

## FREE EXTRACTS – VOLUME 2

**Leaving Mr Rette's home, and his 'job' at Toad Transoceanic, behind him, the Mole sets off by bicycle in a generally north easterly direction along the line of the Chiltern Hills, looking for some place in this disturbing world of the future where he may feel sufficiently at ease to settle. Gradually, though, the wooded and suburbanised hills give way to a far more open countryside...**

Towards the end of this third day of his journey, the Mole emerged from the urban-outbreak lands. He found himself in a new kind of topography, too, so that along with uncharted brick acreages and symptoms of golf, he had left behind hillsides of any steepness, and woods of any size. Now the land rolled on before him in a vague and gentle way, neither hill nor vale, and everywhere he looked there was ploughland. At first the fields were merely very big here, but then they were bigger still, and the Mole began to wonder whether he might have come to the beginnings of the region known—to one small corn bunting, at least—as the poisonous voids.

It was not long before he found out. At five o'clock he confused a junction, turning north where he should have turned east. After this, as he rode on, the land became more and more sweeping. Hill-swells reappeared as once again he drew close to the extension of the long chalk scarp he had been following from the outset. Here he found himself cycling alongside what looked like fields metalled with stones: pavements of loose grey flints and broken white chalk lumps in which crops were set almost as if there had been soil there to support them. Guessing he must have come the wrong way, the Mole still climbed on up the last long rise only to stop and stare, open-mouthed, across—what else might it be called in his pantheon of titles?—the greater nothingness?

None of the country he had seen or traversed since his emergence into Weaselworld could quite have prepared the Mole for the vista that lay before him now. He looked back the way he had come, to see that an impression of the old countryside had been maintained, up to here, by the retention of thin hedges and the occasional hedgerow tree around the far-too-big fields. Such hedges ran on up to the top of the last land-swell, riding across it like a net on a wave. But beyond this—where the land dropped away to a great flat vale spreading northwards to the horizon—it was just as if, at a certain point on the hill, the lines had been rubbed out wholesale by some giant eraser. There was no further pretence of any kind here: the countryside itself had been rubbed out, and anything left standing— isolated houses, a set of huge white sheds, lumping greystuff water-towers, wire-carrying posts, concertina-skeletons and the incessant earthbound glide of *motors* themselves—stuck up into the sky out of a nakedness of young wheat like outlines sketched on a sheet of green and blue paper.

Way down to his left, the Mole could see the outer edge of a small town. It was two miles away, at least, yet nothing—*nothing*—stood between him and it but rows of young crops and a couple of melancholy thorn bushes, far off and tiny by an angle of road and ditch. The town's edge projected like a row of broken teeth, boxy houses framed by another ramshackle line of short-life fencing, with here and there a white motor-home parked leaning on the verge of nothingness. Had the place been a Saharan stronghold standing mud-walled in an infinity of sand, it could not have been more starkly isolated.

"The poisonous voids ..." whispered the Mole to himself, summoning all his strength as he did so. "The poisonous voids!" And as he stood there, he began to be gripped by an irrational, but also irresistible, fear: that if he stayed much longer he might be sucked out into this emptiness before him, to ricochet and blow about there forever like some small black ping-pong ball. Shivering, he turned and remounted, swiftly retracing his route south as far as the crossroads of his error.

This junction was shaped like a pair of half-open scissors, and to one side of it was an odd little brake that he had barely noticed earlier, but came back to now with gratitude and relief. It was nothing more than an oblong stand of tiny crinkle-oaks and tendon-barked, immature hornbeams growing amidst thorns and bramble clumps—a bit of rough that had somehow, even here, escaped the plough.

Testingly, tentatively, the Mole wheeled his bike off the road to stand amongst the hornbeams' strange ridged boles. Almost amused at himself now, he remembered how uneasy he would have been, in the *old* old days, standing amongst trees like these. These were Wild Wood trees, no doubt about it. But the Wild Wood here was shrunk to a scrap, a toddler's handkerchief, far less threatening than threatened, with the big bare fields pressing in on every side.

At the brake's bottom end, the Mole found a stream: there must be some clays here, he thought. It moved in a flickering pulse round a series of left elbows and right elbows over little drifts of gravel. Somewhere close by, a blackbird began to sing. The sounds floated out from one or other tree, filling and echoing in the narrow bough-space, a set of variations on a beautiful, unstable theme that was at one moment like a lullaby, at another, a valediction. Just as this happened, late afternoon sunlight flooded into the copse when a cloud carried its shadow eastwards on the breeze. A single young hornbeam twenty yards from the Mole was picked out by the light, as prominent now as a suddenly spot-lit stage player. Its leaves were already opening—delicate, skin-soft pointed ovals in miniature constellations of palest green: the lowest of these seemed to hang in space against the woodland floor as if unconnected to the branches, rising and falling in some primordial semaphore for which there never was a handbook of interpretation.

Such beauty! thought the Mole. Even in this world, it is still possible! He walked his bike towards the tree, resting a paw hard against its bark. "O Pan, O Pan!" he said out loud, and a vigorous

chill shudder of emotion shook his small body as the words came out. "How I have loved your realm, and all that you protected in it!"

The Mole stopped that night in the crossroads-brake, perfectly hidden from the road—except perhaps for the few minutes when his stove was lit—by a three-quarters-circle of impenetrable old thorns. He awoke just once, and when he did so he found his eyes and nose and blow-up pillow slightly damp. The dream he had been dreaming had been of shimmerings, and summer sunlight, dancing from wavelet to wavelet across the breeze-ruffled surface of a River. And it had been of quietly creaking rowlocks, and the gentle rocking of a boat, and the sound of Ratty's voice (he had been beside himself, in raptures). They had been searching, and searching, and searching, confident of what they would find, and drawing very slowly—O, so very slowly—closer to a flower-rimmed and, in some quite inexplicable way, awe-inspiring island.

**... and in the morning ...**

Once he was packed up again, with his tyres on the tar, the Mole followed an impulse. Instead of immediately setting off on the lane that would lead him east, he went back up to the high point on the scarp where the land dropped away, and all the world had been shaved to its skin. Here he stopped, gazing out once more across the great space, less scared by it this morning than challenged—and wishing to challenge it back in return. With the informed eye of one who had, after all, lived through a part of ancient history, he read closely each line of the place's nakedness, seeking out ditches and changes in the colour of the cropping, distant isolated lines of trees and low, vestigial, grass-covered banks. He stood like this in the westerly breeze for ten to fifteen minutes, piecing together a picture of what might have been there in the past—B.V.—before the void.

By the end of this time he was, if not convinced, then at least very deeply suspicious. This, too, had been countryside—hadn't it? This, too, had allowed room of *some* kind for Nature. There had been fields here, too—surely, surely!—just like anywhere else in England. Why else could he see isolated thorns standing in rows here and there in one distant sector, like small dark ships afloat on an ocean of green? What had grown along those banks? Why were those trees standing there, in a line, if they had not once been part of a hedgerow? Hadn't all this too been just another part of the familiar English scene, mixing arable with pasture, and woods, and copses, and wet ground, and bits of old rough?

"A terrible—" breathed the Mole, but his voice faltered. But he tried again, if only to make clear to himself what he suspected. "A terrible crime has been committed here," he said. "...I think so. O, I do think so."

For the second and last time, the Mole returned to his brake: it felt like "his" brake now. At least here, he thought, he was back in something that might pass for countryside, if you looked at it from just the right angle. The blackbird sang to see him off, its melodies overlapping the slick whirr of his immaculately oiled freewheel like one stream flowing into another. The bike rolled on effortlessly over the smooth black road surface, and the Mole attempted—and made—a single non-clattery gear change. The bumptious little breeze was with him, too, gusting his exposed bits of fur into velvety channels, and in the first sheltered dip—amazingly early—he found cow-parsley just coming into bloom.

There did also seem to be one other, almost unimaginably good development: *motor-infestation* on these roads had dropped to far lesser densities of incivility-per-hour, at least along the wiggiest back roads the Mole was trying to favour. "Look on the bright side," he said to himself, as the tiny white points of the cow-parsley danced past him on swaying heads. "Remember, Mole. Look on the bright side! Even when there isn't one!"

What the Mole discovered about this rolling country as he angulated slowly east-north-east across it, was that though the open road was often far too open here, and though the void absolute constantly threatened, it became absolute only across isolated expanses. And these, he deduced, must be the land of single vast "farms", for want of a better way of describing them. Their work-places—his chief single clue—were always much the same: brutally looming, hangar-like sheds that reared out of runway-seas of pale cracked greystuff. Rows of boldly coloured machines—that outdid even the titans of the tar in bulk—stood in or near these sheds. (The Mole in person would barely have come up to the middle of one of their crunching great wheels, not that he was about to make the comparison). Many such monsters had already died—of their very unwieldiness, perhaps—and stood in great ranges suggestive of abandoned battlefields, rusting down among the docks and sow-thistles.

Inside some hangars lay the produce, old or new, in roof-high stacks: great cylinders of wheat, occasionally sprouting grasses, or similarly-proportioned blackstuff-bags, or simply hills of grain. Half dry, tyre-moulded mud lay in broad pale channels wherever the dessicated greystuff ended, and hardly an enclave had not also been struck down with an outbreak of crypt-conifers. These stood in rows like flags of mourning—who knows, thought the Mole, perhaps that was what they were, planted in memory of the world that was gone—drilled along side-walls, on guard along end-walls, their vegetable gloom isolate and blackly visible over distances of miles.

As he stared more and more obsessively into the spaces around him (it was not good for his eyes), the Mole began to work out the patterns of clearance, seeing how field-systems had been swept away for the convenience of the giganti-plough, and the giganti-reaper, leaving only the "difficult" bits—this small angle of very steep ground, that horseshoe-bend in a stream—to themselves. The terrain had been scraped, and combed, and scraped again over every variation in its gently rolling surface, to within inches of that broken,

dead-elm-bleached covert, this low woodland edge. Nowhere here was any longer its own place: to have used the word "local" of any part of it would have been a nonsense. All was subsumed into the wider—the utterly anonymous—flowing of the tilth.

**Retrieved from his journey by an increasingly nerve-wracked Mr Rette, the Mole is disguised insuit and hornrims, and put aboard the huge private jet of Mr Mydace McMinc Inc, Toad Transoceanic's biggest rival. The wily Toad is also present, hoping to exploit to his own advantage a bizarre side-effect of the presence of the time-travelling Mole: this is that animals who sit next to him seem to have no choice except to speak the truth. A Professor Mustrak of the McMinc-funded Slyde Research Institute is speaking...**

"We now have—er ... effective and extensive cross-discipline counter-research," said Professor Mustrak. His broad face bore a smile fixed upon it by Nature, so that it was impossible to tell if he was smiling, and his big, thick tail waved in the shade behind him like a drowning poet. "—Of the most *helpful* kind."

"Darn tootin' we do, Matt," said the mink-in-chief. "You mals up there at the Slyde have done good work there."

"Our research *shows*," said the Professor, "in summary, that to burn fossil fuels in quite large quantities—in point of fact, in very large quantities—is ... "

"Good for the *planet*?"

"Good for the *planet*."

"But—um ..." said a small, low voice, from a point almost exactly two and a half feet to the left of the Conference host. Even in his current state of in-flight agitation, the Mole simply could not help himself. He had to speak out—he just had to—when he heard what seemed like nonsense spoken. " ... I mean, you know, if you don't mind me askin'—is it true?—That?"

"Oh!—No. ... No!" said Mr McMinc, and laughed his penetrating laugh. "It's not *true*.—Well hell, who knows! Maybe it is true. Maybe it's true and maybe it ain't. All it has to do is look true—right, Matt? And we know you're always the number one guy to get *that* nailed."

"... Er ..." replied Professor Mustrak, slightly compressing the top sheet of the notepad in front of him. His smile looked as if it had been starched across his face.

Mr McMinc frowned. "Frankly, Mr ... " His eyes refocused slowly on the small animal seated next to him."—Do I know you?"

"Mole," said the Mole.

The old mink stared at him for a moment, and his gleaming round green eyes narrowed very slightly behind their lenses. The end of his tail curled out an inch, then contracted again. "Well," he said, the very faintest hint of a threat in the air. "And how are you today, Mr Mole?"

"O.—Me? O. I'm quite well, thank you very much.—Apart from being up here, of course."

"Good ... good. Normally, you see, Mr Mole," (and here the Mink's gaze drifted away across the centre of the table in the general direction of the Chief Executive of Toad Transoceanic) "we don't bother discussing itty-bitty details like that one you just raised, you catch my drift? Huh? I'm just a tad surprised you don't know that. You got to get your bugs in a row there, Mr Mole."

Mr Rette added a final touch to a well-observed small sketch of a rat-skull and crossbones on his notepad. "*The centre cannot hold*," he said, inaudibly.

"O ..." said the Mole, frowning himself now. "--Don't we?"

Mr McMinc turned back to the table. "Okay, now. On the D-reg initiate, what do I know you don't? We're not gonna call it that, on the notepaper. `Deregulation'?--I don't think so! No no no no no." (There was another wash of complicit laughter and the baring of many a set of well-made dentures.) "What you got on that, Harmony? You got a headline for us?"

Mr van Sleek, the animal to the Mole's left—a black-footed ferret whose pale cream face-fur was boldly patterned around the eyes by a burglar's mask of black—extended his long neck and scanned the table as if for running prey. "We got a vanilla, Mydace," he replied, in a voice that seemed to move along on well-greased wheels. The Mole could not help noticing that whilst his suit was indistinguishable from the rest, his shirt was much the colour of his eye-patches and, what is more, the collar was *buttoned down*. "We were thinking along the lines, 'Multiplexial Conducement In Franchisement'? We still maybe need to add a vowel or two there. But it has that slant of dullness?"

"It's in the right space," said Mr McMinc. "--Hell, I'm not sure *I* understand *that*." (Laughter, teeth.) "That's good, Harm. That's good! But among friends, now, I think we'll just stick with D-reg. `Regulation'?" (He spat out the word.) "We don't need it. Do I hafta say it? We don't want it. It's that thing governments did to tie business down. `Environmental' regulation? Ball and chain. `Animal rights', `health-at-work'? Ball-and-chain, *big* ball-and-chain! We're way beyond that now, that was day-before-yesterday. Tomorrow, we regulate." He raised an eyebrow, and met the gaze of his colleagues with the very faintest of grins. "Ohh ... where the need occurs, mals. Where the need occurs! *We* decide when. The Market decides." He slapped both paws on the table. "The *Mystery* decides. In the upcoming century—the upcoming millennium! But for the *Mystery* to be free to decide, we *need* these Deregulation-Regulations. ... Okay, some of you will not yet know Tom Finqueret, Legal Advisor In Chief to McMinc as of two weeks ... Tom ..."

An animal sitting just far back enough from the table for his face to be lost in shadow—his species once again obscure, at least to the Mole—said, "We're nearing granulation on this. I think I can say, goability is close. It's in the meat-safe." Several others sat behind him, in deeper shade still. "Where the rubber meets the road is: when we put it out of reach. Up, up. Where governments can't go."

"Yah," said Mydace. "That's the picture. We need laws (*our* laws) to eliminate `laws'. We need powers to remove and transfer `powers'. But while we're still down here in the engine room, we're

just goin' to have to keep those kid-gloves on, yes, okay, I'm sorry—persuade, persuade, persuade. Our animals to go on their committees. Our animals to be their committees, whenever, wherever. Tomorrow we are the government, pandangit! Now that' ain't such a bad idea! No such problems over there in the UK, huh, Humf? We need more governments like that."

Mr Wyvern-Toad grinned back. "Oh, we invented the idea, Mydace. It just took a little while to get it up and running. A reliable historian would bear me out in that, I think."

"Never been a one for history, Humfrey," said the old mink, the golden globe hovering for one moment in both his lenses. "Always preferred makin' it, huh?—Persuade, persuade, persuade ... We'll call it,—Harm?"

"We have a select portfolio on this one, Mydace. In order of current preference, we run: `Detrusionary Concord'?"

"--Hm." Mr McMinc stroked musingly at the long, oily black guard-hairs on one of his cheeks.

"`Defenestrative Euphony'?"

"Ha ... ah."

"`Supinitional Reciprocity'?"

"Hu ... uh. Go on.--Go on."

"Okay, finally, I blush to say this one, but--`Downward Harmonization'?"

"*Downward Harmonization* ... No, I like *that*, Harm.--I like *that*.--Gent'mals?"

A series of grunts, nods, "Yehs" and "Yups" ran swiftly around the oval of faces.

"There's still a place in the world for poets—eh, Harm?"

"Oh, you're too kind, Mydace," preened Mr van Sleek.

"Okay," said the old mink. "We agree?—We agree. That is the first job of the World Mystery Consortium, next Houston. You bet your tail it is! The WMG achieves that goal: `Harmonization'--Downward. First stage of many future stages. To where we want to go. We take off the ball and chain. The world does not *need standards*. It *needs Trade*. This little planet is getting smaller," said Mr McMinc, staring about him over his small round lenses. "We all know that. Every day that comes, we all of us have to fight harder for the primary resources to conduct business. Oilfields? Opencast? First-growth forest? All the stuff still standing in the way—all those spider's webs, all those `checks and balances'—they have to go. They have to go. We have to be able to fight bare-knuckle,—whenever, wherever."

Here the Mole, good at sums of the simpler kind, put an available pair of twos together. "Um ... Sorry, Mr Mink, but doesn't that mean--pardon for interrupting, but--those rivers we went over--"

"--Rivers? ... Rivers. *What* rivers?"

"--flowing black—"

"Ohh ... *Oh*.--Kentucky, huh? I guess. Is that what you mean? What about 'em?"

"Well--won't *all* the rivers be flowing black, at the end? Or most of them? If you can dig up everything just where you want?"

"Not if the citizens living near them pay to keep them clean," said Mr Baskervole, leaning towards the Mole in a conspiratorial style.

This brought forth another bout of raucous, pink-gummed laughter from all sectors, into which-grinning himself-Mydace McMinc flung the following, silencing remark: "Let's say the words, huh? Why not? Corporate World Government. Let's put a handle on it, that scenario. *Corporate World Government*. That's the endgame. That's the third act. That's when they start throwing the wreaths."

"-but ..."

"`But' *what*, Mr Mole?" hissed Mr McMinc.

"Well--that is--O! *Blow* it! If there aren't any rules--you know--what will there be left to guvv'n *with*?"

The old mink turned fully towards the Mole and bit hard into him with his unsettling green-eyed gaze, holding it on him as if he wished to mesmerize him into silence. But the Mole did not back down, nor look away. After a moment, Mr McMinc too began to laugh, in a hoarse, scathing, sandpapery kind of a way. "Hell, Mr Mole!" he said. "I just can't figure if you are an apple-knockin' clover-kickin' Herkimer-Jerkimer gully-jumper fresh up from the boondocks or a goldarned, pandanged genius!" He fell to laughing once more, and the table (barring two who merely smiled) joined him. "*Dagnabbit*, boy! That is the point! That is the *point*! Corporate World Government *is* government liberated from rules. And the tailline on *that* is--government-without-government. And that's not `government-without-government' as your much-respected To-We Party likes to have it, a.k.a. `government"-without-government-but-within-parentheses-(government)'. This is zero-g-g. Zero-zero. If you follow that?"

"Um--"

"The American people--the most sophisticated electorat in the whole pandanged world--" went on Mr McMinc, "what do they want most of all from their politicians? I'll tell you Mr Mole. They want *Government That Does Not Govern*. --Governments? Hell, they'll just be facilitators! They'll create the conditions to let it all happen, sure. Then: they hold the line. They police the consoomanship, they keep things sweet. They Keep the roads open. We're talking the End of Politics here, Mr Mole. `Ethical' governments? Well of course here in the States we don't have that problem, but if you can find me one about the place-okay, fine--they are just going to have to damned well *De-Ethicize*. Lickety-split! Ethics and the *Mystery*? Oil and water, Mr Mole. `Society', now--"

"--That difficult word," said Mr Wyvern-Toad.

"`Society'--whatever the hell it may be, Humfrey, that's right, if you can stick a pin in it for me--is there for just one thing: to serve the needs of the *Mystery*. Not the other way round, boy. Regulations? Forget regulations! We need to open up an oilfield? We need to do it. Forget what's there first. Forest? Tribesmals? Shepherds? Farmland? Villages? *Forget* all that! We need trees for furniture? Fine and dandy. We need to cut down that forest. We need new grazing for our cattle? New cultivations for coffee, tobacco? We need new lands. We need to cut *down* that pandanged forest. We have to be able to go on moving outwards.



*Indefinitely*, you got me? So, whadda we do?" (He shrugged, bringing his claws together in a little Gothic arch) "We set up the World Mystery Consortium. And at this very moment in time we are building the W.M.C. into the big one. *The Big One*, Mr Mole: a Court, no less, that will stand above all other courts *on this planet*. Any government stupid enough to stand in the way of the aims of Business with its `environmental', `animal rights' laws, all that cabbagehead claptrap?

--Hey, we take it to that Court. We take it there--we sue it for its *fur*. We take that government to the cleaners and back again. Because, why? Because--sorry guys--its laws just happen to stand in the way of the highest end of them all; our right to do business as we wish."

"It will be a beautiful thing," said Mr Finqueret." All decisions made behind very locked doors. Accountable to no one but itself. Meetings held, naturally, only at secret but *secret* locations--"

"Maybe we'll get it its own fleet of jets, sure. And staffed of course exclusively by corporate lawyers. (You wanna put your name down now, Tom!) And it will be able to wipe out laws.--*Laws*, you get it? Wherever--any country. Biggest to the smallest. No higher power. No higher *power*."