

followed by his friends, whereupon the Wild Wooders run cackling across the stage bearing bits of the looted caravan

Summer has gone and autumn. So now it is winter and Rat and Mole are taking a brisk walk along the deserted River Bank

Mole Nobody on the river.

Rat No. Too cold.

Mole Nobody at all.

Rat There's a duck.

Mole Yes.

Rat Well, that's interesting. I like ducks.

Mole gives Rat a pitying look

Mole We should go see Toad.

Rat Won't be home. He'll be perambulating the countryside in his latest motor car. That is if he's not smashed it up already.

Mole I wouldn't mind going out in a motor car.

Rat What did you say?

Mole Nothing. We could go and see Badger.

Rat Out of the question. Hates callers. Besides, he lives in the middle of the Wild Wood.

Mole You said the Wild Wood was all right.

Rat So it is. But it's not somewhere we want to go on a cold winter's afternoon.

Mole I've never met Badger.

Rat Once the warmer weather comes I'll introduce you. Though you'll probably find him as dull as you're finding me. I'm off back. Coming?

Mole I'll catch you up.

Rat goes

Whereupon an elegant Fox waylays the unsuspecting Mole. The Fox, possibly on the if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em principle, is dressed in hunting pink

Fox I say, did I hear you mention the Wild Wood?

Mole Yes, do you know it?

Fox One has various elderly female relatives there, largely bedridden, alas.

Mole I'm sorry.

Fox They would welcome a visit, a little ray of sunshine like you. That way. Give them my love.

The weasels, the ferrets and the stoats are busy lordling it over their territory. This happens to be the Wild Wood but it could be any provincial bus station on a Saturday night. But they are not alone

Chief Weasel Mole!

The place is suddenly deserted as Mole comes wandering along

Mole Well, I don't see what all the fuss is about. It's a bit dark, I admit. But it's only a wood. Somebody might think those trees had faces but I don't. I mean, what is there to be frightened of?

But if Mole is as bold as he is pretending to be, why is he saying this out loud? Meanwhile the Wild Wooders flit between the trees and it grows darker

Still, I wish I was back with Ratty round his cosy fireside.

Then the whistling begins, and the panting and all sorts of other frightful noises, and Mole begins to panic. He runs this way and that but whichever way he runs he finds his path blocked by one of the Wild Wooders

Chief Weasel Well, well, well.

Ferret Fred Hello, Mole.

Ferret Gerald How's it going?

Weasel Norman Hello, Mole.

Stoat Ian Lovely weather.

Weasel Norman All right, Mole?

Stoat Stuart Where's friend Rat?

Weasel Norman Where's friend Toad?

Weasel Wilfred All right then?

The Wild Wooders close in on Mole

Chief Weasel A hole is where you belong.

Stoat Stuart Go back to where you belong.

Ferret Fred We don't like moles.

Weasel Norman We don't like little black animals.

Stoat Ian We don't like moles who are friends with Toad.

Weasel Wilfred Moles are dirty.

Weasel Norman Moles smell.

Ferret Fred Who's a smelly little mole then?

Wild Wooders (*chanting*) We don't like moles. They belong in holes. We

PART ONE

It is a spring morning on the River Bank and the locals are going about their (not very pressing) business. A troop of rabbits lollups by, followed by a line of hedgehogs, and then come some squirrels. All the River Bank animals seem to patronize the same outfitter, who has kitted them out in a special brand of tweeds that manages to accommodate both tails and ears. Thus the small tails of the rabbits come through their skirts or breeches as do the long plumed tails of the squirrels. The rabbits wear hats that allow their ears free play but the hedgehogs don't wear hats on account of their spiky hair

Some of the squirrel children start scuffling with the young rabbits and a row seems about to break out when everyone's attention is distracted by the sudden eruption, brush in hand, of Mole. Mole has close-cropped black hair, a blazer and sandals. He wears NHS spectacles and though he is a mole he could also be an old-fashioned northern schoolboy

Mole Hang spring cleaning! And hardy whitewashing! Oh the light! The air! The *freedom*.

Rabbit Robert Where do you think you're going? You can't come through here.

Mole Why? You don't own the place.

Rabbit Robert I do actually. It'll cost you sixpence.

Mole Onion sauce!

Rabbit Robert Don't you onion sauce me. This is private property.

Rabbit Rose That's right. You have to pay a toll.

Rabbit Robert At least if you're a mole.

Rabbit Rose And haven't stayed in your hole.

Mole Well I won't pay.

Rabbit Robert He won't pay.

Rabbit Rose Why won't he pay?

Rabbit Robert Why won't you pay?

Mole I've no money — bunny.

Rabbit Robert He's no money.

Rabbit Rose Oh well — we'll overlook it just this once.

Rabbit Robert Yes, particularly since you're new round here — but remember, it is private property. Some people. Honestly.

Mole Hey, Flopsy.

Rabbit Robert Are you speaking to us?

Mole What's this?

Rabbit Rose What's what?

Mole This. This long — sliding — gurgling thing?

Rabbit Rose What is it? Well it's a river.

Rabbit Robert Never come across one before, have you?

Mole No.

Rabbit Robert So much for onion sauce. The ignorance of some people.
Mole But — it's — it's wonderful.

Rabbit Rose Is it? I've always thought it a bit ordinary.

Mole is still gazing wonderingly at the river

Rat rows into view. Rat, being something of a sailor, wears a navy-blue blazer and yachting cap. But for his ears, which are rather larger than normal, and the long tail (which he tucks in his pocket) he might be a naval officer who has taken early retirement

Rabbits (to Rat) Morning, Mr Rat.

Rat (to Rabbits) Good-morning. (To Mole) Hello.

Mole Hello.

Rat You're Mole, aren't you?

Mole That's right, you're Rat.

Rat That's right. How'd you do. Well, this is an unexpected pleasure. A bit far from home aren't we? Never seen you around here before.

Mole No. I've — I've taken the day off.

Rat Taken the day off! I say, that's bold.

Mole That's a lovely boat!

Rat Well, I like it.

Mole I've never been in a boat.

Rat I'm sorry. I thought for a moment you said you'd never been in a boat.

Mole I haven't.

Rat Bless my soul.

Mole Why? Is it so nice?

Rat Nice? No, it's not nice. It's the only thing. Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing, absolutely nothing half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats. In them or out of them, whether you get away or you don't, or whether you never get anywhere at all, there's always something to do, you're always busy. But nice, that's not the half of it. Listen, if you've nothing else on this morning, what say we drop down the river together and make a day of it?

Mole In the boat? Together? Could we? Could we really?

Rat Certainly. Hop in.

Mole gets into the boat

Careful. Splendid.

Rat hands Mole a hamper

Put that on your lap.

Mole What's in it?

Rat Our lunch. There's cold chicken, cold ham, cold tongue, cold beef, pickled gherkin, sausage rolls, cross sandwiches, ginger beer, lemonade ...

Mole Oh stop, stop. This is too much.

Rat Do you really think so? It's only what I always take. The other animals are always saying I'm a mean beast, and cut it very fine. Comfy?

Mole Rather.

Rat Right. Off we go.

Mole So this is a river.

Rat My dear Mole, if I may correct you. Not a river. *The river*.

Mole And you really live by the river? What a jolly life.

Rat By it and with it and on it and in it. It's my world and I don't want any other.

Mole Isn't it a bit dull at times?

Rat Dull?

Mole Just you and the river and no-one else to chat to ...

Rat No-one else? My dear fellow, the bank is so crowded nowadays, some people are moving away altogether.

Mole What's over there?

Rat Where?

Mole There. That dark place on the horizon.

Rat Oh — nothing.

Mole Yes there is. It's — a wood. (*He stands up to get a better view*)

Rat Don't stand up, you idiot. You'll have the boat over.

Mole sits down again. Pause

Sorry about that. My fault. Shouldn't have called you an idiot. Only Rule One where boats are concerned is "Never stand up".

Mole Sorry.

Rat This looks a good spot. What say we pitch camp here? Steadily as she goes. That's it. Make a sailor of you yet. You unpack the hamper and I'll lay the table-cloth. Peckish?

Mole A bit. Well, a lot actually.

Rat Well, we won't stand on ceremony. Tuck in.