

FREE EXTRACTS - VOLUME 1

During his annual spring-cleaning session, the Mole has discovered a mysterious tunnel hidden away behind a cupboard in his kitchen. Unable to resist his own curiosity, he finds his way along it, emerging finally into the daylight...

As always it took the Mole a good half minute to adjust to the sudden brilliance - although the day was cloudy, so that he did not need to screw up his eyes quite so tightly as if the sun had been out. But even before he could look about him easily, he knew for certain that something was wrong. He sniffed the air, wrinkling up his nose in instant distaste. There was a smell about - several smells, in fact, but one in particular that stood out: acrid, sharp, almost like that of a salt wind blowing off a seaweedy sea, yet seeming to the Mole's sensitive nose not of Nature at all. Straight away his eyes began to itch. And there was too a strange, awesome sound, such as he had never heard before nor could possibly have imagined. It was like a great continuous exhalation, or rumbling, or combination of the two, in which pulses of whining also grew and then dimmed, grew and then dimmed. Somehow it seemed far away and close by, all at the same time.

"O, but where *am* I?" he thought to himself, half out loud. "What can have *happened*?"

As his vision adjusted so he began to look about him more keenly. And the first thing that struck him, like a hammer blow, was how little there was to see, and how utterly, utterly strange what he *could* see was. Through his own front door he would come straight up into a grassy meadow, close by a hedge whose neat rounded shape was always, by late March, dazzlingly patterned over with the tiny white blooms of the blackthorn. There was a great old oak - not in the hedge, but standing by it - whose arm-like twisted roots had been gnawed and then polished by the oily wool of resting sheep. Yet no such landmarks existed here. Instead, next to him, he found an odd, ugly little short grey post. It had a broad head bearing a door of some kind, embossed with the letters LI-00192-PX. It made a low, slow and continuous ticking, like a grandfather clock in the very last moments before it runs down. A few yards behind this object stood a series of broken fragments of hawthorn and elder, growing in a line along a very low bank with wide gaps between them. Far away to the south, in the direction of what ought to have been his everyday entrance, there stood a big dead tree.

The ground itself was mossed, with blackened stumps of some crop of long ago sticking up from it as if it might once have been plough-land, then abandoned. A line of tall posts made of a crude looking grey-white material ran across it as far as an unmade road. Beyond this, to the Mole's left, stretched a ploughed field so huge that anything that lay beyond it might as well have been in the next county. On this vast space, made toy-like by distance, a strange

yellow machine was slowly moving. Behind it, what looked like a white mist swirled out, impossibly, in a row of Catherine-wheeling shapes. The wind was blowing from just this direction.

The Mole hugged himself in anxiety, so startled by the sense of invisible danger all about him that he could not even move back towards the tunnel exit. "Something terrible - O, *terrible* - has happened here!" he whispered. Yet where was "here"? And how had he arrived in it?

"I must go back," he said, summoning the courage to make a move.

But just as he was about to take a step he saw a great grey vehicle with immensely fat, ridged tyres bouncing towards him over the rough ground. It was loaded with rolls of what looked like wire, and its engine made a monstrous grating-whining-growl of such a violence as he had never before heard nor imagined. Seeing this great beast come on directly at him, or so it seemed, what could any mole have done but turn and run from it? He ran in the direction of the unmade road, and within seconds the thing stood between him and the tunnel exit.

When he reached the track, still in a panic, the Mole hurried on along it. The animals that jumped down from the vehicle - a very rough-looking rabbit and, bizarrely, a couple of stoats - showed not the slightest interest in him, but the Mole was not about to go back and have a chat with them. Instead, puffing nervously, he trotted on towards a distant point where there was at least some hopeful sign of overhanging vegetation.

"This is not the adventure I wanted!" he whispered. A hundred yards further on, negotiating a large pothole filled with a crumbling black material and pieces of old brick, he said the same thing again, a little louder and rather more petulantly. Here isolated hawthorns stood a hundred yards apart from one another, trimmed flat across their tops as if at the hand of some lunatic of tidiness. These gradually increased in number until a quarter of a mile later the track was lined continuously along one side with blackthorn bushes - as the Mole might have expected - but grown out, and in curiously full bloom. Beyond and above the foam of tiny flowerets the Mole could also see the rearing grey-green tops of a series of shed-like *things*, once again inconceivably immense. They were built of deeply ridged materials, wholly unfamiliar to him, and had about them the look and feel of structures thrown up in preparation for a war.

Words were written in towering letters across each of these great null artificial cliff-faces: one, in lemon-yellow, read BRAWSCHE. The one next to it - and it took the Mole nearly a minute to reach it - was made in letters that seemed, astoundingly, to be illuminated from the inside. This said KANSAS HOMEKARE. Underneath, a flatter, unlit sign read KATCH OUR KRAZY PRICES!!! Beyond this was

a very high fence made of some super-heavy-duty criss-cross wire and here, on another sign, were the words UNIVERSAL BREAKDOWN.

"Dear me," said the Mole. "O! Dear, dear me! I seem to have come up in Kansas." He noticed that the sinister breathing-roar, or roaring-breath, ever present in the atmosphere, was much louder here than it had sounded at the tunnel exit. It reached towards him through the leafless branches of a thicket to his right almost as if it were a part of them.

The Mole went on along the track, which by now had a deep screen of hazels and thorns on either side. Under them lay discarded objects: a rusted child's bicycle of an odd design, its frame bent into a sad banana-shape, a rotting mattress in which seedlings had taken root, and ahead, where a bollard bisected the path, a scattering of strange little metal cylinders covered in garishly coloured letters. JILT, read one, ZUPP another, and there, and there, and then again there, were the words POKE-A-POLAR.

Finally the Mole emerged from the shrubs into another open space. But this was a space with buildings - or at least, structures - strewn about in such incomprehensible chaos and ugliness that at first he could only cover his eyes with his paws and hope that when he removed them he might be looking at something else entirely. The strategy did not work. One vastly distended grey-blue shed lumped upward into the sky beyond the next vastly distended grey-blue shed, elbowing at one another for room in a tangling mayhem of smooth, black hard roads whose very surfaces seemed alien to him. Between all this and the spot where the Mole now stood there stretched an acreage of land big enough to support three small farms complete with livestock, cereals, roots and clover: on it stood hundreds upon hundreds of absurd, blob-like wheeled contraptions. To his great credit - despite his anxiety - it did not take the Mole very long to identify these last-mentioned objects as some strangely distorted, sealed-in species of motor-car.

One stretch of road passed near where he stood, and this was full almost to capacity with a very slow-moving queue of the same contraptions - a weary-looking animal slumped dimly at the wheel of each - going in to the expanse, whilst in the other direction an equally solid line of the things flowed out. Between these excitements ran narrow borders of straggling shrubs generously littered about with a mix of little metal cylinders and things resembling large white handle-less tumblers. And above all of this reared more wall-size letters illuminating phrases of blank opacity such as CARPET-PLANET, MISSISSIPPI CHICKEN BAKES ("Mississippi?" thought the Mole), PARADISE OF SUEDE, and LOUISIANA LIZARD-LOUNGES ("Ah! - O? Er..Louisiana?"). Another sign at the road-edge announced, THIS WAY TO THE UTOPIA PARK TRADE NURTURY. Beneath it lay a ragged six-foot twist of what looked like old cardboard, and just behind it a series of flapping banners that one after another repeated a proposition the Mole comforted himself he knew to be nonsense: SAVE WHILE YOU SPEND!

Beyond the giant sheds, cranes were moving, slowly shifting immense square-shaped loads. And beyond these the sky itself seemed to have been scored across with drooping lines suspended from three-armed tapering metal skeletons as if to fence it out altogether.

Well: what could even the most stalwart and level-headed of animals have done in circumstances such as these? Was the Mole to go over into that looming horror-scape, knock amiably on one of the inching contraptions' windows and ask the animal inside for directions? Directions to where? In any case, many of the drivers looked like weasels, or if not weasels proper ... But the Mole instantly dismissed the thought as too difficult. He turned helplessly in the opposite direction and there, dim and blue in the hazy cloud-lit distances, he could just make out a line of wooded hills. There was - wasn't there? - something faintly familiar about their shape, something sufficient, anyway, to make him hope that if he could possibly get to them he might find someone - some approachable animal of his own kind to whom he might turn for help.

So he hurried off, trying as best he could not to give the impression he was afraid. He followed a long smooth-topped pavement as it curved slowly up beneath a bank of littered grass. But when eventually he crested this slight rise, fear or no fear, he stopped dead in his non-existent tracks. For here, spreading below him like the worst post-prandial nightmare ever suffered by a top-scale Titan, lay the dread source of that atmospheric breathing-roar, now deafening in its intensity: a "road" of such vast dimensions that even as the Mole gawped in amazement at it, he found his sense of distance and scale dizzily undermined.

Why, the thing had to be wider than a river - fifty yards, at least. Wider than *the River* - no, but that was impossible! Yet there it was in front of him. And on this impossible thing - in three seemingly marble-smooth channels leading west, and curving away to the edge of the world, and three seemingly marble-smooth channels leading east, and curving away to the world's other edge - there flowed two unbroken rivers of blobs, squashed blobs, angular-squashed blobs, great shoe-boxes with snouts, and panttechnicons the size of freight carriages crazily freed from their rails. All were moving at speeds so high that the Mole was quite unable to adjust his vision to the sight of them.

"Where are they all going?" he thought, whispering the words out loud just after he thought them. "Where are they all going? Why aren't they all back at *home*?"

He looked away, reaching out to a grey metal barrier for support, but even as he did so he understood how the noise was generated: each missile made its own contribution as it passed, its tyres roaring along the surface of the road as if the air itself was being ripped and tattered. And the air seemed barely air at all. To the Mole - whose nostrils and lungs had rarely been exposed to anything worse than a double dose of meadowsweet pollen - it seemed

as if he was being poisoned. He pulled out his spotted cotton handkerchief and clutched it tightly to his face.

The torrential road was bridged, not twenty yards from him, by a great three-channelled oval around which further blob-flows pulsed, much like rowboats in a maelstrom. But the Mole saw that to follow this upper route any sane animal would need to be inside (and thus capable of controlling) one of those urgently-whisking machines. To attempt the crossing on foot would mean running across first one flow of projectiles as it came up from the river-road on a spur, and then across another as it descended on the far side.

He stared desperately about him: to his left was a bramble-bank, hung over with what looked like ragged sheets of some opaquely shining substance (another unappealing unknown) and, just as puzzling, a number of little grey-silver and oddly patterned 'wheels'. To his right stood signs bearing meaningless arrows and white chevrons on black backgrounds, a huge blue board indicating LONDON in one direction, SWINDON AND THE WEST in the other. Here too the sky was scratched across with wires, and around the bridge-oval there stood a series of lights on very tall, thin posts, which glowed a dull crimson against the gradually darkening sky.

The Mole gazed out beyond all this, towards the line of distant hills. A suggestion of woods and fields on them gave him the faintest sense of hope. Like it or not, he thought, he had no choice: to reach them he would have to get across this chasm somehow. He walked as close as he could to the first ramp of exit, and stood on a grey cracked pavement next to a grey flaking rail, watching the perpetual stream of contraptions as they climbed the ramp to pass him. There they came: a white one, another white one, a red one, another red one ... another red one ...

Every so often, with a little self-urging "Oo!" he began a movement, as if to cross, but each time he did so his feet failed to leave their starting-post. At one moment the contraption build-up on the oval was almost dense enough to stem the flow, but the moment quickly passed.

Then, at last, there in the distance, he saw a space coming. After that mini-blob of acidic puce, leaving the flow - just *there* - there was a space. He could do it there - he could!

"I will ... I will ..." muttered the Mole into his handkerchief, pattering his little feet on the spot as he did so.

The blob of vile pucidity was bulleting towards him, very hard on the tail of the last of the preceding flow. "Soon, soon, soon - NOW!" shouted the Mole to himself. But ... O, how long was that space? ... *Another* Thing was coming now, there, at the back end of it, even faster than all the others. There it was, and there, and there, still far off but closer, closer ...

"Come on, Mole!" groaned the Mole. "COME on!" Then, with the most heroically fearsome yell of his tribal war-cry - "A Mole! A Mole!" - that he could muster, he hurled himself full in the path of the oncoming projectile.

There was a long and high-pitched squeal, and what seemed no more than a second later the front of the machine had thumped into the running Mole, flipping him over and over its top towards the slope of its windscreen, whence in another second or so he had fallen away again to the ground. Dazed, his head spinning, and with a dull pain now running all along his left leg and haunch, the Mole saw a door flung open, and an irate animal throwing aside some kind of curved device which, oddly, he seemed to have been pressing to his face.

"You MORON! You CRETIN! - I - you - you Cranially-Very-Very-Seriously-Under-Furnished Individual!!" shrieked the animal, jumping out and performing a little jig of rage next to his vehicle, his fists clenched high above his head. "If you want to KILL yourself, ALL you've got to do is jump off THERE!" (With trembling hand and finger he pointed towards the bridge.) "Much more effective, you know! Much more choice!" But then - in what seemed to the dazed Mole no more than the twitch of a whiskered nose - this furious individual gained control of himself and fell silent. He glanced about, just a little furtively, at the passing vehicles, then bent down to the prostrate Mole. "Are you badly hurt?" he asked.

Now staying with Mr Gordon R. Rette, the Water Rat, whose car knocked him down, the Mole travels with him into London, only to find the streets of the city paralysed by a seemingly universal gridlock...

For another twenty minutes or more, the BPW maintained its unassuming place in the great spreading paralysis of traffic-flow - inching, footing, occasionally even yarding, but mostly inching, its way onward. At every junction both tongue-tied mole and tongue-loose rat would stare hungrily up side-streets for some inkling of free space and a chance to move. But each vista was just as jammed as the last, roof beyond roof, boot beyond boot, away and away to the first visible bend. Many drivers were now making their own contributions to a growing improvisatory fanfare for horns whose performers may well have stretched from Ealing in the west to Bethnal Green in the remote east, from Hampstead in the far north to Herne Hill in the deep, deep south.

Several times, Mr Rette cut suddenly and desperately to the left or right, making what even his passenger could tell were the most extreme deviations from any route aimed towards a single point of the compass.

"And now we're here!" the Rat would wail at intervals. "I don't WANT to be here! WHY are we *here*? ... Please? ... Please?"

During the next long moment of absolute stasis, the rear door of the motor ahead of them opened. An arm protruded beyond it holding what was, quite uninterpretably otherwise, a small child's potty. This it tilted into the gutter in the 'pour' position.

"Oh, *really*," said Mr Rette in a tortured voice. "Really! This is just *too much!* - We are never going to get there! We are *never* going to get there!" he bawled, grasping at the air above the steering wheel much as if he wished to strangle it. Then "- Come on!" he said. "We're walking!"

In what seemed the merest splinter of a second he had swerved the BPW into a gap in a line of parked vehicles - this created by another *motor* which had just pushed out in front of him.

Leaping to the pavement, the Water Rat snatched his small case. Breathing "Deracitel ... Deracitel ...", he grabbed another item and then began to jam coins into the side of a grey lollipop-shaped bollard with a face on it. Then he was whisking off the Mole's seat belt ("Why you can't do this I do not know!"), and pulling him bodily out of the machine.

"Come on!" he shouted, already twenty feet ahead of the profoundly disorientated Mole. "You do know how to walk, I take it?"

A moment later the Mole was at his side. "O.K.," muttered Mr Rette to himself in the low, collected voice of the field tactician. "Tube, no good from here - have to change, twice - Circle Line - no, no! Rush hour - queues - taxis out, obvious reason - helicopters? - no - so - Oxford Street ... Holborn ... Lincoln's Inn ... Chancery ... umm ... Ludgate Hill ... Mansion ... We can do it. Half an hour. Sprint, Mr Mole, sprint! Please!!"

The Mole fumbled urgently in his pockets for his handkerchief as he walked and pattered on. "This air is just *awful*," he moaned to himself. "Poison, poison!" Even with his face covered he could still smell and even taste whatever it was that floated all but visibly around him.

The pavements of Oxford Street were already getting busy and, rush or no rush, the Mole was vividly aware of the strangeness of the thronging stream, which seemed to grow in density the further they moved through it. Every animal was dressed completely differently from every other, adding (if that was possible) to his sense of chaos. In his day - the day before the day before yesterday - if a mole was dressed in a black velvet smoking-jacket, it *meant* something. But here it seemed there was either a limitless possibility for meaning - in which case there was no meaning - or, of course, there was no meaning in the first place. True, a few of the older female pedestrians were smartly and even becomingly

dressed (and some of them, he noticed, spoke in foreign languages). But these few were all but lost in an unending current of peculiarity in which straw-blond girl dormice minced along in little creased scraps of cloth as if it were summer on the beach, not sleet-weather March, and hedgehogs with their manes tweaked out into luminescent spikes alternated with young ferrets in fur-compressing shiny trousers that outlined the unmuscled boniness of their shanks. There seemed a grimness, a joylessness, on almost every face.

Here now came a ferret wearing glasses whose curved lenses supplanted eyes altogether with pulled-thin miniature reflections of other passers-by. There beyond came a shrew of dirigible vastness, the front face of her marquee-like shift inscribed with the words THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE. Here came a group of rabbits, pavement-wide, staring ahead at all who walked towards them with a beetle-browed resentment - as though they might happily pummel any one of them into an unconscious furry heap, no reasons known nor asked.

One of these, though quite young, the Mole noticed, was losing his fur in patches, and the lowest part of his head-fur was twisted into thin, oily little strands that flicked along his collar as he glared about him in search of something new to hate. Another (and he was the first of many) wore a cap with a kind of duck's-beak brim long enough to shade out an equatorial sun at its zenith - useful, certainly, had the sun ever shown a sign of penetrating the roof of cloud above the buildings, and had he not been wearing it backwards.

"A Mole! A Mole!" groaned the Mole to himself, still struggling heroically to keep up his resolve - no, but more seriously than that, his very sense of who he was in this inhospitable place. "A Mole! - A Mole! - A Mole!"

Only moments later a ghastly wailing-choking sound, as of some wounded or bereaved animal, burst out at them from the dazzling glassy depths of a clothes shop. A drubbing drumbeat followed, and then the wailing continued in even greater agonies of desolation.

"O!" cried the public-spirited Mole. "An animal is in pain!" Without a thought for his own safety he hurled himself inside the store, penetrating it by way of a channel of bold-checked jackets on shiny chromium-plated rails. "Where is that wounded animal?" he demanded of a fat rabbit holding a clipboard. "She needs our help. Speak up now, do!"

But Mr Rette - nearly speechless with a heady mix of rage and incredulity - was right behind him. "You vapour-headed excavator!" he exploded, plucking at his case-handle in exasperation. "It's the MUSIC!"

"... music ...?" echoed the Mole vaguely, looking all around him with an unfocused gaze. " ... What ... music ...?"

The walls and ceiling of the shop thumped, the air thumped, the clothes on their shining rails thumped, and then again the wailing-weasel-girl-voice skirled about them like the cry of a banshee risen grieving from its stony lair on a midnight moor.

"No!" retorted the Mole boldly, determined not to be put off. "Mr Rette, that animal is in DISTRESS!"

The plump assistant stood with his clipboard dangling from one limp paw, his nose twitching in double-time with amazement. "Please ignore him," said the Rat hoarsely, attempting a grin his lips would not agree to. "He's - er - been having a spot of trouble lately. Bit of a breakdown - you know. It's *music*, I tell you! - Come ON!" With this he grabbed the Mole firmly by the sleeve and began to tow him backwards out of the store.

"O, no ... No ... But the poor, poor creature!" cried the Mole, all his courtly instincts to the fore now and still urging him to act. "- How can we leave her here in such a plight?"

"There isn't anyone to leave, you bean-brained burke!" yelled his incensed companion.

The Mole stared around the shop, doing his best to locate the wounded, bereaved or dying girl. But since there was no one else in evidence besides the chubby cony and an infinity of reflections of same, he had little choice except to acquiesce.

"... But I heard her ..." he mumbled, half a minute later, by which time he and Mr Rette, still tugging, were two hundred yards further down the street.

"How fat some of these animals are," observed the Mole, another minute later, " ... And how thin some of the others are," he added.

To neither remark did Mr Rette respond except perhaps by walking even faster. Not that this did him very much good. Another fifty yards on, and now in a quiet side-street, they saw ahead a young water vole, hunched on the steps of a recess-doorway and heavily draped in a collection of worn-out jackets and coats. As they drew closer to him, Mr Rette looked everywhere but towards him: it was rather as if lamp posts, waste-bins and paving-blocks had suddenly become worthy of his deepest and most enquiring scrutiny. The Mole, for his part, stared at the animal in blank sympathy and disbelief.

"G'unny chaaaynge?" whined the Vole. His fur was matted, the Mole saw, and his eyes looked slightly glazed.

Resisting the force of Mr Rette's tugs, the Mole skidded to a halt. "O, but the poor, poor animal," he breathed, to himself. Never before in his life had he heard a voice quite so weedy, so ground-

down, so *ill*-sounding, not even amongst the ranks of the poorest hedgehogs. "Mr Rette, we must help him. - We must! It is our duty."

"THERE IS NO TIME!" spumed the Rat.

But to the Mole it was unthinkable not to try to help a fellow-animal in need. It would have gone against his deepest instincts simply to walk on now. "Why are you here?" he asked the Vole. "- No, we *must*," he said firmly, again resisting Mr Rette's attempts to drag him on. "Can't you go home?"

"Bit difficult when you ain't got one," said the Vole sardonically, breaking into a wheezy, compulsive, hacking cough. (Mr Rette turned quickly away, covering his mouth.)

"You haven't got one?" said the Mole. "You haven't got a *home*? O but that's awful! Terrible - terrible." Yet even as he spoke he was also thinking, how could he help him, after all? An animal with no burrow of his own has scant hospitality to offer. "Pan watch out for you, Vole," he said sadly.

The young animal looked up at him with his deep-set eyes, briefly surprised out of his cocoon of separateness by the strength of feeling displayed by this passer-by who had not yet passed. "Pan watch out for you, mal," he replied wearily, looking up the street as he did so.

"Ohhh!!" exclaimed the Rat, fumbling in his pockets, whence he produced a note. "Here!" He flung the money at the sunken Vole. "Sorry! Goodbye! COME ON, Mr Mole. Please!"

The Mole still did not move. Reaching for his purse, he emptied its somewhat outdated contents into the homeless animal's paw. But at that point the Rat got a proper purchase on him.

"How can animals live like that?" said the Mole to himself, replacing his handkerchief over his mouth at much the same time that Mr Rette removed his hand from his own, "And how can they live - here? In *this*?" By now the thing in the air seemed positively to be gripping the sides of his throat; his mouth tasted of metal, and his eyes were itching again.

The remains of this uneasy journey between London W1 and London EC2 is perhaps best left undescribed, except to mention that as the Rat hauled and yanked his recalcitrant companion on across Holborn and into the western skirts of the City of London, the Mole found it more and more necessary to shade his eyes against any glimpse of what was rearing up next to the pavements he was being tugged along. By the last stages of the walk any sense of orientation he might have clung on to until then was completely overwhelmed by the screaming up-thrust of ever more gigantic structures, brutally vying with one another as if to blank out the light of day itself. The Mole began to wonder if the poor stunned

mullet-brains with their duck's-beak caps might not be a lot more astute than their looks suggested. These caps could only have been made, he reasoned, so as to shut out the sight of windows and walls ascending, against all he knew of Nature, into places where no wall or window should ever go or be.

At last, moist-browed and damp under their collars, the two animals drew close to what even the Mole could not avoid seeing was a Gog amongst Magogs - A Gargantua amongst Pantagruels - a truly Himalayan display of corporate haute couture: the World Headquarters of Mr Rette's employers, Toad Transoceanic and Mollusk (Holdings) A.L.C., rearing, as it did, above the very Heart of Bigness and completely blocking out all view of the sky beyond from each of the roads that approached it.

This building was not merely vast. Unlike everything else around it, which conformed to the standard of grit-grey-on-black (or sometimes, more challengingly, grit-black-on-grey), the Toad Transoceanic building was done all in shades of terracotta and blotched pinks and whites and fawns. It was clad in close on three-quarters of a square mile of polished Serravezza marble, rising in a chasmic E-shape around a courtyard-front adorned with fountains. At its remote top the building broke into a series of caps and crests resembling the roofs of some medieval city, and indeed one part of the structure here had been given tall, very thin windows in a bogo-Gothic style, lending it a strange resemblance to the Lady Chapel of a Cathedral, grabbed from its normal resting place and craned up into the sky. The immense entrance doors - each a limpid megalith of sea-green glass - were framed on either side by skeletal, nightmarish sculptures of horses, the one mirroring the other in the midst of a threatening, hoof-flailing rear. Yet, with their blocky forms and angularity of muscle-shape, they resembled less horses than machines.

The Mole is now temporarily lodged at one of the country residences of Mr Wyvern-Toad, CEA of Toad Transoceanic. The house is set on high land not very far from the site of the original Toad Hall. Left to his own devices for the day, the Mole decides to explore the strangely altered countryside nearby...

He found himself walking along the wide mouth of a great empty downland combe. Though he was once more in a landscape of bare cultivation, with bits of hawthorn-dotted turf visible only on the steepest slopes, his view of the combe was obscured by fragments of a tall, outgrown thorn hedge. Half way along this - like some sad museum relic of a time when animals still used their legs to get about - he saw a dilapidated stile.

The Mole hesitated for just one moment, then clambered over the stile's rotting timbers and stood on one of the ridges of the deep-ploughed field beyond. From here, he could see that the steepest edges of the combe were fringed with solidly dark conifer plantations. From this distance they resembled fur that had been set with some vast wet comb, one diagonal row running parallel to the next. On the left hill flank though, a series of less predictable rounded shapes suggested the beginnings of older woodland near the hilltop.

It is probably true that the Mole had never quite lost his fear of the Wild Wood of his own home valley, in his own home time. But as he had come to know it over the years, familiarity had bred in him a guarded kind of love for the place, so that now - seeing something here that resembled it even faintly - he knew he would have to climb up to it. He staggered out across the corrugated field (there was no sign of a path) until he reached a hard-surfaced farm road. This led on into the combe, where it split into two. The right hand way curved off to join the hillside under the facing strip of woodland, where it became a rubble road of huge and ugly dimensions, resting on a new and staring-white bank of excavated chalk. As the Mole was looking at this - dismayed, as ever, by the bludgeoning crudity of the work - a group of roughly twenty riders descended on to it from some hidden channel in the trees, followed by a crawling, bumping and lurching chain of *motors*. All but one of these were made in the snouted-shoobox style, and even at a distance of nearly a mile the colour of the riders' costumes - blazing scarlet against the jetty greens of the trees - told the Mole he was in the presence of the hunt.

"How odd," said the Mole to himself. " - No, how very odd!" Here he was in The Future, where it seemed almost everything he had known and loved about the countryside had vanished. Yet here too, plain as plain amongst the greater blankness, was one of the old, old things - one that he had no love for, one of the last things he would have hoped to find here - carrying on just as if nothing else had changed.

For the animals of the Mole's day and circle, the hunt was one of those things that was simply not discussed. It did not run over their stretch of the Riverbank, and that was all they had needed to know. It was - had been - one of those activities that went on in the great elsewhere, and the less said about it the better. No question now that the Mole would walk in the opposite direction which, luckily, should also get him to his chosen destination.

A number of signs gleamed threateningly at him from the conifer-edge. One read: "This wood is managed by Outflow Forestry, a division of FrugoNatch TreeManagement Group P.L.C." Another admonished: "AUTHORIZED ACCESS ONLY". Another advised: "Conservation Area: Please keep to the Pathmarked Ways". Another, twenty yards or so further up a sidetrack, shouted: "PRIVATE WOODLANDS! No Path." (The Mole half expected to find another board demanding "Now: have

you read all the signs? *And What Did They Say?*" but did he not spot one.)

'Conservation' area?' he ruminated, as he continued on alongside the dry, leafless, suffocating depths of the plantation, whose rows of virtually branchless boles looked like nothing so much as the piers of a vast dark tomb. He could see no mosses, no flowers, and the one bird singing appeared to be singing from somewhere else entirely. And was it *really* possible that they made jam here?

From the other side of the combe - now well out of sight - he heard a distant babbling of hounds and the single, abbreviated sounding of a horn. He straightened his smoking-jacket: he was, after all, the most respectable kind of mole - known for it throughout his neighbourhood - and things like this had nothing to do with him. Yet again he quickened his pace, wanting nothing more now than to be as far away from this spot as possible. Deep in his mind, where he would not quite recognise it as such, there lurked a quite irrational fear that, respectable or not, this hunt might take it into its head to latch on to *him* - choose *him* as its quarry. How could he know for sure they did not have mole-hunts now? Even where the moles concerned were of the speech-making kind? His brow damp, he hurried on up the track with (so far as possible) ever-lengthening paces.

It was then he thought he heard the chink of horseshoes on hard metalling, somewhere down in the combe behind him, but much closer than the riders he had seen. Pausing, he listened, and heard the sound again, a little louder now.

"O-o-o-o-o ..." he moaned, his earlier tolerably convincing Citizen-out-strolling strides transformed now into a panicky run. "O dear, O, dear!" he groaned. He just had to get off this track!

Another narrow, grassy division between conifer blocks was coming up on his right. Ignoring the PRIVATE WOODLANDS sign he scurried into it and followed it for many hundreds of yards until it ended, not with more Sitka-tombland but in an expanse of low hazel coppice whose pale leaning stems caught the colour of the sky in their bark. Pushing on through this - forcing aside the living hazels, and breaking his way through the still standing but papery dead ones - he emerged two or three minutes later into a steep clearing on the down-side, a place that might have been pasture once. It was smooth-grazed now by rabbits, though only in patches between encroaching scrub and brambles.

The Mole paused, panting, his heart thumping at the side of his chest and drumming its drumbeat hard inside his ears. Then those same ears pricked up again.

There was something in the hazel copse behind him - the copse from which he had just emerged. He could hear the faintest crackling

of dessicated timber and the soft crish-crush, crish-crush of light paw-steps on the damp compost of last autumn's fallen leaves. Whatever it was, it was moving at great speed, and towards him. Even as he listened on he saw its glistening eyes, its tapering snout and its auburn-and-white-furred face emerge beyond a clump of brambles. It was a fox. - It was *the* fox!

It ran out into the clearing, seeing him, yet far more in fear of what lay behind. And perhaps it did not fear the Mole at all. It ran on right by him, head dropped, tail drooped so low it brushed the rabbit-droppings off their makers' grassy perches. How small it was, thought the Mole - but then that was often the case, wasn't it, with the Unclothed animals? As it passed him the Fox made a low, barely audible crying-bark that seemed to say, *Get out of here, you fool! Get out! They're on to us!*

This was more than enough to remobilise the Mole. Terror now engraved as lines across his vision, his heart pumping as crazily as a tiny derailed toy steam engine, he plunged after the hunted creature (even though in his reasoning mind he knew this made no sense), bursting into the clawing-tripping-brambled edge of another stand of trees at just the moment when two huntsmalls came into sight on the ground above. That was where the track he had been following led to! These two - a toad and a weasel as flamboyantly attired on their steaming, panting, sheen-flanked steeds as ever they had been in olden days - caught sight of the Mole, the respectably if oddly dressed Citizen-Mole, as he flailed and struggled with restraining briars and then, freed, hurled himself on out of sight into the woodland.

"Was that a supporter?" demanded the one of the other in a Myrmidon's voice.

"Not sure! Didn't look like one: though he was wearing a shirt and tie of some sort!" replied the other to the one, as hero unto hero.

They galloped on along the track. Being high on the hill, this track separated the Fox and the Mole, in their refuge on the steep wooded slope beneath it, from any more secure retreat amongst the trees on the flat hill top above.

The Mole plunged after the hunted animal, tripping on roots, sliding sideways on damp pieces of fallen wood, dodging the squirls of honeysuckle that trailed against his face, crawling in places where he found no other way through the barriers before him. But moments later he found himself on a path of sorts - a deer trail out across a now open woodland floor of dog's mercury and ramsons, the latter not yet in flower but already filling the air with their hints and wafts of garlic. Here and there ancient ash pollards thrust themselves up under a canopy of sycamore, some resembling dancers with dropped heads and up-thrust arms, others gargoyle-

faces, club nosed and thick lipped around their gaping rot-filled "mouths" and wearing pairs of madly twisted rabbit ears.

Perhaps aware of the dilemma facing them, the Fox was now trotting on slowly enough for the Mole to keep up, with an effort. Where to cut up across the track without being spotted by these two - evidently outriders from the rest - that was the problem. But the Fox made no pause, continuing on along the contours of the steep slope for what seemed, to the increasingly exhausted Mole, like miles.

Was the combe itself narrowing? And was that, now - could it be possible? - *another* great breathing-roar, as of *another* titanic road, he heard ahead of him? Or was it just the sound of a freshening wind in the treetops? Suddenly the Fox veered upward in the direction of the track, if track it still was. Again the Mole followed blindly as if the Fox might be able to lead him to some safe haven, some lair that could not be dug out with spades, or penetrated by trap-jawed terriers. But even as he emerged from the trees he heard behind him a shout of recognition and the thudding of approaching hooves.

What happened then took place too swiftly and confusingly for the Mole to make any real sense of it. He saw the Fox, momentarily stymied in the centre of the track to his right, but he also saw other figures - tall, grey-and-white-furred, combative, powerful-looking figures - emerging towards him out of the deep shade of a plantation of conifers on its far side. Two of these stepped out on to the track and threw something down over the ground where the Fox had been standing. Two others came out to his left, one armed with a rifle, the other with an ancient-looking cudgel. The former raised his weapon towards the riders. Then the Mole saw no more, his vision shockingly shut off in blackness by material pulled tight over his face and tied behind his head. Something that felt suspiciously like the butt of a gun was thrust into his back, and a growling voice said, "Come on animal - move!"

Guided on by the occasional thrust, or by an arm holding his own to steer him, and with muffled cries of protest coming from animals on both sides, the Mole walked, stumbled, and walked on again in deepening blackness. From the flatness of the ground he could tell that they were on the hilltop, whilst the continuous crackling of dry twigs and branches beneath his feet, coupled with the almost complete absence of light around his blindfold, suggested that they were walking across the woodland floor and that the woods here were once again plantations.

Eventually the group paused at a spot where the breathing-roar was strong. He heard a sound as of dead branches being pulled back, and the heavy scraping of a timber door-brace, and then found himself being guided down steps - scores, perhaps hundreds of them - to a place where the ground levelled out once more and the air was warm and pungent with the presence of animals.

"Give that Mole his sight back first," said a rough-throated, slightly threatening voice from somewhere behind him. "Leave those others."

"This is outrageous!" exclaimed a much lighter voice. "This is *broodnap-with-use-of-force-of-arms!* A most *indictable* criminal offence!"

Sharp-clawed paws fumbled irritably with the material of the Mole's blindfold and there was a muttering and a cursing and a "Which hamfisted clot tied *this* damned knot?" After a low growl of frustration the cloth was tugged free over the Mole's nose, which proved just pliable enough to let it by.

The captive found himself in a place that was at once familiar and very strange. It was a big sett-chamber whose furnishings, all of them threadbare, made it look like some curious hybrid of a none-too-clean kitchen and a war-room. Unwashed mugs and a big chipped brown teapot stood on a tea-and-otherwise-stained deal table, and on the straighter pieces of wall hung maps and charts marked out with pins and tape crosses. In one of several dark and looming passage entrances stood a rack for guns. But it was the place's occupants that drew the Mole's gaze. These included five large young badgers, each of them dressed in variegated combat gear, a tough-looking scarred otter, and an immense, elderly hare sporting an eye-patch and wearing a bullet-belt across his chest. Two of these animals were carrying guns that had obviously seen many years of use, and two of the young badgers each gripped the arm of a blindfolded huntsman. A pheasant with a bandaged wing was also picking along the edge of one wall, and beneath the table the Mole could see the white tip of the Fox's brush just protruding into sight.

"Well, Mole! So you like to follow the hunt in your spare time, do you?" demanded the hoarse voice. "Or support it anyway? Unusual interest for a mole. Bit on the violent side, wouldn't you say?"

"I do not follow it!" retorted the Mole angrily, turning to the voice's source, a yet larger and older badger, whose markings instantly suggested him to be father to the rest. "I thought *it* was following me!"

There was unbridled, snarling laughter throughout the chamber at this remark, not least from the one-eyed hare, whose visible eye streamed with tears of amusement. But then the Fox emerged a few inches from beneath the table, cowering back momentarily at the sight of the blindfolded hunters. It made its crying-bark and again the Mole thought that he could almost understand it, though no words of the civilised language had been spoken.

He is speaking the truth, it seemed to say. He ran with me.

"Well, well, well!" responded the badger-elder. "Now that's not what you normally expect of the Clothed and Worded, is it? Not even moles!"

He walked slowly towards the Mole, scrutinising him, and a look of puzzlement briefly clouded his expression. "You don't set hounds on your fellow-citizens now as well, do you? I'm talking to you, Toad! Pay attention!"

"We most certainly do not," replied the huntsman in a clipped, impersonal tone worthy of a prisoner-of-war.

"Good. Take off their blindfolds. And a warning, you two of the 'pink'. We are well armed here."