



III

TOAD'S STORY

Toad looked at Fox with an expression of disbelieving horror. 'But... but... they couldn't!' he whispered. 'I was born there. My parents were born there... and all my relatives, and acquaintances. And every spring we have a reunion. Toads all around leave their land homes and make for their birthplace. They couldn't take that away from us!' He looked pathetically from one sad face to another, almost compelling someone to deny this awful piece of information; but he received no answer. 'Filled *all* of it in? Is it... quite gone?' Toad's voice shook. 'I'm afraid so,' Badger mumbled. 'But, you know, there was very little left of it really. With this drought the water had nearly all dried up anyway.' He knew his words were of no comfort. 'What about the other toads?' Toad asked hoarsely.

'I think they had probably left the pond before this happened,' Fox said encouragingly. 'After all, it is May now...'

'Yes, yes,' Toad agreed morosely. 'I'm late. It's not spring any more, really. Not what we toads call spring.'

'This drought,' Badger rejoined, 'is a danger for all of us. That's why I called this Assembly. There's *no* water left, Toad. None anywhere in Farthing Wood. We just don't know what to do.'

Toad did not reply. His downcast face took on a new expression. He looked considerably more hopeful. 'I've got it!' he exclaimed excitedly. 'We'll leave! All of us! If I could do it, so can all of you!'

'Leave Farthing Wood?' Badger queried with some alarm. 'How could we? What do you mean?'

'Yes, yes! Let me explain.' Toad stood up in his excitement. 'I know the very place to go to. Oh, it's miles away, of course. But I'm sure we could manage it, together!'

The other animals began to chatter all at once, and Badger completely failed to quieten them.

'We must face the facts!' Toad cried. 'What you've just told me about the pond has brought our danger home to me with a jolt. Farthing Wood is finished; in another couple of years it won't even exist. We must all find a *new* home. Now – before it's too late!'

The other voices broke off. Toad's voice dropped to a whisper. 'The Nature Reserve,' he announced dramatically.



'We shall all go to the Nature Reserve, where we can live in peace again. And I shall be your guide.' He looked round triumphantly.

'Dear, dear! I don't know,' Badger shook his striped head. 'You'd better tell us all about it, Toad. I don't know if it's a good idea. If it's so far...'

'Go on, Toad,' Fox broke in. 'Tell us about your adventure, right from the beginning.'

Toad sank back into his accustomed comfortable squat and cleared his throat.

'You'll recall how last spring was very warm – in March particularly,' he began. 'Well, one weekend there were a tremendous number of humans at the pond; young ones with their horrible nets and glass jars – and a lot of them had brought their parents along. Everything in the pond was in a panic; there seemed to be no escape anywhere. The young humans were even wading out nearly to the middle of the pond in their eagerness to capture us. I remember I dived underwater and tried to hide in the mud on the bottom. So did a lot of others. But it was no use. They found me; and I was prodded into a jar and carried away.'

'How awful for you,' one of the lizards commiserated. 'They come after us, too, with those stifling glass jars that are made specially slippery, so that you can hardly grip the bottom.'

'Ghastly things,' muttered Toad. 'I must have been kept in it for three or four hours, I should think. I was submitted to



the indignity of watching my captors eat their food by the side of my pond, while I was left out in the sun, trying frustratedly to scale the sides of the jar, without so much as a leaf to protect me. If the weather had been any hotter, I'm sure I would have dried up.'

'I like to sunbathe, myself,' said Adder. 'But, of course, you amphibians have never really learnt to live comfortably on dry land.'

'Just the same as you reptiles can't adapt to swimming and diving!' retorted Toad.

'I can swim when I have to,' Adder returned.

'Well, well,' nodded Badger. 'What happened next, Toad?' 'They took me away,' he said. 'I don't know for sure how far, because I took the opportunity of having a nap during the journey. They put me in the back of their car, and the next thing I knew I was being tipped into a glass box in their garden.'

'How long did they keep you in this glass box?' asked Fox. 'I suppose about four weeks,' replied Toad. 'They put some netting on the top as a lid, and one day their wretched cat, who was always prowling around trying to get at me, knocked it off. So I leapt as high as I could, and I managed to jump out of the box and hide behind a shed. That very night I started my journey home.'

'I hadn't got very far before I decided I ought to strengthen myself with a good meal. All the humans had ever given me was mealworms; tasty enough, but so boring without some



change to relieve the diet. I still think you can't beat a juicy earthworm, fresh and moist from its burrow.'

'Hear, hear!' cried Mole feelingly. 'Nothing like them! I could eat them till I burst. Never tire of 'em.'

'It's a wonder there are any left at all, with your appetite,' remarked Tawny Owl.

'Oh, nonsense, there are plenty for everyone,' Mole justified himself a little shamefacedly. 'Though during this dry weather I have my work cut out finding them. They do go down so deep, you know.'

'Yes, of course,' said Toad. 'Anyway, when I had eaten my fill, my first problem was to get out of that garden. The great difficulty lay in getting round the wall. There was no wooden fence with convenient gaps in it – just a stone wall all round the garden. However, I was determined not to be disheartened, and there was one thing in my favour. The wall had bits of pebble and flint stuck into it – for decoration perhaps, I don't know – and I knew I could use these projecting pieces to climb up.'

'It took so long,' however, that I was sure daylight would break before I had reached the top, particularly as I fell off about four times, and had to start again. But I knew I had to get up that wall, even to have a chance of setting out for Farthing Wood.

'Well, I got to the top eventually, and walked along to the end of the wall. By that time it was just starting to get light, and I knew I would have to jump for it. I looked all round for a plant or something to break my fall, but there was nothing: only



concrete all around. Of course, I couldn't possibly risk jumping on to that, so I had to lower my legs over the edge, and climb down the pebbles again. Fortunately, it didn't take as long as going up, and I was just thinking I could probably jump the last few inches when that horrible cat came out of the house. I pressed myself close to the wall and froze.'

Toad broke off, and contemplated his enthralled audience. The room was completely, utterly silent, so that you could have heard a pine needle drop. The young squirrels had wrapped themselves cosily in their mothers' thick tails, and the fieldmice and voles were now all bunched together in a large, furry mass, which was animated only by a score or so of quivering pink noses. Every animal gave Toad his rapt attention. Only Adder appeared to be taking no further interest in the proceedings. He had allowed his head to drop forward, but whether he was asleep or not would have been difficult to say.

'Would you believe me,' Toad went on quietly, 'if I told you I stayed in that spot all day, trying to look like another pebble? I couldn't risk climbing down any further because there was nowhere to hide, and if the cat had seen me it would have been the end of me.'

'Fortunately, the day was reasonably cool, and as soon as it was safely dark, I let myself drop the rest of the way to the ground, and then crawled and hopped as far as I could away from the house. There were only one or two other houses nearby, and once I'd got past them I began to feel much freer. My sense



of direction told me what course to take, and I kept on down to the end of the road. This was sealed off by a sort of ditch, and behind that a fence. I knew I was on the right route, and those two things didn't present much of a barrier to me. I hadn't gone far on the other side when I realized I must be in some sort of private park, because the fence stretched as far as I could see in both directions.

'Now I don't know exactly why it was, but the more I looked at that fence, the safer I felt. I suppose it was because I knew I was on the right side of it.

'It was very quiet and peaceful in there, and a lovely bright moon was shining as I made my way along, flicking up a few insects on the way. I decided to make my bed under some trees, so I scooped out a little hole in the earth, and pulled some dry leaves round me. I slept quite well during the day because, apart from the birds, no one seemed to be about.

'When it was dusk I emerged again, and continued forward. After a while, the trees gave way to some open land, and ahead of me I could sense water. You can't imagine how excited I became at that, after all those weeks without a dip. It was another bright, moonlit night, and eventually I could see a pool ahead, where the moon was reflected perfectly. As I approached I thought I could hear one or two croaks coming from the water. I realized I had not been mistaken, when the whole party of the pool's inhabitants started croaking in unison, making a tremendous racket. It was a call I couldn't place,



unlike any I had heard before. They were obviously frogs – but what sort of frogs?

'As I didn't know if they were likely to be friendly, I approached the water's edge cautiously, and just watched them for a while. There seemed to be quite a number of them splashing about in the centre of the pool, and some were just floating, with their heads out of the water. These were the ones making the noise. They were blowing out their cheeks like two bubbles in their efforts to croak the loudest.

'After I had been there for a little while, they stopped croaking, and seemed to decide amongst themselves that it was time to leave the water. They began to make for the shore, some swimming in my direction. I stood my ground. As they clambered out, one of them called, "We've got a visitor. A toad."

'They all came up to have a look, remarking that they hadn't seen me before, and that the toads who shared their pond in the spring had all been gone a week or more to make their homes on land. They made quite a fuss of me when I told them my story. They explained to me that they had just left the pond to feed, and invited me to join them.

'There was no shortage of food, and we were all able to eat our fill. Although it was night-time, I was able to discover that these unusual frogs were a definite shade of green, with darker spots, and a stripe of a paler colour down the centre of the back. When we had finished eating, they asked me to join them in a swim, and I was glad to accept.



'We swam out to the centre, and rested amongst the water-weed, and I took the opportunity of asking them about the park. Their spokesman was an old, fat male who seemed to be a sort of patriarch of their society. He told me the park was called White Deer Park, and it was a Nature Reserve.'

Toad paused for effect, and there were obliging murmurs of, 'Ah' and 'Of course – the Nature Reserve.'

'We have heard of these Nature Reserves,' said Badger. 'Do they, in fact, reserve nature?'

'Exactly as the name implies,' Toad answered emphatically. 'My friends the frogs told me all about it. A Nature Reserve is a piece of land – or water – of exceptional value and interest because of the rare animals or plants – or both – in it. There is a certain breed of human called a Naturalist, who, unlike most ordinary humans, spends his time learning about, and caring for, animals and plants. Their prime consideration is our well-being and safety. The frogs told me these Naturalists usually work in groups, and it was one of these groups that decided that *their* homeland, White Deer Park, was too valuable to be left unprotected. So, about three years ago, it was sealed off, designated a Reserve, and now no humans are permitted entry to it without a special pass. Even then, they may not remove any animal or plant from the Reserve whatsoever.'

'It sounds wonderful,' said Hare's mate. 'Peace and security all the time. No hiding. No running away. No guns!'

'And that's not all,' Toad went on. 'The Reserve is under



the permanent care of one of the Naturalists, who is called a Warden. The animals' health and safety is in his keeping, and he patrols the Reserve to ensure their protection.

'Apparently, in the frogs' park there is a herd of albino deer which is unique. They themselves are a colony of rare frogs, called Edible Frogs by the humans, although luckily nobody is allowed to eat them. There is also an unusual type of water-plant in their pond, and they believe one or two rare butterflies feed in the Park. But they assured me that there is also a good representation of the commoner animals, like ourselves, who live here and benefit from the protection.'

'Why, it sounds like Paradise,' breathed Badger. 'I can't think why you wanted to leave it.' Fox looked at him meaningfully, and Badger went on quickly, 'That is, of course, I understand why you did. But . . . but . . . tell me, Toad, how far is it? It's taken you months to get here.'

'It's certainly a long way,' agreed Toad. 'I wouldn't deny it. I spent a week with the frogs, and then explained to them that I had to go on. Of course, they understood perfectly.'

'Is it a large park?' asked Fox.

'One of the frogs told me that he'd heard it was about five hundred acres, which, as you can imagine, would more than hold all of Farthing Wood! And I mean the old wood – as it used to be.'

'Anyway, it took about another week to cross the park completely. Then, every day after that, I pressed on, never



staying in one place more than a day. I travelled mostly in the dark hours, finding a convenient hiding-place during the day-time. I ate what I could on the move . . . and so the weeks went on. I must tell you that I was constantly buoyed up by the thought that every day, every step or hop, brought me nearer to my friends.'

'Good old Toad,' said Badger under his breath.

'When I noticed the weather was beginning to get colder I tried to hurry. I could sense there wasn't a tremendous distance left, and I wanted to get home before the winter really arrived. But I knew if I didn't eat properly, and the winter overtook me, I would die. So I compromised, I kept on going, but at a more leisurely pace, eating as much as I could find every night. Finally, I knew it was time to hibernate. The other frogs and toads, and lizards too, that I had encountered during the previous week or so, had been looking for a comfortable roost, and I found one on some farm land.

'I chose a grassy bank, by a ditch where there was plenty of cover. Food was becoming scarce by now, and I spent all day picking up what I could. Then, as night was approaching, I dug myself a nice hole under a large stone, and settled into that. It was really quite cold by then, and I felt so sleepy that I went out like a light as soon as I closed my eyes.

'Well, there I stayed until the warm spell at the beginning of March woke me up, and then I had a good meal at an ants' nest, and set off again. And . . . the rest you know, really.'



'A brave fellow indeed,' remarked Badger warmly.
'Very courageous,' agreed Weasel.

'What tremendous perseverance!' commented Fox. 'I have always admired you toads for that. Once started on something, you just won't be diverted!'

'I'd do it again, gladly, if you'd all come with me,' said Toad stoutly.

'That's fighting talk!' cried Badger. 'How about it, everyone? Shall Toad be our guide to a new home?'

'And a fresh start for everybody,' Toad added, 'away from the threat we've been living under here for so long?'

There was a deafening chorus of agreement.

'Then it's farewell to Farthing Wood?'

There were more shouts of approval. The animals were excited now.

'Better to say, "Welcome to White Deer Park",' said Mole.

'Now Mole, don't get carried away,' said Badger kindly.

'We haven't even taken our first step yet, you know.'

Mole grinned contritely. Badger looked around the chamber.

'Are there any dissenters?' he asked formally, and studied every individual face. There was no reply.

'Then I take it as unanimous. We go to White Deer Park!'