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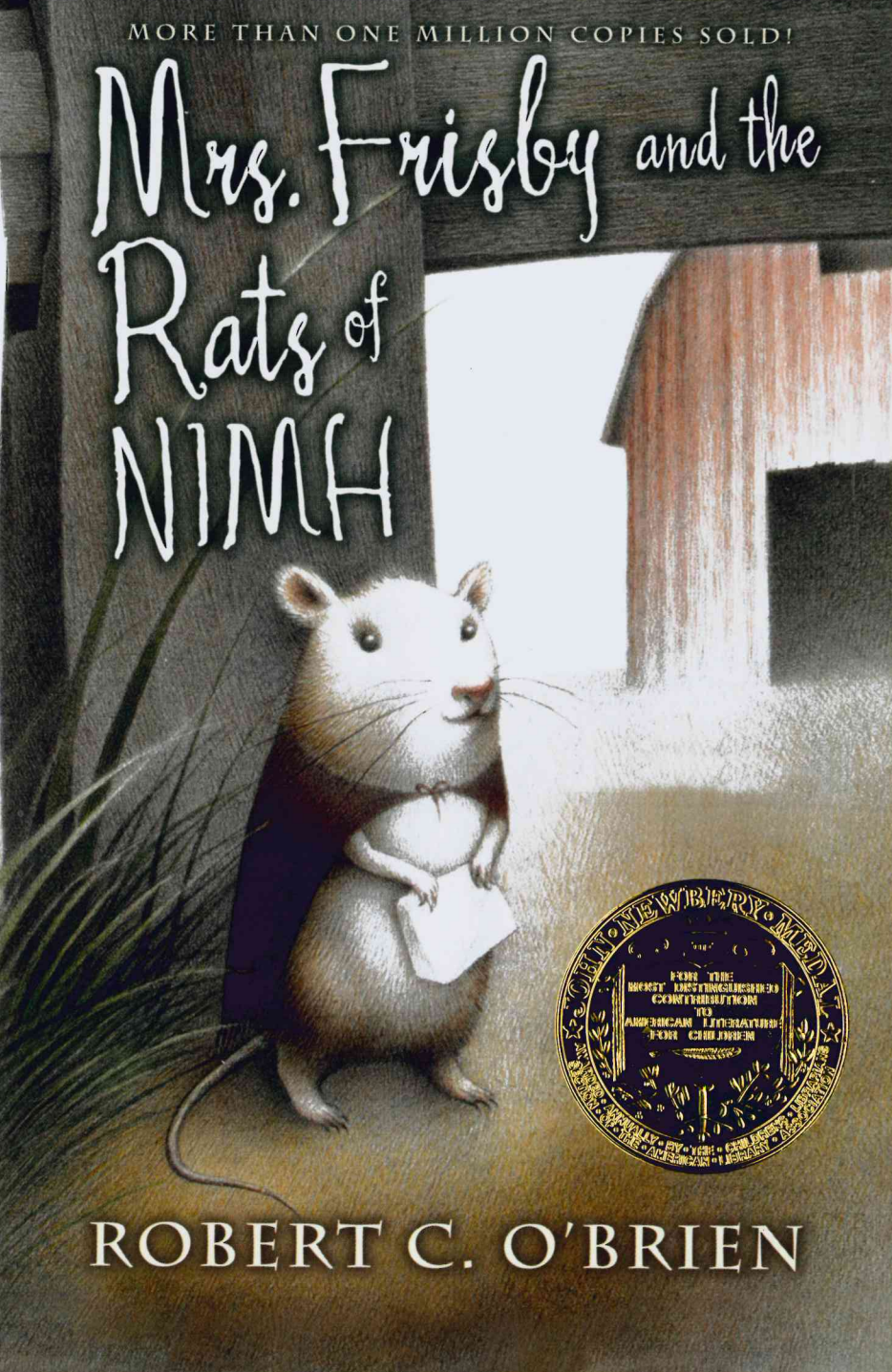
Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH



ROBERT C. O'BRIEN

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Contents

The Sickness of Timothy Frisby

Mrs. Frisby, the head of a family of field mice, lived in an underground house in the vegetable garden of a farmer named Mr. Fitzgibbon. It was a winter house, such as some field mice move to when food becomes too scarce, and the living too hard in the woods and pastures. In the soft earth of a bean, potato, black-eyed pea and asparagus patch there is plenty of food left over for mice after the human crop has been gathered.

Mrs. Frisby and her family were especially lucky in the house itself. It was a slightly damaged cinder block, the hollow kind with two oval holes through it; it had somehow been abandoned in the garden during the

summer and lay almost completely buried, with only a bit of one corner showing above ground, which is how Mrs. Frisby had discovered it. It lay on its side in such a way that the solid parts of the block formed a roof and a floor, both waterproof, and the hollows made two spacious rooms. Lined with bits of leaves, grass, cloth, cotton fluff, feathers and other soft things Mrs. Frisby and her children had collected, the house stayed dry, warm and comfortable all winter. A tunnel to the surface-earth of the garden, dug so that it was slightly larger than a mouse and slightly smaller than a cat's foreleg, provided access, air, and even a fair amount of light to the living room. The bedroom, formed by the second oval, was warm but dark, even at midday. A short tunnel through the earth behind the block connected the two rooms.

Although she was a widow (her husband had died only the preceding summer), Mrs. Frisby was able, through luck and hard work, to keep her family—there were four children—happy and well fed. January and February were the hardest months; the sharp, hard cold that began in December lasted until March, and by February the beans and black-eyes had been picked over (with help from the birds), the asparagus roots were frozen into stone, and the potatoes had been thawed and refrozen so many times they had acquired a slimy texture and a rancid taste. Still, the Frisbys made the best of what there was, and one way or another they kept from being hungry.

Then, one day at the very end of February, Mrs. Frisby's younger son, Timothy, fell sick.

That day began with a dry, bright, icy morning. Mrs.

Frisby woke up early, as she always did. She and her family slept close together in a bed of down, fluff, and bits of cloth they had gathered, warm as a ball of fur.

She stood up carefully so as not to awaken the children, and walked quietly through the short tunnel to the living room. Here it was not so warm, but not really cold either. She could see from the light filtering down the entrance tunnel that the sun was up, and bright. She looked at the food in her pantry, a hollowed-out space lined with small stones in the earth behind the living room. There was plenty of food for breakfast, and lunch and dinner, too, for that matter; but still the sight depressed her, for it was the same tiresome fare they had been eating every day, every meal, for the last month. She wished she knew where to find a bit of green lettuce, or a small egg, or a taste of cheese, or a corn muffin. There were eggs in plenty not far off, in the hen house. But hens and hens' eggs are too big for a field mouse to cope with; and besides, between the garden and the henhouse there was a wide sward of shrubs and grass, some of it grown up quite tall. Cat territory.

She climbed up the tunnel, emerging whiskers first, and looked around warily. The air was sharp, and there was white frost thick on the ground and on the dead leaves at the edge of the wood across the garden patch.

Mrs. Frisby set off over the gently furrowed earth, and when she reached the fence, she turned right, skirting the border of the forest, searching with her bright round eyes for a bit of carrot, a frozen parsnip, or something green. But there was nothing green at that time of year but the needles on the pine trees and the leaves on the holly, neither of which a mouse—or any other animal, for

that matter–can eat.

And then, straight in front of her, she did see something green. She had reached the far corner of the garden, and there, at the edge of the woods where it met the fence, was a stump. In the stump there was a hole, and out of the hole protruded something that looked a little like a leaf, but was not.

Mrs. Frisby had no trouble at all going through the cattle wire fence, but she approached the hole cautiously. If the stump was hollow, as it seemed to be, there was no telling who or what might be living in it.

A foot or so from the hole she stopped, stood still, and watched and listened. She could hear no sound, but from there she could see what the green was. It was, in fact, a yellowish-brownish-green: a bit of a corn shuck. But what was a corn shuck doing there? The cornfield was in a different part of the farm altogether, away beyond the pasture. Mrs. Frisby hopped closer and then, carefully, crept up the side of the stump and peered inside. When her eyes got used to the dark, she saw that she had found a treasure: a winter's supply of food, carefully stored and then, for some reason, forgotten or abandoned.

But stored by whom? A racoon perhaps? Not very likely, so far from the stream. More likely a squirrel or a ground hog. She knew that both of these felt free to help themselves to the new corn each year, and that they were strong enough to carry ears away and store them.

But whoever had done it, why had he then abandoned the store? And then she remembered. Back in November there had come from near that edge of the woods the sound that sends all of the animals in the forest shiver-

ing to their hiding places—the sound of hunters' guns shooting, the sound that is accompanied, for someone, by a fiery stabbing pain. And then he never needs his stored food again.

Still, since Mrs. Frisby did not even know what kind of animal it had been, much less his name, she could not shed many tears over him—and food was food. It was not the green lettuce she had longed for, but she and her children were extremely fond of corn, and there were eight large ears in the stump, a noble supply for a mouse family. Down under the corn she also could see a pile of fresh peanuts (from still another part of the farm), some hickory nuts, and a stack of dried, sweet-smelling mushrooms.

With her forepaws and sharp teeth she pulled off a part of the husk from the top ear of corn and folded it double to serve as a crude carrying bag. Then she pulled loose as many of the yellow kernels as she could easily lift, and putting them in the shuck-bag she hopped off briskly for home. She would come back for more after breakfast and bring the children to help.

She backed down the tunnel entrance to her house tail first, pulling the corn after her and calling cheerfully as she went:

"Children! Wake up! See what I have for breakfast. A surprise!"

They came hurrying out, rubbing their eyes in excitement, for any kind of surprise in food was a rare and festive thing in the cold dead of winter. Teresa, the oldest, came first; crowding close behind her was Martin, the biggest, a strong, quick mouse, dark-haired and handsome like his poor father. Then came Cynthia, the

youngest, a slim, pretty girl-mouse, light haired, and, in fact, a little light-headed as well, and over-fond of dancing.

"Where is it?" she said. "What is it? Where's the surprise?"

"Where is Timothy?" asked Mrs. Frisby.

"Mother," said Teresa, concerned, "he says he's sick and can't get up."

"Nonsense. Martin, tell your brother to get out of bed at once or he'll get no breakfast."

Martin ran to the bedroom obediently but came back in a moment alone.

"He says he feels too sick, and he doesn't want any breakfast, even a surprise. I felt his forehead, and it's

burning hot."

"Oh, dear," said Mrs. Frisby. "That sounds as if he really is sick." Timothy had, on occasion, been known to think he was sick when he really was not. "Here, you may all have your breakfast—save Timothy's—and I'll go and see what's wrong."

She opened up the green carrying bag and put the corn on the table, dividing it into five equal shares. The dining table was a smooth piece of lath supported on both ends by stones.

"Corn!" shouted Martin. "Oh, Mother. Where did you ever get it?"

"Eat up," said Mrs. Frisby, "and a little later I'll show you, because there's a lot more where this came from." And she disappeared into the little hallway that led to the bedroom.

"A lot more," Martin repeated as he sat down with his two sisters. "That sounds like enough to last till moving day."

"I hope so," Cynthia said. "When is moving day, anyway?"

"Two weeks," said Martin authoritatively. "Maybe three."

"Oh, Martin, how do you know?" protested Teresa. "What if it stays cold? Anyway, suppose Timothy isn't well enough?"

At this dreadful thought, so casually raised, they all grew worried and fell silent. Then Cynthia said:

"Teresa, you shouldn't be so gloomy. Of course he'll be well. He's just got a cold. That's all." She finished eating her corn, and so did the others.

In the bedroom Mrs. Frisby felt Timothy's forehead.

It was indeed hot, and damp with sweat. She took his pulse and dropped his wrist in alarm at what she felt.

"Do you feel sick to your stomach?"

"No, Mother. I feel all right, only cold, and when I sit up I get dizzy. And I can't get my breath too well."

Mrs. Frisby peered anxiously at his face, and would have looked at his tongue, but in the dark room she could see no more than the dim outline of his head. He was the thinnest of her children and had a dark complexion like his father and brother. He was narrow of face; his eyes were unusually large and bright, and shone with the intensity of his thought when he spoke. He was, Mrs. Frisby knew, the smartest and most thoughtful of her children, though she would never have admitted this aloud. But he was also the frailest, and when colds or flu or virus infections came around he was the first to catch them and the slowest to recover. He was also—perhaps as a result—something of a hypochondriac. But there was no doubt he was really sick this time. His head felt as if he had a high fever, and his pulse was very fast.

"Poor Timothy. Lie back down and keep covered." She spread over him some of the bits of cloth they used as blankets. "After a while we'll fix you a pallet in the living room so you can lie out where it's light. I've found a fine supply of corn this morning, more than we can eat for the rest of the winter. Would you like some?"

"No, thank you. I'm not hungry. Not now."

He closed his eyes, and in a few minutes he went to sleep. But it was a restless sleep in which he tossed and moaned continually.

In mid-morning Mrs. Frisby, Martin, and Cynthia set off for the stump to carry home some more of the corn, and some peanuts and mushrooms (the hickory nuts they would leave, for they were too hard for mouse jaws to crack, and too tedious to gnaw through). They left Teresa home to look after Timothy, whom they had wrapped up and helped into a temporary sickbed in the living room. When they returned at lunchtime, carrying heavy loads of food, they found her near tears from worry.

Timothy was much worse. His eyes looked wild and strange from the fever; he trembled continuously, and each breath he took sounded like a gasp for life.

Teresa said: "Oh, Mother, I'm so glad you're back. He's been having nightmares and shouting about monsters and cats; and when I talk to him, he doesn't hear me at all."

Not only was Timothy not hearing with his ears; his eyes, though wide open, were not seeing, or if they were, he was not recognizing what they saw. When his mother tried to talk to him, to hold his hand and ask him how he felt, he stared past her as if she did not exist. Then he gave out a long, low moan and seemed to be trying to say something, but the words would not form properly and made no sense at all.

The other children stared in frightened silence. Finally Martin asked:

"Mother, what is it? What's wrong with him?"

"He is terribly ill. His fever is so high he has become delirious. There is nothing for it—I will have to go and see Mr. Ages. Timothy must have medicine."

Mr. Ages

Mr. Ages was a white mouse who lived across the farm and beyond, in a house that was part of a brick wall. The wall lined the basement of what had once been a large farmhouse. The farmhouse itself had burned down so many years ago that nobody could remember what it had looked like nor who had lived there. The basement remained, a great square hole in the ground; and in its crumbling walls, protected from the wind and snow, numerous small creatures lived. In summer there were snakes, dangerous to Mrs. Frisby, but there was no need to worry about them in winter.

Just the same, it was a long, hard journey and could

be risky unless she was extremely cautious. It was so far, in fact, that Mrs. Frisby would not ordinarily have set out so late in the day, for fear that the dark would catch her before she got back. But Timothy obviously could not wait until the next day. So only five minutes after she had announced that she must go, she was gone.

If she had been able to follow her nose, that is, to take the shortest route to where Mr. Ages lived, her journey would have been easy enough. But since that would have led her close to the farmhouse and the barn, and since the cat stalked those grounds relentlessly, she had to plot a much more roundabout way, circling the whole wide farmyard and sticking to the fringe of the woods.

She loped along briskly, moving in the easy, horse-like canter mice use when they are trying to cover ground. Her progress was almost completely noiseless; she chose her path where the earth was bare, or where grass grew, and she avoided dead leaves, which would rustle and crackle even under her small weight. Always she kept an eye out for hiding places—logs, roots, stones, things to scurry under if she should meet a larger animal who might be unfriendly. For though the cat was number one, there were other things in the woods that chased mice.

And as she did all this, she worried about Timothy and hoped that Mr. Ages would know something that would help him.

It was more than two hours later that she saw she was getting close to the brick wall where he lived. Though her husband had been a great friend of Mr.

Ages and had visited him often, Mrs. Frisby herself had been there only once before, and that had been in summer. Still, she remembered the place clearly. It was an odd sort of clearing in the woods. Long ago, when the old house had been lived in, before it had burned, there must have been a wide lawn around it. Over the years this clearing had grown over with a strange mixture of high, rank grass, tall weeds, berries and wild flowers. In the summer it was a wild and beautiful place, bright with blooms and full of the smell of blackberry blossoms and purple clover. There were harsher plants as well—spiked jimson weeds and poisonous dark pokeberries, and bees droning everywhere.

But in winter it had a bleak and almost ghostly look, for the blossoms and the green leaves were gone, and only the dry skeletons of the weeds stood, hung with stalks and seeds and pods that rattled in the wind. It was from these seeds and others, and from the flowers and roots beneath them, that Mr. Ages made the draughts and powders that could sometimes save the sick from dying.

The time she had been here before—that was for Timothy, too, when he was only a baby, scarcely bigger than a marble. He had wandered, while playing with the other children, a little way from them and had been bitten or stung by something poisonous. They did not know what. When the others found him, he lay curled in a ball, paralyzed and scarcely able to breathe.

That time her husband Mr. Frisby had been alive, and between them, taking turns, they had managed to carry Timothy to Mr. Ages' house. It was a sad and frighten-

ing journey, and when they arrived they had been afraid he might already be dead. Mr. Ages looked at him, examined his tongue, felt his pulse, and found a small red lump near his neck. "Spider," he said. "Not a black widow, but bad enough." He had forced a few drops of a milky liquid into Timothy's mouth and held him upright so that it could trickle down his throat, for Timothy could not swallow. In a few minutes his small muscles had unlocked, and he was able to move his arms and legs. "He'll be all right," said Mr. Ages, "but weak for a few hours."

The trip back home had been a happy one, and the other children were wide-eyed with joy to see Timothy alive. Yet Mrs. Frisby thought that this had been the beginning of his frailness. From that time on he tended to stumble a little when he walked, especially when he was tired; he never grew as big or as vigorous as his brother Martin. But he thought a great deal more, and in that he resembled his father.

Now she reached Mr. Ages' house, a hole in the brick wall where one end of heavy floor beam had once rested. It was about two feet below the top of the wall, and one reached it by climbing down a sort of rough stairway of broken brick ends. She knocked on his door, made of a piece of shingle. "Oh, let him be in, *please*," she thought, but he was not. There was no answer, so she sat down to wait on the narrow ledge of brick in front of his door.

Half an hour passed, the sun sinking lower in the west all the time, before she heard a slight scratching noise up above, and there he came, carrying a cloth sack bulging with some kind of lumpy material. His fur was a soft

gray-white, and so glossy he seemed almost to glow. Mrs. Frisby had heard that Mr. Ages was not truly a white mouse; that is, he had not been born with white fur, but had turned white from old age. Whether this was so or not she did not know. Certainly he *seemed* very old, and very wise; yet he walked nimbly enough.

"Oh, Mr. Ages, I'm so glad you've come," she said. "I don't suppose you remember me, Mrs. Frisby."

"Of course I remember you. And I was sad to hear about poor Mr. Frisby. How is your young son—Timothy, was it?"

"It's about him I've come to see you. He's taken terribly sick."

"Has he? I was afraid he might turn out to be not as strong as the others."

"I hoped you might be able to help him."

"That may be. Come in, please, so I can put down this sack."

Mr. Ages' house, somewhat larger than a shoebox but about the same shape, resembled the house of a hermit. It was bare of furniture except for a bit of bedding in one corner, a stool made of a piece of brick, and another piece of brick worn smooth from use as a pestle on which he ground out his medicines. Along one entire wall, arranged neatly in small piles, stood the raw materials he had collected: roots, seeds, dried leaves, pods, strips of bark and shriveled mushrooms.

To this row he now added the contents of his sack. It held a number of small plants, all of them the same kind, with stringy roots and dark, veined green leaves that looked like mint.

"Pipsissewa," said Mr. Ages. "Botanically, *Chima-*

phila umbellata. It stays green all winter, and makes a very useful spring tonic. Most people use only the leaves, but I have found the roots even more effective." He arranged the plants in an orderly pile. "But that's not what you're here for. What's wrong with young Timothy?"

"He has a very high fever. He's delirious. I don't know what to do."

"How high?"

"So high that he feels burning hot to the touch, runs with perspiration, and yet he shivers with cold at the same time.

"Keep him wrapped up in a blanket."

"I do."

"And his pulse?"

"So fast that you cannot tell one heartbeat from the next."

"His tongue?"

"So coated that it looks purple."

"How does he breathe?"

"He breathes very rapidly, and the air rasps in his chest. He said, at first, that he could not get his breath."

"But he does not cough."

"No."

"He has pneumonia," said Mr. Ages. "I have some medicine that will help him. But the most important thing is to keep him warm. And he must stay in bed." He went to the back of his house, and from a ledge formed by a projecting brick he took three packets of medicine, powders neatly wrapped in white paper.

"Give him one of these tonight. Mix it in water and make him drink it. If he is still delirious, hold his nose

and pour it down his throat. Give him the second one tomorrow morning, and the third the next morning."

Mrs. Frisby took the packages. "Will he get better?" she asked, dreading to hear the answer.

"He will get better this time. His fever will be less on the second day, and gone the third, after he has taken all the medicine. That does not mean he will have recovered; his lungs will still be terribly weak and sensitive. If he gets the least bit cold, or breathes cold air—even a breath or two—the pneumonia will surely come back worse than before. And the second time he may not recover. This will be true for at least three weeks, and more likely a month."

"And after that?"

"Even after that he should be careful, though we may hope by then the weather will be warmer."

By now the sun was getting low in the west, settling into the high mountains beyond the woods. Mrs. Frisby thanked Mr. Ages and set out for home as quickly as she could go.

The Crow and the Cat

Mrs. Frisby looked again at the sun and saw that she faced an unpleasant choice. She could go home by the same roundabout way she had come, in which case she would surely end up walking alone in the woods in the dark—a frightening prospect, for at night the forest was alive with danger. Then the owl came out to hunt, and foxes, weasels and strange wild cats stalked among the tree trunks.

The other choice would be dangerous, too, but with luck it would get her home before dark. That would be to take a straighter route, across the farmyard between the barn and the chicken house, going not too

close to the house but cutting the distance home by half. The cat would be there somewhere, but by daylight—and by staying in the open, away from the shrubs—she could probably spot him before he saw her.

The cat: He was called Dragon. Farmer Fitzgibbon's wife had given him the name as a joke when he was a small kitten pretending to be fierce. But when he grew up, the name turned out to be an apt one. He was enormous, with a huge, broad head and a large mouth full of curving fangs, needle sharp. He had seven claws on each foot and a thick, furry tail, which lashed angrily from side to side. In color he was orange and white, with glaring yellow eyes; and when he leaped to kill, he gave a high, strangled scream that froze his victims where they stood.

But Mrs. Frisby preferred not to think about that. Instead, as she came out of the woods from Mr. Ages' house and reached the farmyard fence she thought about Timothy. She thought of how his eyes shone with merriment when he made up small jokes, which he did frequently, and how invariably kind he was to his small, scatterbrained sister Cynthia. The other children sometimes laughed at her when she made mistakes, or grew impatient with her because she was forever losing things; but Timothy never did. Instead, he would help her find them. And when Cynthia herself had been sick in bed with a cold, he had sat by her side for hours and entertained her with stories. He made these up out of his head, and he seemed to have a bottomless supply of them.

Taking a firm grip on her packets of medicine, Mrs. Frisby went under the fence and set out toward the farmyard. The first stretch was a long pasture; the

barn itself, square and red and big, rose in the distance to her right; to her left, farther off, were the chicken houses.

When at length she came abreast of the barn, she saw the cattle wire fence that marked the other end of the pasture; and as she approached it, she was startled by a sudden outburst of noise. She thought at first it was a hen, strayed from the chickenyard—caught by a fox? She looked down the fence and saw that it was no hen at all, but a young crow, flapping in the grass, acting most odd. As she watched, he fluttered to the top wire of the fence, where he perched nervously for a moment. Then he spread his wings, flapped hard, and took off—but after flying four feet he stopped with a snap and crashed to the ground again, shedding a flurry of black feathers and squawking loudly.

He was tied to the fence. A piece of something silvery—it looked like wire—was tangled around one of his legs; the other end of it was caught in the fence. Mrs. Frisby walked closer, and then she could see it was not wire after all, but a length of silver-colored string, probably left over from a Christmas package.

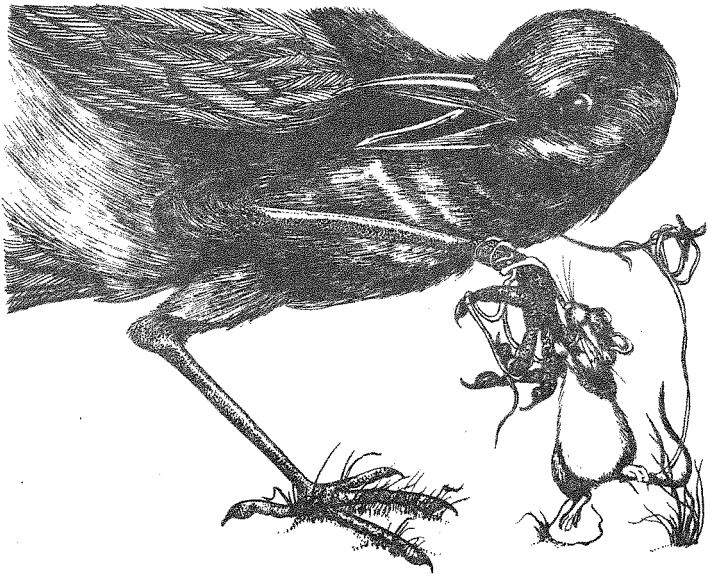
The crow was sitting on the fence, pecking ineffectively at the string with his bill, cawing softly to himself, a miserable sound. After a moment he spread his wings, and she could see he was going to try to fly again.

"Wait," said Mrs. Frisby.

The crow looked down and saw her in the grass.

"Why should I wait? Can't you see I'm caught? I've got to get loose."

"But if you make so much noise again the cat is sure to hear. If he hasn't heard already."



"You'd make noise, too, if you were tied to a fence with a piece of string, and with night coming on."

"I would not," said Mrs. Frisby, "if I had any sense and knew there was a cat nearby. Who tied you?" She was trying to calm the crow, who was obviously terrified.

He looked embarrassed and stared at his feet. "I picked up the string. It got tangled with my foot. I sat on the fence to try to get it off, and it caught on the fence."

"*Why* did you pick up the string?"

The crow, who was very young indeed—in fact, only a year old—said wearily, "Because it was shiny."

"You knew better."

"I had been told."

Birdbrain, thought Mrs. Frisby, and then recalled what her husband used to say: The size of the brain is no measure of its capacity. And well she might recall it, for the crow's head was double the size of her own.

"Sit quietly," she said. "Look toward the house and see if you see the cat."

"I don't see him. But I can't see behind the bushes. Oh, if I could just fly higher . . ."

"Don't," said Mrs. Frisby. She looked at the sun; it was setting behind the trees. She thought of Timothy, and of the medicine she was carrying. Yet she knew she could not leave the foolish crow there to be killed—and killed he surely would be before sunrise—just for want of a few minutes' work. She might still make it by dusk if she hurried.

"Come down here," she said. "I'll get the string off."

"How?" said the crow dubiously.

"Don't argue. I have only a few minutes." She said this in a voice so authoritative that the crow fluttered down immediately.

"But if the cat comes . . ." he said.

"If the cat comes, he'll knock you off the fence with one jump and catch you with the next. Be still." She was already at work with her sharp teeth, gnawing at the string. It was twined and twisted and twined again around his right ankle, and she saw she would have to cut through it three times to get it off.

As she finished the second strand, the crow, who was staring toward the house, suddenly cried out:

"I see the cat!"

"*Quiet!*" whispered Mrs. Frisby. "Does he see us?"

"I don't know. Yes. He's looking at me. I don't think he can see you."

"Stand perfectly still. Don't get in a panic." She did not look up, but started on the third strand.

"He's moving this way."

"Fast or slow?"

"Medium. I think he's trying to figure out what I'm doing."

She cut through the last strand, gave a tug, and the string fell off.

"There, you're free. Fly off, and be quick."

"But what about you?"

"Maybe he hasn't seen me."

"But he will. He's coming closer."

Mrs. Frisby looked around. There was not a bit of cover anywhere near, not a rock nor a hole nor a log; nothing at all closer than the chicken yard—and that was in the direction the cat was coming from, and a long way off.

"Look," said the crow. "Climb on my back. Quick. And hang on."

Mrs. Frisby did what she was told, first grasping the precious packages of medicine tightly between her teeth.

"Are you on?"

"Yes."

She gripped the feathers on his back, felt the beat of his powerful black wings, felt a dizzying upward surge, and shut her eyes tight.

"Just in time," said the crow, and she heard the angry scream of the cat as he leaped at where they had just been. "It's lucky you're so light. I can scarcely tell

you're there." Lucky indeed, thought Mrs. Frisby; if it had not been for your foolishness, I'd never have gotten into such a scrape. However, she thought it wise not to say so, under the circumstances.

"Where do you live?" asked the crow.

"In the garden patch. Near the big stone."

"I'll drop you off there." He banked alarmingly, and for a moment Mrs. Frisby thought he meant it literally. But a few seconds later—so fast does the crow fly—they were gliding to earth a yard from her front door.

"Thank you very much," said Mrs. Frisby, hopping to the ground.

"It's I who should be thanking you," said the crow. "You saved my life."

"And you mine."

"Ah, but that's not quite even. Yours wouldn't have been risked if it had not been for me—me and my piece of string." And since this was just what she had been thinking, Mrs. Frisby did not argue.

"We all help one another against the cat," she said.

"True. Just the same, I am in debt to you. If the time ever comes when I can help you, I hope you will ask me. My name is Jeremy. Mention it to any crow you see in these woods, and he will find me."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Frisby. "I will remember."

Jeremy flew away to the woods, and she entered her house, taking the three doses of medicine with her.

Mr. Fitzgibbon's Plow

When Mrs. Frisby went into her house, she found Timothy asleep and the other children waiting, frightened, sad and subdued.

"He went to sleep right after you left," Teresa said. "He's waked up twice, and the second time he wasn't delirious. He said his chest hurt and his head hurt. But Mother, he seemed so weak—he could hardly talk. He asked where you were, and I told him. Then he went back to sleep."

Mrs. Frisby went to where Timothy lay, a small ball of damp fur curled under a bit of cloth blanket. He looked scarcely larger than he had when she and Mr.

Frisby had carried him to Mr. Ages as an infant, and the thought of that trip made her wish Mr. Frisby were alive to reassure the children and tell them not to worry. But he was not, and it was she who must say it.

"Don't worry," she said. "Mr. Ages gave me some medicine for him and says he will recover." She mixed the contents of one of the packets, a gray-green powder, in water, and then gently shook Timothy awake.

He smiled. "You're back," he said in a voice as small as a whisper.

"I'm back, and I've brought you some medicine. Mr. Ages says it will make you all right." She lifted his head on her arm, and he swallowed the medicine. "I expect it's bitter," she said.

"It's not so bad," he said. "It tastes like pepper." And he fell back to sleep immediately.

The next morning, as predicted, his fever was lower, his breathing grew easier, and his heartbeat slowed down; still, that day he slept seven hours out of each eight. The next day he stayed awake longer, and on the third day he had no fever at all, just as Mr. Ages had said. However, since Mr. Ages had been right in all that, Mrs. Frisby knew he was sure to have been right in the other things he had said: Timothy was not really strong yet. He must stay in bed, stay warm, and breathe only warm air.

During those three days she had stayed close by his side, but on the fourth she felt cheerful enough to go for a walk, and also to fetch some more of the corn from the stump so they could have it for supper.

She went out her front door into the sunshine and was surprised to find a spring day waiting for her. The

weather had turned warm while she had stayed indoors; February was over and March had come in, as they say, like a lamb. There was a smell of dampness in the air as the frosted ground thawed, a smell of things getting ready to grow. It made her feel even more cheerful than before, and she walked almost gaily across the garden.

And yet despite the fine warmth of the day—indeed, in a way, because of it—Mrs. Frisby could not quite get rid of a nagging worry that kept flickering in her mind; it was the kind of worry that, if you push it out of this corner of your thoughts, pops up in that corner, and finally in the middle, where it has to be faced. It was the thought of Moving Day.

Everybody knows that the ground hog comes up from the deep hole where he has slept away the winter, looks around, and if he decides the cold weather is not over, goes back down to sleep for another six weeks. Field mice like Mrs. Frisby are not so lucky. When winter is over, they must move out of the garden and back to the meadow or the pasture. For as soon as the weather allows, Farmer Fitzgibbon's tractor comes rumbling through, pulling the sharp-bladed plow through the soil, turning over every foot of it. No animal caught in the garden that day is likely to escape alive, and all the winter homes, all the tunnels and holes and nests and cocoons, are torn up. After the plow comes the harrow, with its heavy creaking disks, and then the people with hoes and seeds.

Not all the field mice move into the garden for the winter, of course. Some find their way to barn lofts; some even creep into people's houses and live under the eaves or in attics, taking their chances with mousetraps.

But the Frisbys had always come to the garden, preferring the relative safety and freedom of the outdoors.

Moving Day therefore depends on the weather, and that is why a fine day set Mrs. Frisby worrying, even as she enjoyed it. As soon as the frost was out of the ground, the plow would come, and that could happen as much as a month earlier (or later) one year than the last.

And the worry was this: If it came too soon, Timothy would not be able to move. He was supposed to stay in bed, and moving meant a long walk across the field of winter wheat, up and down the hill to the brook's edge, where the Frisbys made their summer home. Not only that—the home itself would be damp and chilly for the first few weeks (as summer homes always are) until early spring turned to late spring and the nights grew truly warm. This was something that Mrs. Frisby and the children did not ordinarily mind; Moving Day, in fact, was normally a gay time, for it marked the end of the gray weather and the frost. It was like the beginning of a summer holiday.

But this year? Now that Mrs. Frisby had faced the problem, she did not see any answer except to hope that the day would not come too early. In another month (according to Mr. Ages), Timothy would be strong enough. Perhaps she was only borrowing trouble. One warm day, she told herself, does not make a summer. No, nor even a spring.

She walked on through the garden and saw ahead of her a small figure she knew. It was a lady shrew, a tiny thing scarcely bigger than a peanut, but with a wit as sharp as her teeth. She lived in a simple hole in the

ground a few yards away; Mrs. Frisby met her often and had grown to like her, though shrews are generally unpopular, having a reputation for short tempers and extremely large appetites.

"Good morning," said Mrs. Frisby.

"Ah, Mrs. Frisby. Good morning indeed. Too good is what I'm thinking." The shrew was holding a stalk of straw, which she now thrust into the earth. It went down easily for two inches or more before it bent in her hand. "Look at that. The top of the frost is gone already. Another few days like this, and it will be all gone. Then we will have the tractor in here again, breaking everything up."

"So soon? Do you really think so?" asked Mrs. Frisby, her worry returning in a rush, stronger than before.

"He plows when the frost is gone. Remember the spring of sixty-five? That year he plowed on the eleventh day of March, and on a Sunday at that. I moved down to the woods that night and nearly froze to death in a miserable hollow log. And that day came after a week of days just like this."

Mrs. Frisby did remember it; her family, too, had shivered through those chilly nights. For the fact was,

the earlier Moving Day came, the colder the nights were likely to be.

"Oh, dear," she said. "I hope it doesn't happen this year. Poor Timothy's too sick to move."

"Sick is he? Take him to Mr. Ages."

"I've been myself. But he was too weak to get out of bed, and still is."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Then we must hope for another frost, or that the tractor will break down. I wish someone would drive a tractor through *his* house and see how he likes it." So muttering, the lady shrew moved off, and Mrs. Frisby continued across the garden. The remark was illogical, of course, for they both knew that without Mr. Fitzgibbon's plow there would be no garden to live in at all, and there was no way he could turn the earth without also turning up their houses.

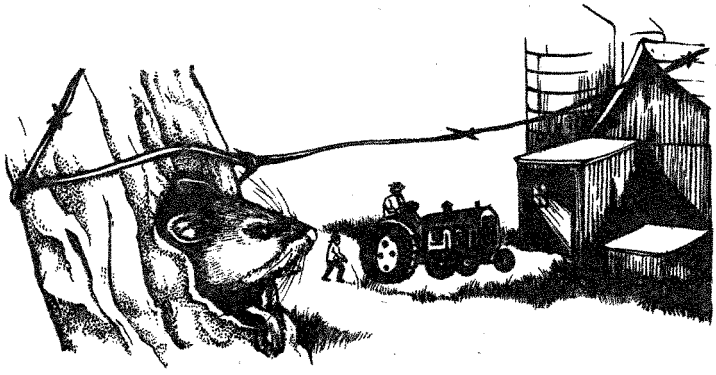
Or was there? What the shrew had said was meant to be sympathetic, but it was not helpful. It meant, Mrs. Frisby realized, that she, too, could see no solution to the problem. But that did not mean that there was none. She remembered something her husband, Mr. Frisby, used to say: All doors are hard to unlock until you have the key. All right. She must try to find the key. But where? Whom to ask?

And then, as if to make things worse, she heard a sound that filled her with alarm. It came from across the fence in the farmyard, a loud, sputtering roar. It was Mr. Fitzgibbon starting his tractor.

Five Days

The sound of the tractor did not necessarily mean that Mr. Fitzgibbon was getting ready to plow. He used it for many other things—hauling hay and firewood, for instance, and mowing, and clearing snow in the winter. Mrs. Frisby reminded herself of all this as she hurried over to the corner post.

That was a very thick fence post at the corner of the garden nearest the farmhouse and the tractor shed. She had discovered long ago that it had, a few inches above the ground, a convenient knot hole with a hollow place behind it in which she could hide, when she had reason to, and watch what was going on in the yard. The cat, Dragon, also knew of its existence, so she had to look sharply when she came out.



She came up carefully behind the post, stared this way and that, and then darted around it and up into the hole. All clear.

Mr. Fitzgibbon had backed the tractor out of the big, cluttered shed where he kept it. Leaving the motor idling, he climbed down from the seat and called to the house. In a moment his older son Paul came out, closing the door carefully behind him. Paul, at fifteen, was a quiet, hardworking boy, rather clumsy in his movements but strong and careful about his chores. In a few seconds he was followed by his younger brother Billy, who at age twelve was noisier and had an annoying habit of skimming rocks across the grass at anything that moved. Mrs. Frisby did not much care for Billy.

"All right, boys," said Mr. Fitzgibbon, "let's haul it out and see about that linch pin."

"It was just about worn through last fall, I remember," Paul said. The boys disappeared into the shed, and Mr. Fitzgibbon remounted the tractor; he turned it around and backed it slowly toward the shed, so that the rear end was out of Mrs. Frisby's sight.

There was some clanking and clanging inside the shed while Mr. Fitzgibbon, looking over his shoulder, worked

some levers on the side of the tractor.

"All set?"

He shifted gears and eased the tractor forward again. Hitched behind it, clear of the ground, was the plow.

Mrs. Frisby's heart sank. Surely he was not going to start *now?*

But as soon as he had the plow out in the sunlight, Mr. Fitzgibbon turned the tractor's engine off. It died with a sputter, and they all gathered around the plow-hitch.

"Sure enough," said Mr. Fitzgibbon. "She's just about ready to shear. Paul, I'm glad you remembered that. If I order it today, Henderson's will have a new one in three or four days."

"It took five days last time," Paul said.

"Five, then. That's just about right anyway. It's too wet to plow now, but five days like this ought to dry the ground out. Let's grease up while we've got it out. Billy, get the grease gun."

In her hiding place. Mrs. Frisby breathed a sigh of relief, and then began to worry again immediately. Five days, although a respite, was too short. Three weeks, Mr. Ages had said, would be the soonest Timothy could get out of bed, the soonest he could live through a chill night without getting pneumonia again. She sighed and felt like weeping. If only the summer house were as warm as the cinder block house. But it was not, and even if it were, he could not make the long journey. They might try to carry him—but what was the use of that? Only to have him get sick again after the first night there.

She might, she thought, go back to Mr. Ages and see if he had any ideas that would help. Was there some

medicine that would make Timothy get strong sooner? She doubted it; surely, if he had such medicine he would have given it to her the first time. She was thinking about this when she climbed out through the knot hole and slithered to the ground below—not ten feet from the cat.

Dragon lay stretched out in the sunlight, but he was not asleep. His head was up and his yellow eyes were open, staring in her direction. She gasped in terror and whirled around the fence post to put it between her and him. Then, without pausing, she set out on a dash across the garden as fast as she could run, expecting at any instant to hear the cat's scream and feel his great claws on her back. She reached the shrew's hole and considered for a fraction of a second diving into it, but it was too small.

Then she glanced back over her shoulder and saw an amazing sight. The cat had not moved at all! He was lying exactly as before, except that now one of his eyes was closed. The other, however, was still looking straight at her, so she did not pause, but raced on.

Finally, when she was a safe distance away—two thirds across the garden and nearly home—she stopped and looked again more carefully. The cat still lay there and seemed to have gone to sleep. That was so odd—so unheard of—she could hardly believe it. Feeling quite safe, but puzzled, she looked for a vantage point from which she could see better. By rights, she should be dead, and though she had escaped by what seemed almost a miracle, she scolded herself for having been so careless. If the cat had killed her, who would take care of the children?

She saw a dead asparagus plant, stiff, tall, with branches like a small tree. She climbed it and from near the top looked back to the farmyard. Mr. Fitzgibbon and his sons had finished greasing the tractor and gone on somewhere else. But the cat still lay on the grass, seemingly asleep. Why had he not chased her? Was it possible that, close as she had been, he had not seen her? She could not believe that. The only explanation she could think of was that he had just finished a very large meal and was feeling so stuffed and lazy he did not want to take the trouble to get up. But that was almost as unbelievable; certainly it had never happened before. Was it possible that he was sick?

Then, on what had already been a day of oddities and alarms, she noticed something else strange. Beyond the cat, quite far beyond, between the barn and the house, she saw what looked like a troop of dark gray figures marching in columns. Marching? Not exactly, but moving slowly and all in line.

They were rats.

There were a dozen of them, and at first she could not quite see what they were up to. Then she saw something moving, between them and behind them. It looked like a thick piece of rope, a long piece, maybe twenty feet. No. It was stiffer than rope. It was electric cable, the heavy, black kind used for outdoor wiring and strung on telephone poles. The rats were hauling it laboriously through the grass, inching it along in the direction of a very large wild rosebush in the far corner of the yard. Mrs. Frisby quickly guessed where they were taking it, though she could not guess why. In that rosebush, concealed and protected by dense tangles of fiercely sharp

thorns, was the entrance to a rat hole. All the animals knew about it and were careful to stay away.

But what would the rats want with such a long piece of wire? Mrs. Frisby could not imagine. Even more curious, how did they dare to pull it across the yard in broad daylight when the cat was right there? The rats were bigger than Mrs. Frisby, and could be, when necessary, dangerous fighters, but they were no match for Dragon.

She watched them for quite a long time. It was obvious that they knew exactly what they were doing, and they looked as well drilled as a group of soldiers. They had about twenty-five yards to go to reach the rosebush; as if at a signal (which, however, she was too far away to hear), they would all pull together, moving the wire about a foot. Then they would pause, rest, and heave again. It was about twenty minutes before the first rat disappeared into the bush. A little later the last bit of wire disappeared behind them like a thin black snake, and Mrs. Frisby climbed down from the asparagus bush.

All that time the cat had slept on.

A Favor from Jeremy

In her worry about Moving Day, in watching the tractor, the cat, and finally the rats, Mrs. Frisby had forgotten that she had set out originally to get some corn for supper. Now she remembered it, so instead of continuing to her house she turned toward the far corner of the garden and the stump at the edge of the woods beyond. She was a little tired after her dash from the cat, so she walked along slowly, feeling the warmth of the sun and the smell of the breeze.

This mild breeze, carrying the moist essence of early spring, caused a dead leaf to flutter here and there, and across the garden near the fence it moved something that

sparkled in the sunlight. This caught the corner of Mrs. Frisby's eye; she glanced at it, saw that it was only a bit of tin foil (or aluminum foil) blown from somewhere, and she looked away again. Then she looked back, for at that moment a black object plummeted from the sky, and she recognized her friend Jeremy the crow.

A thought crossed Mrs. Frisby's mind. She changed direction again, and, moving more quickly, ran across the earth to where Jeremy stood. He was hopping around the shiny piece of foil, eyeing it from one direction and another.

What had occurred to Mrs. Frisby was that although Jeremy was not the brightest of animals she had met, and though he was young, he knew things and places she did not, and one had to begin somewhere. As she approached him, he had picked up the foil in his beak and was spreading his wings to fly off.

"Wait, please," she called.

He turned, folded his wings, and then replaced the foil carefully on the ground.

"Hello," he said.

"You remember me?"

"Of course. You saved me from the cat." Then he added, "What do you think of this piece of foil?"

Mrs. Frisby looked at it without much interest.

"It's just a piece of foil," she said. "It's not very big."

"True. But it's shiny—especially when the sun strikes it just so."

"Why are you so interested in shiny things?"

"Well, really, I'm not. At least not very. But I have a friend who likes them, so when I see one I pick it up."

"I see. That's very thoughtful. And would the friend

be female?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. She is. How did you know?"

"Just a guess," said Mrs. Frisby. "Do you remember saying once that if I needed help, I might ask you?"

"I do. Any time. Just ask for Jeremy. Any of the crows can find me. And now, if you will excuse me . . ." He bent over to pick up the foil again.

"Please don't go yet," said Mrs. Frisby. "I think perhaps you can help me now."

"Ah," said Jeremy. "What kind of help? Are you hungry? I'll bring you some seeds from the barn loft. I know where they're stored."

"No, thank you," said Mrs. Frisby. "We have enough to eat." And then she told him, as briefly as she could, about Timothy, his sickness, and the problem of Moving Day. Jeremy knew about Moving Day; crows do not have to move, but they keep a close watch on such activities as plowing and planting so as to get their fair share of what's planted, and with their sharp eyes they see the small animals leaving before the plow.

So he clucked sympathetically when he heard Mrs. Frisby's story, cocked his head to one side, and thought as hard as he could for as long as he could, which was

about thirty seconds. His eyes closed with the effort.

"I don't know what you should do," he said finally. "I'm sorry. But maybe I can help even so. At least, I can tell you what we do when we don't know what to do."

"We?"

"The crows. Most of the birds."

"What do you do, then?"

"Over that way," Jeremy nodded in the direction of the deep woods and faraway mountains that rose beyond the fence, "about a mile from here there grows a very large beech tree, the biggest tree in the whole forest. Near the top of the tree there is a hollow in the trunk. In the hollow lives an owl who is the oldest animal in the woods—some say in the world.

"When we don't know what to do, we ask him. Sometimes he answers our questions, sometimes he doesn't. It depends on how he feels. Or as my father used to say—what kind of a humor he's in."

Or possibly, thought Mrs. Frisby, on whether or not he knows the answer. But she said:

"Could you ask him, then, if he knows of any help for me?" She did not think it likely that he would.

"Ah, no," Jeremy said, "that won't do. That is, I could ask him, but I don't think the owl would listen. Imagine. A crow come to ask for help for a lady mouse with a sick child. He wouldn't believe me."

"Then what's to be done?"

"What's to be done? You must go yourself and ask him."

"But I could never find the tree. And if I did, I don't

think I could climb so high."

"Ah, now. That is where I can help, as I said I would. I will carry you there on my back, the way I did before. And home again, of course."

Mrs. Frisby hesitated. It was one thing to leap on a crow's back when the cat is only three jumps away and coming fast, but quite another to do it deliberately, and to fly deep into a dark and unknown forest. In short, Mrs. Frisby was afraid.

Then she thought of Timothy, and of the big steel plow blade. She told herself: I have no choice. If there is any chance that the owl might be able to help me, to advise me, I must go. She said to Jeremy:

"Thank you very much. I will go and talk to the owl if you will take me. It's a great favor."

"It's nothing," said Jeremy. "You're welcome. But we can't go now."

"Why not?"

"In the daytime, when the sun is out, the owl goes deep into the hollow and sleeps. That is, they say he sleeps, but I don't believe it. How could anyone sleep so long? I think he sits in there, part of the time at least, and thinks. And that's why he knows so much.

"But anyway, he won't speak in the daytime, not to anyone. And at night he's out flying, flying and hunting . . ."

"I know," said Mrs. Frisby—and that was another reason to be afraid.

"The time to see him is just at dusk. Then, when the light gets dim, he comes to the entrance of the hollow and watches while the dark comes in. That's the time to ask him questions."

"I understand," said Mrs. Frisby. "Shall we go this evening?"

"At five o'clock," Jeremy said, "I'll be at your house." He picked up the piece of foil in his bill, waved goodbye, and flew off.

The Owl

Jeremy appeared as promised when the last thumbnail of sun winked out over the mountains beyond the meadow. Mrs. Frisby was waiting, her heart pounding in her ears, and three of the children were there to watch—Teresa and Martin standing beside their mother, and Cynthia, who was afraid of the crow, just a pair of round eyes peering out the round doorway. Timothy was down below, taking a nap, and had not been told about the expedition lest he worry and blame himself for the risk his mother must take. (Indeed, the words Moving Day had not been mentioned in his presence.) Even to the other children Mrs. Frisby had explained

only a part of the problem; that is, she had not told them that there were only five days left, nor anything about Mr. Fitzgibbon and the tractor. She did not want them to worry, either.

Jeremy landed with a *swoosh*—a bit dramatically, perhaps—and nodded at the children and Mrs. Frisby.

"Hello," he said. "Here I am."

Mrs. Frisby introduced Martin and Teresa (and Cynthia's eyes). Martin, who wished he were going on the trip himself, asked Jeremy in excitement:

"How high can you fly?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly," Jeremy said. "A couple of miles, I guess."

"Mother, did you hear? You'll be two *miles* up in the air."

"Martin, it won't be necessary to go so high on this trip."

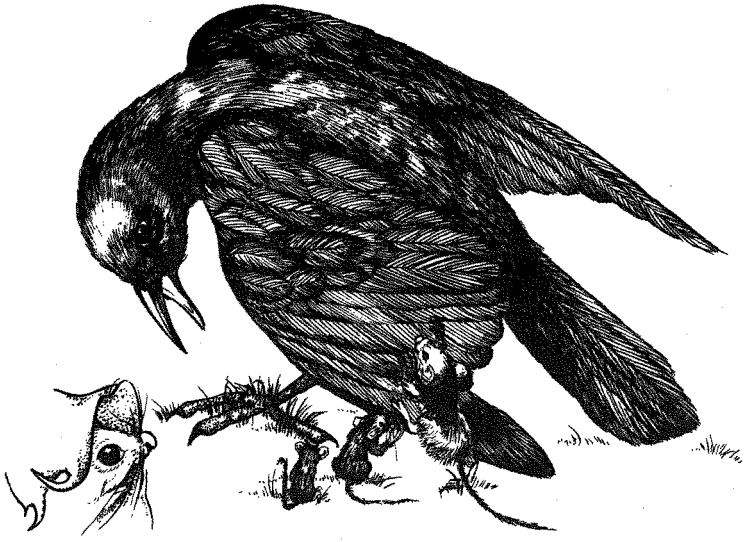
Jeremy said cheerfully: "No, but I can, if you'd like."

"No, thank you. I wouldn't think of your taking the trouble." She was trying hard to hide her terror, and Martin had not helped matters at all. But Jeremy suddenly saw that she was trembling and realized that she must be afraid.

"It's all right," he said kindly. "There's nothing to be nervous about. I fly over the woods a dozen times a day."

Yes, thought Mrs. Frisby, but *you're* not riding on your back, and *you* can't fall off.

"All right," she said as bravely as she could. "I'm ready. Teresa and Martin, take care of Timothy until I come back, and be sure you don't tell him where I've



gone." With a small leap she was on Jeremy's back, lying as flat as she could and holding tight to the glossy feathers between his wings, as a horseback rider grips the horse's mane before a jump. Martin and Teresa waved goodbye, but she did not see them, for she had her face pressed against the feathers and her eyes closed.

Once again she felt the surge of power as the crow's broad wings beat down against the air; this time it lasted longer for they were going higher than before. Then the beating became gentler as they leveled off, and then, to her alarm, it stopped altogether. What was wrong? The crow must have felt her grow tense, for suddenly from ahead she heard his voice:

"An updraft," he said. "We're soaring. There's us-

ually one over this stretch of woods in the evening." A current of warm air, rising from the woods, was carrying them along. So smooth was the motion that they seemed to stand still, and Mrs. Frisby ventured to open her eyes and lift her head just a trifle. She could not look straight down—that was Jeremy's back—but off to the right, and a bit behind them, she saw a gray-brown square the size of a postage stamp. She realized with a gasp that it was the garden patch, and Martin and Teresa, if they were still there, were too small to be seen.

"Look to the left," said Jeremy, who was watching her over his shoulder. She did, and saw what looked like a wide, fearsome snake, blue-green in color, coiling through the woods.

"What is it?" she asked in wonder.

"You really don't know? It's the river."

"Oh," said Mrs. Frisby, rather ashamed of her ignorance. She had heard of the river, of course, but had not known that it looked like a snake. She had never been there, since to reach it one had to cross the entire width of the forest. There were advantages to being a bird.

In a minute more they had left the updraft, and Jeremy's wings resumed pumping. They went higher, and Mrs. Frisby closed her eyes again. When she opened them, the garden patch had vanished far behind them, and Jeremy, searching the trees below, began a long, slanting descent. Eventually, as he banked sharply, Mrs. Frisby saw off his wing tip a gray-brown patch among a stand of tall green pines; from so high it looked like a gnarled gray bush, but as they circled lower she could see that it was in fact an enormous tree, leafless, skeletal,

and partly dead. One huge branch had recently broken off and fallen, and three pine trunks lay bent double under its weight. It was a gloomy and primeval spot, deeply shadowed in the gray dusk. Jeremy circled over it one more time, looking at a certain mark three-fourths of the way up the towering main trunk. Just below this spot another great branch, itself as big as an ordinary tree, jutted out over the tops of the pines, and on this at last Jeremy fluttered gently to rest. They were some ten feet from the main trunk, and Mrs. Frisby could see, just above the place where the branch joined the tree, a dark round hole as large as a lunch plate.

"We're here," Jeremy said in a low voice. "There's where he lives."

"Should I get down?" Instinctively, Mrs. Frisby spoke in a whisper.

"Yes. We've got to walk closer. But quietly. He doesn't like loud noises."

"It's so high." She still clung to the crow's back.

"But the limb is broad. You'll be safe enough."

And indeed the limb was almost as wide as a sidewalk. Mrs. Frisby gathered her courage, slithered down, and felt the solid wood under her feet; still she could not help thinking about how far it was to the ground below.

"There he is," said Jeremy, staring at the hole. "It's just the right time."

They inched their way along the limb, Mrs. Frisby gripping the rough bark tightly, being careful not to stumble; and as they came closer, she could dimly perceive a shape like a squat vase sitting back in the hollow of the tree. Near the top of the vase, wide apart, two round yellow eyes glowed in the dark.

"He can't see us," Jeremy whispered. "It's still too light."

Perhaps not, but he could hear, for now a deep round voice, a voice like an organ tone, echoed out of the hollow trunk:

"Who is standing outside my house?"

Jeremy answered:

"Sir, I am a crow. My name is Jeremy. And I have brought a friend. I hope we have not disturbed you. My friend needs your advice."

"I see. And can your friend not speak for himself?"

"Sir, my friend is a lady, a lady mouse."

"A mouse?" The sonorous voice sounded unbelieving. "Why should a crow be a friend to a mouse?"

"I was trapped, sir, and she set me free. She saved me from the cat."

"That is possible," said the owl, "though unusual. I have heard of such a thing before. We all help one another against the cat."

"True. And now, sir, my friend herself is in trouble."

"I understand," said the owl, moving closer to the round entrance of his hollow. "Mrs. Mouse, I cannot see you, for the glare of the daylight is too bright. But if you will step inside my house, I will listen to what you have to say."

Mrs. Frisby hesitated. She knew something of the dietary habits of owls, and she did not much like the idea of being trapped in his house. Finally she said timidly:

"Sir, I would not want to intrude. And I can hear you quite well from out here."

"Mrs. Mouse, please understand that I have no interest

at all, as a general rule, in helping mice to solve their problems. If you have indeed saved a bird from the cat, I will spare you a few minutes. But I do not discuss problems with people I cannot see. Either come inside, or tell your friend to take you home again."

Behind her, Mrs. Frisby heard Jeremy whisper, very softly, "It's all right. He wouldn't harm you in his own home."

She whispered back, "I hope not." She walked up the limb to the hollow, climbed over the sill and stepped inside.

Up so close, the owl looked very large. Each of his feathery feet was tipped with five gleaming talons an inch long. His beak was curved and sharp and cruel. He blinked his yellow eyes and said:

"Please step across the room, away from the light."

Mrs. Frisby did as she was told. As she grew accustomed to the dimness, she looked around her. The chamber into which she had stepped was spacious—at that level, almost half of the huge trunk was hollow—and clean, but the floor was extremely rough. It was not really a floor at all, but only the jagged ends of dead wood sticking up from below, like stalagmites in a cave, so that Mrs. Frisby had to climb rather than walk as she crossed the room. In the back the walls narrowed to a corner, and there she saw that the owl had built himself a nest, as big as a water bucket, of twigs and leaves; from the top she could see protruding some wisps of the feathers with which he had lined it.

When she got near this nest, she stopped and faced the owl, who had turned from the light of the doorway and was peering at her with his great yellow eyes. Jer-

emy was nowhere to be seen. She could only hope he was still waiting on the limb outside.

"Now," said the owl, "you may state your problem."