting it ready.'

'We haven't come here to admire each other's plumage,' Tawny Owl said shortly. 'If you haven't anything more to offer the Assembly than that, you might as well not have come.'

'I didn't say anything about not attending the Assembly,' said Pheasant in a small voice, and without further ado he walked into the hole with his mate, followed by Kestrel.

'Vain as a peacock,' muttered Tawny Owl, and Badger shook his head.

'You go in, Owl,' he said presently. 'I'm only waiting for Adder, and then we're complete.'

Just then Fox's head reappeared at the opening. 'Mole's just dropped in,' he announced with a grin. 'He came direct. Dug a long passage from his tunnel straight into the Assembly Chamber.'

Badger laughed. 'I'd forgotten Mole,' he admitted. 'Hallo, here's Adder.'

'Good evening, gentlemen,' Adder whispered, as he slid to a halt. His forked tongue flickered all around. 'I trust I'm not late?'

'I suppose someone had to be last,' remarked Fox pointedly.

'Well, after you, Badger.'

Inside the Assembly Chamber, the expectant faces of the young animals contrasted strangely with the solemnity of their seniors in the faint greenish glow. Badger took his place in the centre of the room, flanked by Fox and Tawny Owl as his self-



appointed committee. The other animals spread themselves evenly round the Chamber against the hard earth walls. Most of the fieldmice and voles and rabbits took care not to sit anywhere near Adder or Weasel.

Without ceremony, Badger opened the meeting. 'This is only the second Assembly called in my lifetime,' he began, 'and for most of you it will be the first you've attended. My father called the last Assembly five years ago, when the humans first moved in to lay waste to our homes. In those days there was a Farthing Heath, as well as Farthing Wood. I don't have to tell anybody what happened to the heath that once surrounded the whole of our wood.'

'Gone. All gone,' hissed Adder from the corner where he had carefully coiled himself up, and was resting his head on the topmost coil.

'All gone!' echoed the voles.

'But the humans weren't content with that,' Badger went on bitterly. 'They began to fell our trees. They continued to do so, at regular destructive intervals, until what was once a large wood had been cut back to the present sad remnant, not much larger than a copse.'

'What do you think will happen, Badger?' asked one of the rabbits timidly.

'Happen?' Badger echoed. 'Why, the same thing that has been happening. They will cut down *more* trees, and build *more* houses, and *shops*, probably a school, and offices and roads,



and ghashty concrete posts and signs everywhere, faster and faster and faster still, until eventually . . . He broke off with a despairing shake of his head.

'Until eventually we are destroyed with the wood,' Tawny Owl finished the sentence with determined pessimism.

'And all this – how long will it take?' asked Hare.

'The very question I myself asked yesterday,' nodded Badger. 'Though all the time I suppose I knew the answer. We animals can never accurately forecast what the humans will do; we only know what they are capable of doing. And they're capable of cutting down the remainder of Farthing Wood in twelve months, perhaps less.'

There was a stunned silence for a moment, then one or two animals coughed nervously. Kestrel began to preen his wings. His livelihood was not as completely threatened as the others' by the advancing destruction.

'And on top of all this,' Badger said in pained tones, 'comes a drought.'

'The very last straw,' said Mole.

'Merely accelerating the end,' Tawny Owl muttered, more to himself than to anyone else.

'Friends, we are up against a brick wall,' Badger intoned with deadly seriousness. 'Leaving aside the threat of our extermination, if we don't, in the next couple of days, find a safe, secluded place where we can all go to drink, we're going to find ourselves in the worst kind of distress.' He coughed huskily,



already feeling his throat to be unusually dry. 'This is why I've asked all of you to join me tonight. The greater the gathering, the better the chance we have of finding a solution to end our immediate danger. So I entreat you all: don't be afraid to speak up. Size and strength have no bearing on anyone's importance at an Assembly. The only important fact is that all of us live in Farthing Wood, and so we all need each other's help.'

The smaller animals seemed to receive some encouragement from Badger's remarks, and began to murmur to each other and shake their heads in bewilderment. But none of them seemed to have any definite ideas.

Badger looked at Tawny Owl and then at Fox, but they were both scanning the circle of faces to see who was going to be the first to make a suggestion.

'Surely you birds can help us?' prompted Weasel. 'You cover a wider stretch of country than we ground dwellers. Can any of you say where the nearest water is to be found outside our boundaries?'

Pheasant's dowdy mate shifted uncomfortably, as she felt many pairs of eyes turning towards her. 'Say something, Pheasant,' she whispered to him.

'My mate and I don't really venture outside the wood,' he said hurriedly. 'Being game birds, there is always the danger of being shot at.' He thrust out his gaudy breast. 'I'm told we're considered to be a great culinary delicacy by all well-bred humans,' he added, almost smugly.



'Kestrel, can you offer a more worthwhile piece of information?' Badger enquired, directing a withering glance at Pheasant. 'Of all the birds present, you spend more time than any outside the wood.'

Kestrel stopped preening and looked up with his habitual piercing glare. 'Yes, I can,' he said evenly. 'But I doubt if it will be of any real use. There's a sort of marshy pond on the enclosed army land on the other side of the trunk road. I haven't hunted over there for some weeks – it's never very rewarding at the best of times – and for all I know that, too, could have dried up. Apart from that, the most secluded expanse of water is a goldfish pond in a garden near the old church.'

'But that's in the old village, well over a mile away!' exclaimed Badger. 'Is there *nowhere* else?'

'Oh yes,' Kestrel replied without concern. 'There's a swimming-pool in one of the gardens on the new estate.'

'How close?'

'I suppose, for you, about fifteen minutes' travelling.'

'There'd be no cover: no cover at all,' Fox warned.

'I know,' Badger answered worriedly. 'But it's nearer. The smaller animals could never walk as far as the church and then back again, all in one night.'

'We could try!' piped up one of the fieldmice.

'Of course you could, and you would be very brave to do so,' said Badger kindly. 'But that would only be one journey. If this drought continues we'll all have to make several journeys



to drink what we need.'

'The only suggestion I can make,' said Hare, 'is for the larger animals to carry the smaller – as many as we can manage.'

'Yeess,' drawled Adder. 'I could carry several little mice and voles in my jaws, and I should be so gentle, they wouldn't feel a thing.' His tongue flickered excitedly. 'I should so enjoy carrying the plump ones,' he went on dreamily. 'And Owl could manage a young rabbit or two in his talons, couldn't you, Owl?'

'You're not looking at the situation in at all the right frame of mind, Adder,' admonished Badger, looking with some sympathy at the smaller animals, who were huddling together as far away from Adder as they could manage without actually bolting into the tunnel. 'You're merely thinking, as usual,' he went on, 'of a way in which you can benefit personally from it. I know what you're thinking, and it won't do. It won't do at all. We're a community, facing a dangerous crisis. You know the Oath.'

'Just a suggestion,' hissed Adder, with a scarcely disguised leer. He was quite undismayed by the effect his words had had on the fieldmice and voles.

'Now calm down, mice,' soothed Badger. 'Calm down, rabbits. You'll come to no harm in my set.'

When the Assembly appeared to be more relaxed again, one of the squirrels said, 'Couldn't we dig for water?'

Badger looked towards Mole. The latter shook his black velvet head. 'No, I don't think it's really possible,' he said. 'We'd



only be wasting our energy, I'm afraid.'

There was silence then, while every animal cudgelled his brains for a way out of the difficulty. The seconds ticked past.

Suddenly, a voice was heard calling from the passage outside. 'Hallo! Who's there? Who's there?'

Weasel ran to the tunnel. 'I can see something moving,' he said. Then he called out, 'This is Weasel! The other animals are here, too . . . Good Heavens, it's Toad!' he exclaimed.

'I've been looking all over the place for everyone,' said the newcomer, as he stumbled into the Chamber. 'I've been so worried: I thought you'd all deserted the wood. Then I heard voices.' He sat down to regain his breath. 'And I noticed the lights.'

'Toad, whatever happened to you?' Badger cried, as all the animals gathered round him. 'We'd given you up for lost. Whenever have you been? We haven't seen you since last spring. And you're so thin! My dear chap, tell us what has happened.'

'I . . . I've been on a long journey,' Toad said. 'I'll tell you all about it when I've got my breath back.'

'Have you had anything to eat recently?' Badger asked with concern.

'Oh yes - I'm not hungry,' he replied. 'Just tired.'

The heaving of his speckled chest gradually quietened as he recovered from his exertions. The other animals waited patiently for him to begin. He looked wearily round his audience.



'I was captured, you know,' he explained. 'It happened last spring, at the pond. They . . . they took me a long way away - oh, miles away! I thought I would never see any of you again.'

He paused, and some of the animals made soothing, sympathetic noises.

'Eventually, though, I managed to escape,' Toad went on. 'I was lucky. Of course, I knew I had to make my way back here - to the pond where I was born. So I started out that very day. And ever since, except during the winter months, I've managed to get a little nearer: little by little, mile by mile, covering as much ground as I was able to each day.'

Fox looked at Badger, and Badger nodded sadly.

'Toad, old fellow, I . . . I'm afraid there's bad news for you,' Fox said with difficulty. 'Very bad news.'

Toad looked up quickly. 'What . . . what is it?' he faltered.

'Your pond has gone. They've filled it in!'