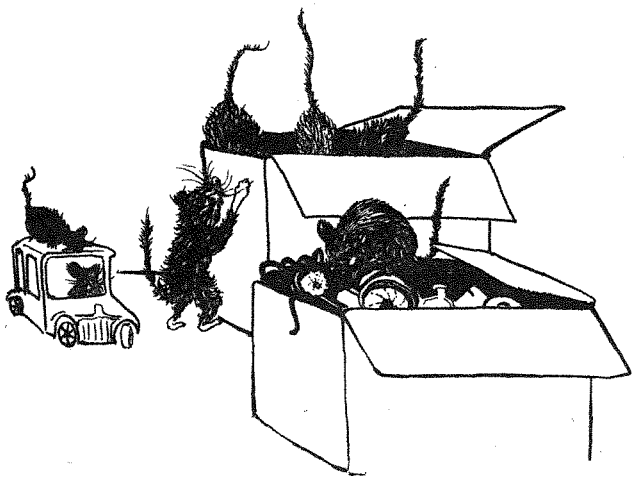
Thorn Valley

It might almost be easier to tell what *wasn't* in it," Nicodemus continued. "That truck was as roomy as a small bus, and the old man hadn't wasted a square foot of it. Not that it was cluttered; on the contrary, everything was neatly in place on its shelf, or hook, or in its cabinet."

It took us a while to understand what a treasure we had found. The truck contained, as you might expect, a big stock of toys. It also contained the old man's simple living quarters: a cot, a lamp, a work table, a folding chair, a bucket for carrying water, a plate, pots, pans,



and so on. There was a tiny refrigerator with food in it, and some canned stuff—peas, beans, peaches, things like that.

Most of the toys—we thought at first—we had no particular use for. There were toy automobiles and trucks, windmills and merry-go-rounds, airplanes, boats and a lot of others, mostly run on batteries. It was entertaining to look at them, and some of them we even tried out; for a while the floor looked like Christmas morning.

We tired of that and explored farther into the truck. Up near the front we found several large cardboard boxes, and when we opened them we found that they were full of electric motors of assorted sizes—replacement engines for broken or worn out toys. There were dozens of them, ranging from very small, no bigger than a spool of thread, up to some so heavy we could hardly move them.

Then, next to these, we found the real treasure: the old man's tools. They were neatly arranged in shining rows inside a steel cabinet as big as a trunk. There were screwdrivers, saws, hammers, clamps, vises, wrenches, pliers. There were welding tools, soldering irons, and electric drills. And the beauty of it was, since they were designed for working on toys, they were nearly all miniature, easily small enough for us to handle. Yet they were themselves not toys; they were made of the finest tempered steel, like the tools of a watchmaker or a dentist.

It was Arthur who said it first:

"Do you realize what we've got here? We could open our own machine shop. With these tools and all these motors, we could make anything we wanted."

"We could," said Jenner, "except you've forgotten one thing."

"What's that?"

"We have no electricity. The old man couldn't have run these tools off batteries. The small toy motors, yes, but not the real ones, not the power tools. He had to plug into house current to use those. See, there's his extension cord on the wall."

There was a long coil of heavy black cable hanging from a hook on the wall. It had a plug on one end and a socket on the other.

Now another rat spoke up, a rat named Sullivan. He was a great friend of Arthur's, and like him, had a particular interest in engines and electricity.

"Maybe," he said, "we could plug into a house current, too."

"How?" I said. "Who'd let us?"

"Do you remember that cave we looked at the other day? The one we decided was too close to the farmhouse?"

That was the beginning of it. The end you have seen yourself. He was speaking of the cave you saw today.

We all trooped back to it and examined it more carefully. It *was* too close, or at least closer than we had planned to live to a human habitation. But then we saw the huge rosebush near the tractor shed, where, with quite a lot of digging, we could put a concealed entrance. But most important, we noticed that there was an electric light in the tractor shed.

Mr. Fitzgibbon had an underground power cable leading out from his house to the shed. We dug a tunnel to it, tapped it, and we had all the electricity we needed. Near it ran a water pipe. We tapped that, too, and we had running water. Then, a few at a time, we moved the tools and the motors from the Toy Tinker's truck to the cave. We got nearly all of them before the truck disappeared. We went back one day and it was gone—only the hole remained, where its tire had been sunk. The forest rangers must have found it and hauled it away. But they never discovered or disturbed the mound where the old man lay buried.

So we built ourselves the life you see around you. Our colony thrived and grew to one hundred and fifteen. We taught our children to read and write. We had plenty to eat, running water, electricity, a fan to draw in fresh air, an elevator, a refrigerator. Deep underground, our home stayed warm in winter and cool in

summer. It was a comfortable, almost luxurious existence.

And yet all was not well. After the first burst of energy, the moving in of the machines, the digging of tunnels and rooms—after that was done, a feeling of discontent settled upon us like some creeping disease.

We were reluctant to admit it at first. We tried to ignore the feeling or to fight it off by building more things—bigger rooms, fancier furniture, carpeted hallways, things we did not really need. I was reminded of a story I had read at the Boniface Estate when I was looking for things written about rats. It was about a woman in a small town who bought a vacuum cleaner. Her name was Mrs. Jones, and up until then she, like all of her neighbors, had kept her house spotlessly clean by using a broom and a mop. But the vacuum cleaner did it faster and better, and soon Mrs. Jones was the envy of all the other housewives in town—so they bought vacuum cleaners, too.

The vacuum cleaner business was so brisk, in fact, that the company that made them opened a branch factory in the town. The factory used a lot of electricity, of course, and so did the women with their vacuum cleaners, so the local electric power company had to put up a big new plant to keep them all running. In its furnaces the power plant burned coal, and out of its chimneys black smoke poured day and night, blanketing the town with soot and making all the floors dirtier than ever. Still, by working twice as hard and twice as long, the women of the town were able to keep their floors *almost* as clean as they had been before Mrs. Jones ever bought a vacuum cleaner in the first place.

The story was part of a book of essays, and the reason I had read it so eagerly was that it was called "The Rat Race"—which, I learned, means a race where, no matter how fast you run, you don't get anywhere. But there was nothing in the book about rats, and I felt bad about the title because, I thought, it wasn't a rat race at all, it was a People Race, and no sensible rats would ever do anything so foolish.

And yet here we were, rats getting caught up in something a lot like the People Race, and for no good reason. And the worst thing was that even with our make-work projects, we didn't really have enough to do. Our life was too easy. I thought of what the scientist had written about our prairie dog ancestors, and I was worried.

So were many of the others. We called a meeting—indeed, a whole series of meetings, extending over more than a year. We talked and argued and considered, and we remembered our evenings in the library at the Boniface Estate when we had wondered what a rat civilization would be like. Oddly enough, Jenner, my old and best friend, took little part in these discussions; he remained rather glumly silent and seemed disinterested. But most of the others felt as I did, and slowly some things became clear; we saw our problems and we figured out, as well as we could, what to do about them.

First, we realized that finding the Toy Tinker's truck, which had seemed like such an enormous stroke of luck, had in fact led us into the very trap we should have avoided. As a result we were now stealing more than ever before: not only food, but electricity and water. Even the air we breathed was drawn in by a

stolen fan, run by stolen current.

It was this, of course, that made our life so easy that it seemed pointless. We did not have enough work to do because a thief's life is always based on somebody else's work.

Second, there was always the fear, in the back of all our minds, that we might get caught. Or perhaps not caught—we took precautions against that—so much as found out. Mr. Fitzgibbon was surely aware that some of his crops were being removed. And as our group grew larger, we would have to take more and more.

Already, he had begun lining some of his grain bins with sheet metal. That didn't bother us particularly, because we knew how to get the doors open. But suppose he should take to locking them? We could cut through the locks, of course, or even through the sheet metal walls; we have the tools for that. But it would be a dead giveaway. What would Mr. Fitzgibbon think about rats who could cut through metal?

All these things we worried about and talked about and puzzled over. But we could not find any easy answer—because there was none.

There was, however, a hard answer.

I began taking long walks into the forest. I had an idea in the back of my head. Sometimes I went alone, sometimes with some of the others.

On one particular day I went with Jenner. I had not yet told him about my idea, nor did I on the morning we set out, but merely proposed a direction. We took along enough food for lunch. I remember that it was autumn, a bright, cool day; the leaves made a rustling

sound when the wind blew, and some were turning yellow.

In my walks I had been exploring the jeep trails, trying to find out where they went and where they didn't go, trying to find the wildest parts of the forest, places where not even the rangers ever went.

A few times I tried asking for information. I asked two squirrels, for instance, if they knew what lay on the other side of a mountain that rose before me. But they were silly, fearful creatures; and after looking at me in surprise, they both scurried up an oak tree and scolded senselessly in loud voices, shaking their tails, until I left. I asked some chipmunks, and they were more polite. They couldn't answer my question (never having been farther than a hundred yards from where they were born!), but advised me to ask the birds—more specifically, one bird, a very old owl who was famous throughout the forest. They even told me how to find the enormous tree in which he lived.

That was the beginning of my acquaintance with the owl. He knew every tree, every trail, every stone in the forest. He was (as you know) not naturally friendly toward rats, or mice either, but when I told him about our life at Nimh, and our escape, he grew interested. Though he did not say so, I think he had already been watching some of our activities from the air in the evenings. Anyway, he was curious and listened carefully when I told him about our problems and my ideas for solving them. I have talked to him many times since.

It was he who told me about Thorn Valley.

The valley lies deep in the forest, beyond the big tree. The jeep trails do not cross it, nor even go close to

it, for the mountains around it are forbidding, too steep and rocky even for jeeps, and are covered with thorny thickets. The owl told me that in all the years he had been flying, he had never seen a human being near it.

Yet the bottom of the valley is level and broad and nearly a mile long; steep cliffs wall it in all around. There are three ponds or small lakes in it, and apparently these are fed by springs, for they never dry up. On clear days, the owl said, he sometimes saw small fish swimming in them. I thought: Could rats weave fish nets or make fish hooks?

It was this valley I was looking for the day I set out with Jenner. I had careful directions from the owl; yet it took us half a day, moving briskly, to reach the base of the mountains. Then up, up, very steeply, for more than an hour—not really difficult for us, since rats are better climbers than men; also, we are shorter, so we had little trouble with the spiney underbrush. From the top of the high ridge at last we looked down, and the valley lay before us.

It was beautiful and still, a wild and lonely place. Through the green and yellow treetops below us I could see the water of one of the ponds sparkling in the sun. I got the idea that my eyes—our eyes—were the first ever to see it. Yet that was not true, for as we descended into the valley, a deer suddenly appeared in the trees ahead and went bounding off down the slope. There were wild animals there, and I wondered if they even suspected that outside these walls of mountains there were cities and roads and people.

Most of the valley floor was in forest, great spreading oak and maple trees, but near one of the ponds I

saw what I had hoped to find—a large natural clearing, a glade where only coarse grass and wild flowers grew, and some clumps of black raspberry bushes. This clearing was on the far side of the valley, beyond it the mountain wall rose again, a steep slope with big outcroppings of stone—granite ledges that thrust six or ten feet out of the earth.

"We could live here," I said to Jenner.

"I suppose we could," he said. "It's a beautiful place. But it's a long way from the barn. Think how far we'd have to carry food. And no electricity."

"We could grow our own food," I said. I started to add, but didn't: and maybe, someday, make our own electricity, if we decided we wanted to.

"We don't know how. Anyway, where would we grow it?"

"Right here. It would be easy to clear away these weeds and bushes. And if we dug into that mountainside, under those rock ledges, we'd have all the cave space we wanted, dry and warm, with a good roof. There could be room enough for a thousand of us."

"There aren't a thousand of us."

"There might be, someday."

"But why? Why move? We've got a better place to live right now. We've got all the food we want. We've got electricity, and lights, and running water. I can't understand why everybody talks about changing things."

"Because everything we have is stolen."

"That's silly. Is it stealing when farmers take milk from cows, or eggs from chickens? They're just smarter

than the cows and chickens, that's all. Well, people are our cows. If we're smart enough, why shouldn't we get food from them?"

"It's not the same. Farmers feed the cows and chickens and take care of them. We don't do anything for what we take. Besides, if we keep it up, we're sure to be found out."

"What then? What if we are? People have been trying to exterminate rats for centuries, but they haven't succeeded. And we're smarter than the others. What are they going to do? Dynamite us? Let them try. We'll find out where they keep the dynamite and use it on them."

"Then we'd *really* be found out. Don't you see, Jenner, if we ever did anything like that, they'd figure out who we are and what we know? Then only two things could happen. Either they'd hunt us all down and kill us, or they'd capture us and put us in a sideshow, or maybe take us back to Nimh. And this time we'd never get away."

"I don't believe any of that," Jenner said. "You've got this idea stuck in your head. We've got to start from nothing and work hard and build a rat civilization. I say, why start from nothing if you can start with everything? We've already *got* a civilization."

"No. We haven't. We're just living on the edge of somebody else's, like fleas on a dog's back. If the dog drowns, the fleas drown, too."

That was the beginning of an argument that never had a satisfactory ending. Jenner would not yield to my

point of view, nor I to his. It wasn't that he was lazy and didn't want to work. He was just more cynical than the rest of us; stealing did not bother him. And he was a pessimist. He never believed that we could really make it on our own. Maybe he was right. But I, and most of the others, felt that we must at least try. If we fail—well, then I suppose we must come back here, or find some other farm. Or eventually forget all we learned and go back to stealing garbage.

So we began working out the Plan. It has been a long time coming. Three years ago this spring we started watching Mr. Fitzgibbon to learn what he did, and how he did it, to bring food out of the earth. We collected books and magazines on farming. We discovered early that in order to stop stealing we would, for a while, have to steal more than ever. We've laid up a two-year food supply, so that even if we don't succeed in growing a good crop the first year, we won't

go hungry. We've got two-thirds of it moved to Thorn Valley already, and we've dug a dry cave to store it in, under one of the big rocks. We've got seeds; we have our plows; we've cleared and cultivated part of the land near the pond; and in a few days we'll begin our first planting. We've even dug some irrigation ditches, in case there's a drought.

We have a schedule worked out, sort of a count-down, and by early June we will be out of this cave, and out of Mr. Fitzgibbon's barn, I hope forever.

Captured

"Speaking of schedules and countdowns"—Mr. Ages spoke suddenly—"we've got one for this evening. It's getting late."

The clock on Nicodemus's desk said five o'clock.

"Mrs. Fitzgibbon feeds Dragon at six p.m." He spoke gently, but his voice had a chilling sound to Mrs. Frisby. They all looked at her.

"I'm ready," she said quietly, "but there are still a few minutes, and one question you have not yet answered. Why did Jonathan never tell me anything about Nimh, or any of the rest?"

Mr. Ages said: "I'll try to explain. When Nicodemus

and the others moved into the cave near the rosebush, they invited Jonathan and me to stay with them—after all, we had been with them for many months by that time—and at first we did. But after a few weeks we decided to move out. We were, you realize, different. We both felt strange, associating always and only with rats, even though they were our close and good friends. As for me, I wanted more solitude and less society; Jonathan, on the other hand, was younger than I and felt lonely.

"So we moved, at first together, to the basement of the old farmhouse where I still live. Then Jonathan met you, at a stream near the woods somewhere, I think he said . . ."

"Yes," Mrs. Frisby said, "I remember."

"From then on he worried. He didn't want to be secretive, but he didn't know how to tell you one thing. I'm sure Nicodemus has explained to you that the injections we got at Nimh had two effects. One of them was that none of us seemed to be growing any older at all—the children, yes, but not the adults. Apparently the injections had given us all a much longer life-span than even Dr. Schultz had anticipated.

"You can see why this would have been a dreadful thing for Jonathan to have to tell you. You never had the injections. That meant that while he stayed young, you would grow older, and older, and finally die. He loved you, and he could hardly stand that thought. Yet if it was distressing to him—he thought—how much more painful it would be to you! That is what he could not bring himself to tell you.

"He would have told you eventually; I know he intended to. Indeed, you would have found it out your-

self, you would have seen it happening. But it was hard; he kept putting it off, and then, finally, it was too late."

"Poor Jonathan," said Mrs. Frisby. "He should have told me. I wouldn't have minded. But will my children . . ."

"Also have longer lives?" said Nicodemus. "We don't know yet. We think so, but our own children are not yet old enough to be certain. We do know they have inherited the ability to learn. They master reading almost without effort."

He stood up, took out his reading glass, and looked at the clock. But Mrs. Frisby interrupted again.

"One more thing," she said. "What happened to Jenner?"

Nicodemus said: "He left. He was against the Plan from the start. In our discussions, he tried to persuade others to oppose it, too. Only a few joined him; though there are some others who are still doubtful about it, they're going to stay with us and try it.

"The arguments stayed reasonably friendly, but the last straw, for Jenner, was when we decided to destroy the machines."

"Destroy them!"

"For two reasons. One, so that if anyone ever finds the cave, there won't be any evidence of what we've been doing—nothing but broken bits of metal, debris that will look like ordinary junk. We'll pull out our electric cable, our lights and our water pipes. We'll close up all the tunnels leading in.

"The other reason is more important. When we move to Thorn Valley, we're going to have some hard

times. We know that, and we're braced for it. If this cave is still open, with the machines and lights, the carpets and running water still here, there will be a terrible temptation to give up and move back to the soft life. We want to remove that temptation.

"But when Jenner heard the decision—it was made at a meeting—he grew really angry. He denounced us all as idiots and dreamers. He stamped out of the meeting, and a few days later he left the group forever, taking six of his followers with him. We don't know where they went, but we think they will try to find someplace where they can set up a new life like this one.

"I wish them luck, but they'll have trouble. There won't be any Toy Tinker this time. They'll have to steal their machines—everything. That worries us some, because if they get caught, who knows what might happen? But there's nothing we can do about it. We're going ahead with the Plan; and once we get to Thorn Valley, I think we can stop worrying."

Justin stood up. "It's time to go." He picked up the paper with the sleeping draught in it.

Mrs. Frisby, Justin and Mr. Ages walked together up the long corridor to the rosebush.

"Remember, when you come up through the hole in the kitchen floor," Mr. Ages said, "you'll be under a cabinet. It's low, but there's room to move. Go a few steps forward, and you'll be able to see out into the room.

"Mrs. Fitzgibbon will be there, getting dinner for her family. They eat at about six. When she's got their

dinner ready, she'll feed Dragon. He won't be in the kitchen, but he'll be waiting just outside the kitchen door on the porch. She doesn't let him in while she's cooking because he makes such a pest of himself, rubbing against her ankles and getting between her feet.

"If you look to your right, you'll see his bowl. It's blue, and it has the word Kitty written over and over again around the side. She'll pick it up, fill it with catfood, and put it down again in the same place.

"Then watch closely. She'll walk over to the door to let him in, and that's your chance. Her back will be toward you. She's got to walk about twenty feet—it's a big kitchen. The bowl will be about two feet away from you. Be sure the paper packet is open—then dash out, dump the powder into the food, and dash back. You don't want to be in sight when Dragon comes in. I can tell you that from experience."

"Is that how you got hurt?"

"I got there a few seconds late. I decided there was still time. I was wrong."

At the arch in the rosebush Mr. Ages left them. With his cast, he would not be able to climb through the hole to the kitchen; there was no point in his going farther.

Mrs. Frisby and Justin moved out of the rosebush and looked around them. It was still light, though the sun was low on the horizon. Straight ahead of them, perhaps two hundred feet away, stood the big white farmhouse. Dragon was already on the porch, sitting just outside the door, looking at it expectantly. To their right was the tractor shed, and beyond that was the

barnyard fence and the barn itself, casting a long shadow. Behind them rose the woods and the mountains; to the left Mrs. Frisby could see the big stone in the middle of the garden, near which her children waited. As soon as her task was done, she thought, she must hurry to them and get ready for the move.

"We go under the right side of the house," Justin said quietly. "Follow me." They made their way around the edge of the yard, staying in the shadows, keeping an eye on Dragon. Justin still wore his satchel and had put the powder package in it.

There was a basement under the main part of the Fitzgibbons' house, but the big kitchen had been added later and stood on a foundation of concrete blocks, with only a crawl space beneath. As they approached this gray foundation, Mrs. Frisby saw that near the middle of it, a few inches off the ground, there was a square patch of darker gray. It was a hole, left for ventilation, and there was a screen over it. When they reached it, Justin caught hold of the screen and pulled the corner. It swung open.

"We loosened it a bit," he explained, holding it open for her. Mrs. Frisby crept through.

"Careful," he said. "It's dark. There's a drop of about a foot. Just jump. We put some straw at the bottom, so it's soft."

Holding her breath, Mrs. Frisby jumped blindly into the blackness, and felt the cushion of straw under her feet. In a moment Justin landed beside her. They were under the Fitzgibbons' kitchen.

"Now," he said softly, "look to your left. See the patch of light? That's the hole. The light comes from

the kitchen. We've piled dirt up under it, so it's easy to reach. Come on."

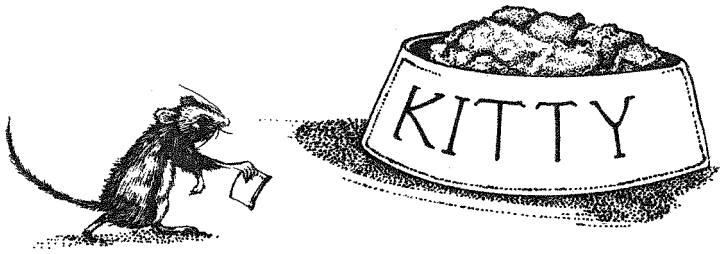
Mrs. Frisby followed him; as they got near the bright hole she could see around her a little. They were walking across bare earth, dry and cool to the touch; overhead there were heavy wooden beams holding up the floor, and above those the floorboards themselves. Under the hole rose a small round hill of dirt. They walked up this, and then Justin whispered:

"This is as far as I can go. There's not room for me to get through. I'll wait here. Come back down as soon as you're finished. Here's the powder." He handed her the paper packet. "Remember to tear it open before you go out to Dragon's bowl. Hurry, now. I can hear Mrs. Fitzgibbon moving around. She's getting the dinner. Be careful, and good luck."

Mrs. Frisby first pushed the packet up through the hole. Then, as quietly as she could, grasping both sides, she pulled herself up and into the kitchen.

It was light there. But Mr. Ages had not been joking when he said the ceiling was low. There was less than an inch between the floor and the bottom of the cabinet, so that she could not walk properly but had to flatten herself out and crawl. She did, a few steps, and discovered that she was trembling. "Stay calm," she told herself. "Don't get panicky, or you'll do something foolish and spoil everything."

Thus admonished, she crept forward again until she was near the edge of the cabinet. She stopped. From there she could see out into the kitchen fairly well. Straight across from her stood a big white gas stove, and in front of it, putting the lid on a pot, was Mrs.



Fitzgibbon. Because the edge of the cabinet was so low, Mrs. Frisby could not see her head, but only up to her shoulders.

"There," Mrs. Fitzgibbon said, as if to herself. "The stew is done, the bread's in the oven, the table is set."

Where was the cat's bowl? Mrs. Frisby looked to her right as Mr. Ages had said. There it was, blue, with words inscribed around the side. Yet something was wrong. It was not two feet from the cabinet, but more like four or five. In the corner, where it should have been, rose four round wooden legs. She realized that she was looking at the bottom of a kitchen stool.

No matter, she thought. The extra distance is just a couple of feet. Mr. Ages had not mentioned a stool, but perhaps they moved it around. She crawled to her right, as close to the bowl as she could get without showing herself, and tore open the package.

Just as she did this Mrs. Fitzgibbon walked over from the stove. Her hand appeared, picked up the bowl, and Mrs. Frisby heard it thump on the counter over her head. A cutting sound—a can opener—the scrape of a spoon, and the bowl was back on the floor.

The strong fishy smell of catfood. Mrs. Fitzgibbon walked away.

Now.

Mrs. Frisby moved swiftly out into the room, across the open floor, holding the powder, her eyes intent only on the bowl. She was no longer trembling. She poured in the powder, which instantly dissolved in the moist catfood. Still clutching the paper, she turned and sped toward the cabinet.

With a bang, the lights went dim. The ceiling, which had somehow become curved, was filled with little round moons. Mrs. Frisby kept running, and her face struck a cold, hard wall of metal.

A voice shouted:

"Mother! Don't let Dragon in yet. I've caught a mouse."

Billy, the younger Fitzgibbon son, had been sitting on the kitchen stool, his feet up on the rung, eating berries from a colander. The colander, upside down, was now over Mrs. Frisby.

Seven Dead Rats

From a birdcage, Mrs. Frisby watched the Fitzgibbons eat dinner. There was dinner for her, too—breadcrumbs, cheese, and bits of carrot—on the floor of the cage, along with a small bowl of water. The cage had been occupied until a few months before by a yellow canary named Porgy, who had lived in it for five years and then died of old age.

To get her out from under the colander, Billy had slid a piece of carboard beneath it, pinching her foot sharply in the process, so that it hurt when she walked. She had been transferred first to a shoebox.

"Can I keep it?" Billy had asked his mother.

"What for? It's just a field mouse."

"For a pet. I like it." Billy had tried to look at Mrs. Frisby through some holes he had punched in the top of the box, but it was dark inside.

"I suppose so. For a few days. You'll have to feed it."

"I think I'll put it in Porgy's cage. I can't see it in this box. It must be hungry. It was trying to eat Dragon's food. Dumb mouse. It might have been killed."

No one had noticed the small torn piece of paper at first; then Mrs. Fitzgibbon had absently picked it up and tossed it into the wastebasket.

A few days! Mrs. Frisby felt sick. And after a few days—then what? Would they let her go? Or would Billy plead for a few more? But even if they did set her free—her children were alone; the rats were coming tonight to move her house. Why had Billy picked today, of all days, to sit on the stool? She had not the heart to eat the food that lay on the cage floor. She felt like weeping.

Paul came in for dinner, followed by his father. He looked at her in the cage.

"Why don't you let it go?" he said to Billy. "Poor little thing. It's scared to death."

"No it's not. It's just not used to the cage."

"I bet it will die."

"I bet it won't."

"You can't just put wild animals in cages. You have to catch them when they're babies."

"They do it in zoos."

"Yes, but they know more about it. Anyway, a lot

of those die, too."

"It's strange that it was in here at all," said Mrs. Fitzgibbon. "I haven't seen any signs of mice. I didn't think we had any."

They sat at the table, and Mrs. Fitzgibbon served the stew. It was a long, square-cut farm table, big enough to feed, besides the family, the four hired hands who would be working with Mr. Fitzgibbon during the planting and harvesting. The Fitzgibbons sat together around one end of it.

Mrs. Frisby's cage hung from a metal stand in the corner on the opposite side of the room, quite high up, so that the floor where she crouched was above their heads. She could watch them, looking down; but if she retreated to the far side of the cage, they could not see her, nor she them. She kept hoping that Paul would resume the argument with Billy and win it, or at least convince Mr. or Mrs. Fitzgibbon that they should let her go.

But Paul was now busy eating. So, moving quietly, she crept to the back of the cage. There was a sliding door halfway up the side, which Billy had lifted to put her in. Remembering Nicodemus's story, she looked at it, wondering if she could climb to it, if she could get it open if she did. Not now, but later, when they had left the kitchen. Maybe. But it looked quite big and heavy.

She thought about her children again. Surely, when Justin had waited a little longer, he would realize that something had gone wrong. He would go and talk to them. But what could he tell them? "Children, your mother went into the kitchen with Dragon and she

hasn't come out." No. But whatever he said, they would be dreadfully frightened and worried. Poor Cynthia! Poor Timothy—poor all of them.

She had one small satisfaction. Dragon, who had been admitted after she was safely caged, had eaten his bowl of catfood greedily, sleeping powder and all, purring as he licked the last scraps from the bottom.

Billy was looking at the cage.

"There," he cried. "It walked. I saw it. I told you it was all right." He started up from his chair.

"Billy, stay in your place and eat your stew," said Mrs. Fitzgibbon. "The mouse can wait."

"Speaking of mice," said Mr. Fitzgibbon, who had driven to town that afternoon, "there was quite a stir today at Henderson's hardware store."

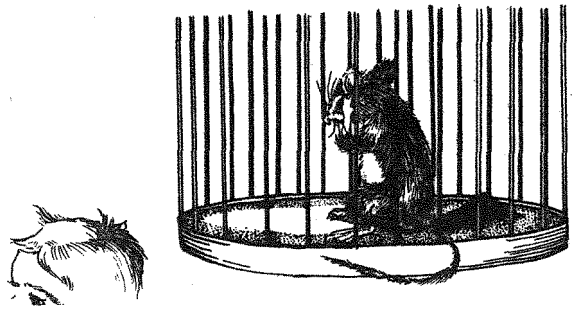
"About mice?"

"No, but nearly. About rats. I went in to order the new linch pin, and there was quite a group there, talking about an odd thing that had happened.

"It seems that six or seven rats got themselves electrocuted there a few days ago. Very strange. Henderson sells motors—he has a whole shelf of them. The rats, for some reason, had got on the shelf. He says it looked as if they were fooling with one of the motors, trying to move it."

"That's a new one," said Paul. "Rats stealing motors."

"They weren't really, of course. Anyway, it happened during the night; when he—Henderson—came into the shop in the morning, he tried to turn on the lights, and the fuse was blown. He found the rats all grouped around the motor. It had been left plugged



in, though it was turned off. They must have been gnawing at the insulation for some reason—at least that's what he thinks. They caused a short circuit, and all bunched together like that, the current went through them and killed the lot."

"Pretty good kind of a rat trap, I'd say," Mrs. Fitzgibbon remarked.

Mrs. Frisby was now listening to the conversation very closely. Dragon had stretched out on the floor, looking drowsy.

"Wait," said Mr. Fitzgibbon. "That's only the beginning. It seems that the local weekly was hard up for news. They heard about it and sent their reporter over."

"Fred Smith," said Mrs. Fitzgibbon.

"Yes. Fred wrote a little article about it, with a headline, MECHANIZED RATS INVADE HARDWARE STORE. Something like that. Well, it attracted more attention than he expected. The next thing they knew, believe it or not, the federal government got into it. They sent a squad over there from the Public Health Service with a truckload of equipment."

"Just on account of seven rats?" said Billy. "They should send the truck over here. We've got more than that."

"That's just what I said," Mr. Fitzgibbon went on. "And do you know? They're going to. I was joking, of course, but the man in charge of the group didn't take it as a joke at all. He wanted to know where the farm was, how far away, how many acres, what I raised, how many rats I thought there were. He acted really interested. It seems they wanted to examine the dead rats at Henderson's, but they couldn't. He'd already sent them to the town dump, and they were incinerated."

"I never heard of such a thing," said Mrs. Fitzgibbon. "All that fuss over a few dead rats."

"I have," said Paul. "And I bet I know what they're after."

"What?"

"They think the rats have rabies. They don't like to say so because it makes people panicky."

"What's rabies?" asked Billy.

"A disease," said Mr. Fitzgibbon. "A very bad one, spread by animals. You know, Paul, I think you're probably right. That would explain why the Public Health Service is in it. Epidemic control. Anyway, they're planning to check on the rats all over this area."

"Don't you remember," Paul said, "a few years ago when everybody had to lock up their dogs? And some people were shooting every dog they saw. That's why they keep it quiet until they're sure.

"And another thing. They taught us in the vet course

in school that when an animal starts acting strange, it may be a sign of rabies. Well, chewing electric wires —that's strange enough."

"And they think some rats here might be infected?" Mrs. Fitzgibbon sounded worried.

"I suppose they must," said Mr. Fitzgibbon, "though they never mentioned rabies at all."

"When are they coming?"

"Day after tomorrow, Saturday morning. The man in charge, a Doctor somebody, said they had some more checking to do in town tomorrow. They're coming with an extermination truck—cyanide gas, I think."

"I can tell them where to look," Paul said.

"Me too," said Billy. "Under the rosebush."

"That's right," said Mr. Fitzgibbon. "In fact, they'll probably want to bulldoze that bush out of there. I can do that with the big tractor."

"Bulldoze my rosebush?" said Mrs. Fitzgibbon indignantly. "They will not!"

"Look at it this way," her husband said. "I've got to get rid of those rats anyway. I'd already decided to; they're stealing too much feed—seeds, too, more all the time. If I paid an exterminator to do it, he'd charge a couple of hundred dollars. If the government will do it free, why shouldn't we let them?"

"Well," said Mrs. Fitzgibbon, still not soothed, "then you can spend the money to buy me some new rosebushes."

"That's just what I had in mind," said Mr. Fitzgibbon with a smile. "And maybe some lilacs, too." Mrs. Fitzgibbon had always wanted a lilac bush; they

were her favorite shrubs.

Mrs. Frisby did not believe at all that it was rabies the men were looking for. She wished Mr. Fitzgibbon had been able to remember the name of the "Doctor somebody." And now she had another urgent reason to get out of the cage. Somehow, she had to warn Nicodemus.

Dragon slept on the kitchen floor.

Escape

At ten by the kitchen clock, the Fitzgibbons went to bed. Dragon was put out, the doors locked, the lights turned off. The first of these things was done by Billy, on instruction from his mother, not without some difficulty. He opened the door.

"Come on Dragon. Out."

"He won't get up."

"I never saw such a lazy cat. He gets worse every day."

Finally Dragon, protesting with only the sleepiest of whines, was picked up and deposited on the back porch. He scarcely opened his eyes.

By that time it was dark. Mrs. Frisby waited a few minutes until she was sure they were really gone and until her eyes adjusted so she could see the bars of her cage. They were vertical bars, smooth and no thicker than match sticks, which made them slippery to climb, but by turning more or less sideways, she was able to grip them fairly well. She inched her way up to the sliding door and tried to lift it.

She could tell from the first pull that it was no use. The door was stiff and it was heavy, and she could not get a good enough grip on either it or the cage wall to exert much pressure. Still she kept trying, first lifting on the middle of the door, then on one corner, then another, straining every muscle. In half an hour she admitted defeat, at least for the moment, and climbed back down to the bottom of the cage. She sat there, shaking from the effort, and thought.

Somehow, she *had* to get out. Her children, even now, would be alone in the dark house, alone at night for the first time. Martin and Teresa would be trying to reassure the younger ones; yet they themselves would be sadly frightened. What would they think? Since she had not told them about Dragon and the sleeping powder, she hoped that perhaps they would decide she had, for some reason, stayed with the rats.

But at eleven, which could not be far off (she could not read the kitchen clock in the dark), the rats would arrive to move the house. Or would they, knowing—since Justin must have told them—that she had not come out of the kitchen? She thought they would. She hoped they would, and that Justin would go with them and talk to the children and try to calm their

fear. There was something about Justin, a kind of easy confidence, that would help them.

She no longer had any doubt, of course, that the rats could move her house. It was a generous thing to do, especially at a time when they were hurrying so in their Plan, their own move. And they had no idea yet of how little time they really had, of the new danger that crowded upon them. If she could only get out! She would run and warn them, and it might still not be too late.

She thought: It's a good plan and a brave one. It would be the first time in all the world that intelligent beings, besides men, had ever tried to start a real civilization of their own. They ought to have a chance. It was not right that they should be killed at the last minute. Or captured. Could it be that they—the men who were coming—were somehow connected with Nimh? Or was it more likely, as Paul had guessed, that they were only worried about rabies? She decided it didn't really matter. The result would be the same. The day after next the truck would come with its poison gas, and that would be the end of all their plans. Unless they could be warned. Wearily, she got up to climb the wall and try the door again.

She heard a noise.

It was in the kitchen, near her cage, a small scuffling on the hard linoleum floor.

"Now what kind of a bird can that be, with no wings?"

It was Justin's voice, very soft, and he was laughing.

"Justin!"

"I thought you might like to come home. Your

children are asking after you."

"Are they all right?"

"They're fine. They were worried, but I told them I'd bring you back. They seemed to believe me."

"But how did you know . . ."

"That you were here? You forget. I was waiting just under the cabinet. I heard what happened. I felt like biting Billy full of holes. But as soon as I heard that you were safely in the cage, I went and told the children you were all right, but that you'd be a little late. I didn't tell them exactly why.

"Now, let's get you out."

"I tried. I couldn't open the door."

"I'll get it open. I brought along a few tools—burglar's tools, you might say—in my back pack. Should I climb up the stand? No. It looks slippery. I think I'll try the curtain."

And in a matter of seconds Justin had swarmed up a window curtain a foot away, and she heard a thump as he leaped and landed on top of the cage, which swayed under the impact. The noise was slight, but they both listened intently for a moment to see if it produced another, from upstairs. All quiet.

"Now let me look at that door." Justin climbed easily down the side of the cage.

"Oh, I hope you can get it open."

"I can," Justin said, examining it, "easily enough. But I don't think I will."

"Why not?"

"Because *you* couldn't," Justin said, "and they'll know that. So they won't be curious, let's make it open itself. As I expected, it doesn't have real hinges."

He had pulled a small metal bar out of his back pack, and was working as he talked. "Just little wire rings. Dime-store quality. Cheap, flimsy things. They're always coming apart." As he said that, one of them came apart; the door sagged and hung crazily by one corner. "There, you see? You couldn't help it if they put you in a defective cage. Come on out."

Mrs. Frisby climbed through and stood with Justin on the top of the cage.

"Now," he said, "we shinny down the stand like a fireman's pole. You go out the way you came in—under the cabinet and through the hole. I'll go out the way I came in—through the attic. I'll meet you outside."

"Justin," Mrs. Frisby said, "there's something I've got to tell you, something I learned . . ."

"Wait till we're out," said Justin. "We've got to hurry. You see, we're having a little trouble moving your cinder block." He was off, running silently into the front of the house, from which the stairway led up two flights to the attic.

Mrs. Frisby crawled under the cabinet, searched in total darkness for the small hole, and finally felt one foot slip down. She dropped through. The square opening in the foundation was easier to find; it glowed palely ahead of her, lit with moonlight.

Justin was waiting for her as she came out of the corner of the screen. The night was warm, and a half-moon shone on the farmyard.

"Now," he said, "what was it you wanted to tell me?" He spoke seriously; he had heard the urgency in her voice. They hurried toward the garden, rounding

the back porch. There, a dark heap in the moonlight, lay Dragon, no threat to anyone tonight.

"Some exterminators are coming to poison all of you." Mrs. Frisby told him, as briefly as she could, of the conversation she had heard at the Fitzgibbons' dinner table.

"Seven rats," Justin said. "Rabies. It might be. But I'll bet it was Jenner. When are the men supposed to come?"

"The day after tomorrow."

To her surprise, Justin stopped. He looked at her in admiration.

"You know," he said, "I had a feeling the first time I clapped eyes on you that you'd bring us good luck."

"*Good* luck!" She was amazed.

"Oh, it's bad news. It's serious. We'll have to change our plans, and quickly. But think how much worse it would be if you hadn't overheard it. We wouldn't have had a chance."

They came into the garden.

"Is Nicodemus here?" Mrs. Frisby asked.

"No. In a few minutes I'll go and tell him. But first we need your help to get started moving your house."

"*My* help? What can I do?"

"You can talk to your neighbor. She seems to think we're stealing your cinder block. She bit Arthur in the leg."

At one end of the big stone in the middle of the garden, ten rats were digging briskly, using scoops that looked more like teaspoons than shovels, piling the earth neatly beside a hole already almost big enough to hold Mrs. Frisby's house.

But on the other side of the stone there was an impasse.

Here another ten rats stood, baffled, in a semicircle. Behind them they had deposited a jumble of equipment: odd-shaped metal bars, pulleys, wooden structures that looked like ladders, other pieces of wood that resembled small logs. But between the rats and Mrs. Frisby's front door stood a small, defiant figure. The rats, looking enormous by comparison, remained a respectful distance away from her.

"Why," said Mrs. Frisby to Justin, "it's the shrew!"

"Yes," said Justin, "and acting shrewish."

One of the rats was speaking. Mrs. Frisby recognized Arthur.

". . . but I told you, ma'am, we *do* have Mrs. Frisby's

permission. She *wants* us to move her house. Ask the children. Call them out."

"Don't tell me that. What have you done with Mrs. Frisby? It's a good thing the children haven't heard you. They'd be frightened half to death! If Mrs. Frisby wanted you to move her house, she'd be here."

"It's all right," called Mrs. Frisby, running forward. "I'm here."

"Mrs. Frisby!" said the shrew. "You're just in time. I heard a noise, and came out and found these—*creatures*—trying to dig up your house."

"I tried to explain it to her," said Arthur. "But she won't believe me."

"I certainly won't," said the shrew. "He said you *asked* him to dig up your house. Thieving rats!"

"It's true," Mrs. Frisby said. "I did ask them, and they said they would. It's very kind of them."

"Kind?" said the shrew. "Great hulking beasts. What do you mean?"

It took several more minutes of reassurance by Mrs. Frisby before the shrew grudgingly moved aside, still muttering warnings. "I wouldn't trust them. How do you know they'll do what they say?" That, of course, Mrs. Frisby could not explain to her.

The rats now commenced to dig busily at the dirt on top of and around Mrs. Frisby's cinder block. Justin said: "I've got to go and talk to Nicodemus. You'd better get the children out." Mrs. Frisby hurried into her house.

She found them waiting in the living room, unaware of the small crisis that had been taking place outside. As Justin had said, they did not seem worried.

"We were scared at first," Teresa said. "But then one of the rats came to see us. He couldn't come in, but he called to us, and we came out, Martin and I. He said his name was Justin. Have you met him? He's *very* nice."

"I've met him," said Mrs. Frisby. "Now we'd better go outside. They're getting ready to move the house."

"I'm ready," said Timothy. "I'm all wrapped up like a scarecrow."

Martin and Teresa had taken pieces of warm cloth from the bed and tied them around him. Mrs. Frisby could not see him in the dark, but when she touched him she found they had even tied a piece like a bonnet around his head and ears.

"Good," she said. "And we're lucky—it's a warm night, and dry."

They went up the small tunnel to the garden and watched in the moonlight from a hillock a few feet away. The rats had finished digging the new hole, and all twenty of them were working near the house. It was a sight to see.

As soon as the earth had been cleared from the top and sides of the cinder block, so that it lay fully exposed in its hole, all of the rats turned to the pile of equipment. Under Arthur's direction the ladder-like structures became a scaffolding—four small towers standing one near each corner of the block. Across the tops of these the rats fastened strong, light bars of metal, probably, Mrs. Frisby thought, from the Toy Tinker's truck.

From these bars they now hung pulleys wound with strong, thin cord, and at the ends of the cords they

fastened hooks, which they slipped into the oval-shaped holes in the block and pulled taut. Five strong rats stood by each cord. One of them, Mrs. Frisby noticed, was bigger than the rest: her friend Brutus.

"Heave!" called Arthur.

The twenty rats strained on the cords, and the block rose an inch. Each rat stepped back a pace.

"Heave!" Another inch.

Slowly, the heavy block rose from the hole until it hung two inches above level ground.

"Steady," said Arthur. "Get the rollers."

Eight rats, two from each group, ran to the round pieces of wood Mrs. Frisby had noticed earlier; these resembled sawed-up pieces of broom handle, each about a foot long.

Two rats to a roller, they slipped four of these under the cinder block so that they lay athwart the hole, like bars across a window.

"Lower away," said Arthur, and the cinder block came to rest gently on the rollers.

"Let's see how it rolls."

They slipped the ropes free of the pulleys and re-hooked two of them to the front of the block. Nine rats now manned each rope; two stayed behind, watching the rollers.

"Heave!"

The rollers turned and the heavy block slid forward easily, like a truck on wheels, in the direction of the new hole. When it moved off the hindmost of the rollers, as it did every few inches, the two rats in the rear would quickly pick that one up and replace it under the front of the block.

Almost like a game of leap-frog, Mrs. Frisby thought. But a well-rehearsed game; the rats had planned carefully; they knew exactly what they were doing; they moved with precision and never wasted a motion.

Within a very few minutes the first of the rollers lay across the new hole; then the second, and finally all four. The block was poised and in position; the hole was exactly the right size and shape. The rats had even dug out a new pantry-hole in one corner, and carved out the small tunnel that would connect the two rooms of the house.

The towers and the pulleys were put up again, and the whole process of lifting and lowering was done in reverse; the rollers were pulled away and the block was eased slowly into its new home.

"It's done!" cried Mrs. Frisby. She felt like applauding.

"Not quite yet," said Arthur over his shoulder. To the other rats he said: "Get the shovels and the backpacks."

Pausing a moment to rest, he explained to Mrs. Frisby: "We're going to cover it with turf, and then we've got to fill up the old hole with the dirt from the new one, or Mr. Fitzgibbon will wonder who's been digging up his garden. Also, we've still to dig you an entrance hole."

In her excitement Mrs. Frisby had forgotten this small detail. She could not get into her house. Now she watched in awe as Arthur and Brutus, using two small, sharp, long-handled shovels, dug the narrow tunnel down to her living room. It took them somewhat less than five minutes. It had taken her all day to dig the other one.

"Now," said Arthur, "you can put your children to bed. We'll take care of the rest."

At the Meeting

Mrs. Frisby slept well and soundly, the day just finished having been the longest and hardest she had ever known.

She awoke in the morning with a smile. Her house was warm, and it was safe at last. Her children slept peacefully beside her; Timothy's breathing was quiet and easy. They could stay in the house, now, as long as they needed to. On some warm day later in the spring, when Timothy was strong again, they would move to the summer house down by the brook. Another nice thing, she thought—when they left the house she would close up the entrance tunnel so that no one

could find it; undisturbed by the plow, it would be ready and waiting for them in the fall. It could be theirs forever, thanks to the rats.

The rats! In her half-dreaming state she had forgotten. They were in terrible danger. What would they do? She felt as if she ought to go and offer to help them. But help how? She could think of nothing she could do.

At that moment she heard a voice calling her name from above.

"Mrs. Frisby."

She left the bed and went to the bottom of the entrance hole.

"Yes? Who's calling?"

"It's me, Brutus. Can you come up?"

Mrs. Frisby climbed up and out her front door, blinking in the early morning sunlight.

"Nicodemus wants to know if you can come with me. He's having a meeting."

"Just let me wake the children and tell them."

Two minutes later she was walking with Brutus toward the rosebush.

"What does Nicodemus want?"

"It's about the men. Justin told us last night. Nicodemus thinks they may be from Nimh. He wants to ask you more about what Mr. Fitzgibbon said."

That morning there were two rats on sentry duty—one just inside the entrance to the rosebush, watching Mr. Fitzgibbon's house, another at the arch where Brutus had stood. All of the rest were gathered in the large assembly room Mrs. Frisby had seen when she got off the elevator. Nicodemus, Justin, Arthur and

two other rats sat on the raised platform at the end. The rest sat facing them, filling every square inch of floor space except for an aisle up the center.

Mrs. Frisby had never seen so many rats. Even the young ones were present; she spotted Isabella, staring up at the platform with wide, round eyes. Some of the mothers held small babies at their sides. Most of them looked anxious; there was an air of tension, but none of panic.

Brutus led her up the center aisle to the raised platform. There was a table on it, covered with papers, and one vacant space, where a chair had been placed for Mrs. Frisby. The rats waited in complete silence while she sat down.

Then Nicodemus said, quite formally: "Justin has told us all that happened. Mrs. Frisby, it seems you have more than repaid us for the help we gave you in moving your house. Just as your husband did once, you have saved us from a disaster: Death or capture—we do not yet know which."

Justin gave her a wink. "Mrs. Frisby had a taste of capture herself last night."

"Would you tell us, as well as you can remember it, word for word what Mr. Fitzgibbon said—about the rats, about the men who were at the store?"

"As well as I can remember it." Mrs. Frisby's voice sounded small in the big room. "Mr. Fitzgibbon said a strange thing had happened in the hardware store—Henderson's, he called it."

Her memory was good; she had listened with great care to what Mr. Fitzgibbon had said, and she was able to recall the whole conversation word for word. The rats sat quietly while she told it.

Then Nicodemus went back over it, asking questions.

"You say that Mr. Fitzgibbon said six or seven rats. Did he ever say which number it really was?"

"No. I don't think he paid much attention to the number."

"Jenner's group was seven," said Justin. "But it could be a coincidence."

"Did he say how far away the town was where this happened? Or did he name it?"

"No. But it must not be very far. He'd been there and back that day."

"Did anyone see his car go out?" Nicodemus asked the others.

"I heard it," Brutus said. "I was on duty. It went after lunch."

"And he was back by dinner. But which direction? If we knew, we might send someone. You see," Nicodemus explained to Mrs. Frisby, "we need to know who those men are. If they're from Nimh, things are much worse for us."

"We'd never make it," said Arthur. "Driving at, say, forty or fifty miles an hour, Mr. Fitzgibbon might have gone fifteen or twenty miles in any direction, and returned easily the same afternoon. On the map"—there was a road map on the table—"you can see it could have been any one of half a dozen small towns. And each of them might have a hardware store."

"You're right, of course," said Nicodemus. "Without the name, that idea is hopeless." He turned back to Mrs. Frisby. "Mr. Fitzgibbon said the rats were grouped around the motor 'as if they were trying to move it'?"

"That's what he said the store owner told him. He didn't see it himself."

"And that the motor was plugged in."

" 'Had been left plugged in'," Mrs. Frisby quoted.

"But we don't know who plugged it in."

"I got the impression," Mrs. Frisby said, "from the way he said it, that the storeowner had left it plugged in. But I'm not sure."

"That would make sense," Arthur said. "If it was Jenner, and if they had plugged it in themselves, they'd have known better than to try to move it. So they must not have realized. It was probably pretty dark in the store."

"Poor Jenner," said Nicodemus. "I wish he had stayed with us."

"It will be poor *us*," said one of the rats at the table (Mrs. Frisby did not know his name), "if we don't get on with this."

"He did not mention the doctor's name," Nicodemus said. "Did he say even a word about what he

looked like?"

"No."

"Did he describe the truck at all?"

"No. Only that it was full of equipment."

"Are you sure about the headline in the local paper: 'Mechanized Rats Invade Hardware Store'?"

"I'm sure that's what Mr. Fitzgibbon said it was. But I don't think he saw it. He didn't say so."

"In a way, that's the most puzzling thing about the whole story," Nicodemus said.

"Why is that?" asked Justin.

"Because the headline doesn't really fit the facts. You don't call a bunch of dead rats mechanized just because you find them on a shelf near a motor."

"Maybe not," said the nameless rat. "But then why did the newspaper say that?"

"I'm wondering," Nicodemus said, "if perhaps there wasn't more to the story. Some stronger reason to think they were really taking the motor away, or that they knew how to use it."

"Maybe some other motors had been stolen," Justin said. "Or some tools. That would make them seem mechanized."

"It would," said Nicodemus. "And it would explain what the doctor meant when he said they had more checking to do in town."

"They're looking for the things that were missing," Arthur said, sounding suddenly worried. "They're looking for Jenner's headquarters. And if they find it . . ."

"We're just guessing, of course," Nicodemus said. "But it's a possibility."

"And a bad one."

"It means," Nicodemus continued, "that we have no choice. We've got to assume they're from Nimh. We've also got to assume that by now they may have found Jenner's headquarters—whatever cave or cavern they were using."

"And," said Justin, "that now they're looking for us."

"Why for us?" asked one of the rats. "Why wouldn't they think Jenner's group are the only ones?"

"They might," Nicodemus admitted, "but I don't think so. After all, they know that there were twenty of us originally. Why should there be only seven now? And we already know that they're coming out here—in quite a hurry at that. So if they're from Nimh, obviously they *are* looking for us."

"I think," said Arthur, "that we've got to make some plans, and quickly."

"I agree," said Nicodemus. "It's a new situation, and a tricky one. We won't be able to do everything we hoped to. There isn't time. And somehow we have to convince the exterminators, when they come, that we aren't more of the mechanized rats they're looking for.

"We won't be able to move any more food to Thorn Valley," Nicodemus continued. "We'll have to get along on what we've already got stored there—about an eighteen-month supply, if we're careful. The seeds, I believe, are already moved."

"Yes," said Arthur. "The last load went yesterday."

"So with luck, we'll have our own first crops this summer and fall.

"We won't have time to destroy the motors, or the books, or the furniture as we planned. Instead, we'll move everything to the cave. And then we'll seal off all entrances to the cave as if it had never existed."

"That can be done," Arthur said.

"But there's more: We've got to pull all the wires and lights from the tunnel—they're likely to dig it up. And the carpet. We've got to tear down the arch.

"Then, when all that's done, when everything is hidden in the cave, we'll fill in the stairway and the elevator shaft. We'll seal off everything except the upper storage room and the tunnels leading in the front and out the back.

"When they dig, let them find that room. It's as big as an ordinary rat hole.

"Justin, tonight, take a group of a dozen or so. Go to the Fitzgibbons' garbage can. Bring back a load of the worst-smelling garbage you can find. The storage room is going to become an ordinary, typical rat hole, not in the least mechanized or civilized."

Nicodemus turned to Arthur: "What do you think?"

"I think we can do it all. We won't get much sleep, though."

Justin said: "But there's one more thing. Won't they think it's odd—especially if they're from Nimh—finding just an empty hole?"

Nicodemus said: "I was coming to that." He sounded suddenly very tired. "Tomorrow morning, as soon as it's light, the main group leaves for Thorn Valley. But some of us will have to stay behind. As Justin says, if they find just an empty hole, they're sure to be suspicious, and they'll keep on digging. So when they come

with their gas truck, they've got to find some rats here. A rear guard. I'd say at least ten."

Mrs. Frisby walked slowly home, keeping to the edge of the woods, keeping out of sight.

Justin had instantly volunteered for the rear guard. Brutus was second, and behind him, eight more; there were fifty more waiting behind them. "Enough, enough," said Nicodemus. Isabella, in tears, had run forward. "I *want* to stay, *please*," she had pleaded, looking despairingly at Justin. "No children," said Nicodemus, and her mother led her away, still weeping.

Those ten, the ten who would remain, did not face certain death, nor certain capture. The exterminators (they presumed) would make noise, especially if they cleared away the rosebush. The rats would be alerted. When the men pumped gas (as expected) into the hole, the pump would also make a noise; the air below would move as the gas flowed in. When they felt that, the rats would scramble out the back exit, past the sealed-off cave, emerge as noisily as possible in the blackberry bramble—indeed, show themselves—and dash off into the woods.

"But won't they block the rear exit?"

"Or put a net over it?"

"We'll give them another rear exit to block," Arthur had said cryptically. "One that's easier to find."

"Mother, why are you so quiet?" asked Teresa. They were sitting down to dinner for the first time in their newly moved house. "You seem sad."

"I suppose I am," Mrs. Frisby said. "Because the

rats are all going away."

"But that's no reason. It's true, they moved our house, and that was nice of them. But we didn't really *know* them."

"I was getting to know them pretty well."

"Where are they going?" Cynthia asked.

"To a new home, a long way away."

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Will you go to see them off?"

"I think I will."

"But why are they moving away?" asked Timothy.

"Because they want to," said Mrs. Frisby. Someday soon she would tell them the whole story. But not that night.

The Doctor

The next morning Mr. Fitzgibbon started the larger of his two tractors, the huge one he kept in the barn, the one that pulled the combine in the fall harvest. With help from Paul and Billy, he bolted the big bulldozer blade to the front of it, rumbled it up through the barnyard gate and stopped it near the rosebush.

"We'll wait until they come," he said, turning off the engine.

Mrs. Frisby could not bear to watch; and yet, even more, she could not bear not to watch. She knew there was nothing to be gained by it, nothing she could do. Yet

how could she stay at home when the ten rats, including Justin and Brutus, were waiting bravely underground? She could not.

She thought at first of her watch-hole in the corner post. Then she decided against it. Nearer to the rosebush, on the edge of the woods, stood a hickory tree, its scaly bark like a ladder inviting her to climb. Ten feet up on this tree a large branch jutted straight out. On this branch, up close to the trunk, she had a vantage point from which, herself unseen, she could look down on the rosebush and also see into the woods to a blackberry bramble where, though she had never been in it, she was sure the rats' rear exit must be hidden. She settled down to wait. It was a chilly morning, with a damp breeze and a gray mist that blew by in patches.

Somewhere near the middle of the morning a square white truck came into the driveway. It went first to the house. A man in a white coverall uniform climbed out and knocked on the Fitzgibbons' door; it was too far away for Mrs. Frisby to hear the knock, or to hear what the man said when Mrs. Fitzgibbon came out on the porch. But ten seconds later Billy ran from the house to the barn, where Mr. Fitzgibbon was working.

The man returned to the truck and waited, standing outside the open cab door. Through the windshield she could see that two more men sat in the front seat, and that one of them wore horn-rimmed glasses.

Now Mr. Fitzgibbon approached the truck, Billy dancing beside him, apparently in some excitement. There was a conference, none of which Mrs. Frisby could hear, accompanied by gestures toward the rose-bush and the waiting bulldozer. The man in white climbed back into the driver's seat and drove the truck across the grass. He backed it up beside the bulldozer, stopping perhaps ten feet from the bush. Mrs. Frisby stared at it. If there was anything printed on it, it must be on the other side, away from her. Then three men climbed out, and she could hear what they said.

"It's a big one, all right," said one of the men. "And look at those thorns. It's hard to see how even a rat could get in there."

The man in the horn-rims walked around the edge of the bush, examining it closely. He bent over.

"Look at this," he said. "There's the entrance hole, very neatly hidden. And look behind it—a path leading in."

He turned to Mr. Fitzgibbon, who had walked up with Billy.

"You were right. You'll need to bulldoze it. It would take us all day to hack our way in there. But cut it off just at the surface if you can. If you dig too deep and open the hole, they'll get away."

He added: "You better tell the boy to keep back. We'll be using cyanide, and it's dangerous."

Billy, after some argument, was dispatched to the

back porch, where Mrs. Fitzgibbon was also watching.

One of the men had walked around to the far side of the bush, the side near Mrs. Frisby's tree.

"Doc," he called, "here's another entrance in the bush, and there's a hole just inside it."

"Doc" was the man in the horn-rims. He was a doctor. Mrs. Frisby thought: Doctor Somebody. He was in charge.

"Can you get at it?" he asked.

"Not very well. Too many thorns."

The man who was a doctor walked around and looked at it. "No," he said. "Anyway, that would be the escape hatch. We'll find the main hole nearer the middle of the bush."

He turned to Mr. Fitzgibbon, who had mounted the tractor. "Okay," said the doctor. "Can you push it that way—away from the shed?"

Mr. Fitzgibbon nodded, and the motor started with a roar. He pulled a lever and flexed the heavy steel blade up and down, bringing the bottom edge to rest just even with the ground. The blade was fully eight feet across. He pulled another lever; the wheels, with cleated tires as tall as windows, dug in and the blade scraped forward.

The bush fought back, then yielded angrily, snapping and crackling before the inexorable thrust of steel. A single sweep, and a third of it lay, a writhing heap of thorns, in a pile twenty feet away. The ground trembled under the wheels, and Mrs. Frisby thought of the ten rats huddled below. Supposing the weight collapsed the earth, caved in the storage room and trapped them? Another sweep, and a third. Only a thorny

stubble now stood where the bush had been. On the porch Mrs. Fitzgibbon covered her eyes with her hands, and Billy cheered in excitement.

Plainly exposed were two holes—simple, round rat holes. There was no trace of the small mound nor the elegant arched entrance. Arthur had done his work thoroughly. Mrs. Frisby wondered for a moment at the second hole. Then she remembered his saying: "We'll give them another rear exit to block." Of course! They had dug another hole, most likely, she thought, just a dummy, leading nowhere.

The men in the white suits went into action. The back doors of the truck were opened and a long, flexible pipe unrolled. It looked like a fire hose, except that at the end, instead of a nozzle, there was a round plunger like a big rubber ball cut in half. One of the men donned a mask with a glass visor and a tube that ran to a pack on his back. A gas mask.

The masked man pulled the hose over to the center rat hole and pressed the plunger over it, covering it completely.

From the back of the truck the other two took a large box made of wood and wire, almost a yard wide, and placed it over the second hole. It was a cage, but half of its bottom was a trapdoor, neatly mounted on hinges. This they raised, placing the open part directly over the opening in the earth. Then they backed away, one of them holding a trip cord which would close the trapdoor after the rats were inside.

"All set?" The doctor called to the man in the mask.

The mask nodded.

"Keep back, now," said the doctor to Mr. Fitzgibbon,

who had left his tractor to watch. He walked to the truck, reached inside, and turned a switch. Mrs. Frisby heard the soft throb of a pump.

Now.

She turned and watched the blackberry bramble in the woods. Would they hear the pump? Where were they? Oh, *let* them come out. Almost a minute passed. The men in white watched the trap. Nothing moved.

Then she saw it. Behind the bramble, half-hidden by a swirl of mist, a gray-brown shape, a rat, shaking dirt from his ears. Another. Then three more. They huddled in silence, waiting. More. How many? Ten? Seven. Only seven. Where were the other three? Still they waited.

Then, as if by agreement, they stopped waiting. They ran. All seven of them, not back into the woods to safety, but out of the woods, toward the stubble of the rosebush, toward the men. At the edge of the bush, they stopped as if in confusion, ran to the left, ran to the right, then fled back into the woods again. Now they were out of sight of the men, but not of Mrs. Frisby. Instantly they regrouped behind the blackberry bramble and charged out again—but this time in smaller numbers: first two, then three, then two again. She saw what they were up to. They were not in the least confused; they were making seven rats look like twenty rats, or forty, a steady stream of them. In the mist, in the hectic turning, running, turning, hiding, she could not tell whether or not she recognized any of them.

The men shouted:

"Look at that!"

"A pack of them!"

"How did they get out?"

"Get the nets!"

The doctor turned off the pump; the man with the hose pulled off his mask. As a new wave of rats danced along the edge of the clearing all three men ran to the truck and from it pulled long-handled nets.

But Mrs. Frisby, up on her branch, was staring at the blackberry bush again. She saw something that all of the others, including the rats, did not see. An eighth rat had come out. He emerged running, but then he stumbled; he got up and ran again, this time more slowly, circling vaguely to the right. He did not seem to know where he was going. He reached a sparse thicket of saplings almost out of her sight, and there, abruptly, he fell over on his side and lay still.

Meanwhile all three men, holding their nets low, ran across the stubble toward the parade of rats. But as they approached the parade it vanished; the rats, their purpose accomplished, melted into the misty woods, and this time they did not reappear. Mrs. Frisby watched them as they loped away swiftly in single file and disappeared from her view, back into the deep forest and up the mountainside. The rear guard was gone, bound for Thorn Valley.

But the eighth rat still lay unmoving among the saplings. And two had never come out at all.

"They're gone," said the man who had worn the mask. "They fooled us."

"What happened?" asked Mr. Fitzgibbon, standing near the truck.

"Simple enough," said the doctor. "They had two escape holes, and they used the other one." He walked

back to the blackberry bramble and bent down, kicking the branches aside with his foot. "Here it is," he said. "Quite a long tunnel. One of the longest I've seen."

To the other two men he said: "Get the pick and the shovels."

For half an hour they dug, laying open a narrow trench along the tunnel. From her angle of view in the tree, Mrs. Frisby could see only the top of this trench, and not down into the bottom. Still she watched, saying to herself, perhaps, after all, there were only eight, maybe they decided that eight would be enough.

Then one of the shovels broke through into air; they had come to the rats' storage room.

"There's two of them," said one of the men, and her heart sank. Who were they? She wanted to run and look, but she did not dare.

"Careful," said the doctor. "There may still be some gas in there. Let the wind blow it out."

"Phew," said one of the men. "That's not gas, that's garbage."

"Open it up a little more," said the doctor.

One of the men wielded his shovel for another minute, and then the doctor peered in.

"Garbage," he said. "Last night's dinner. Garbage and two dead rats." Mrs. Frisby thought: He sounds disappointed.

"Only two?" said Mr. Fitzgibbon.

"Yes. It's easy to see what happened. In a hole this size there would have been a couple of dozen at least. But these two must have been up at the front, near the tunnel. They got a whiff of the gas, and it killed

them. But before they died, they must have warned the others. So the rest ran out."

"Warned them?" said Mr. Fitzgibbon. "Could they do that?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "They're intelligent animals. Some can do a great deal more than that." But he did not elaborate; instead he turned to one of the men. "We might as well take these two back with us."

From the truck the man produced a white paper sack and a pair of plastic gloves. He pulled the gloves on, reached into the hole and placed the two dead rats into the sack. He did this with his back to Mrs. Frisby, so that she never got even a glimpse of them.

"All right," said the doctor. "Let's close it up." They shoveled the dirt back into the trench and returned to the truck.

"You'll let me know if they have rabies?" said Mr. Fitzgibbon.

"Rabies?" said the doctor. "Yes, of course. But I doubt it. They look perfectly healthy."

Perfectly healthy, thought Mrs. Frisby sadly, except for being dead. She looked into the woods, over toward the saplings where the other rat lay. Was he, too, now dead? To her surprise, she saw that he was moving. Or was he? In the mist it was hard to tell. But something had moved.

After the truck had left Mr. Fitzgibbon stood looking at the ruin of the rosebush. He seemed vaguely puzzled and disappointed; he must be wondering, she thought, whether it had been worth it, just to exterminate two rats. He had no way of knowing, of course, that all the rest were also gone and would not return, that

his grain loft was safe. In a moment he turned and walked to the house.

As soon as he was safely gone Mrs. Frisby scurried down from her tree and into the woods. On the ground she could no longer see the rat or the thicket where he lay, but she knew the direction, and she ran. Around a stump, over a mound of leaves, past a cedar tree—there were the saplings, and there lay the rat, still on his side.

It was Brutus. Beside him, futilely trying to move him, stood Mr. Ages.

She reached him, breathless from her run.

"Is he dead?"

"No. He's unconscious, but he's alive and breathing. I think he'll revive if I can just get him to swallow this." Mr. Ages indicated a small corked bottle, no bigger than a thimble, on the ground beside them.

"What is it?"

"An antidote for the poison. We thought this might happen, so we got it ready last night. He got just a little of the gas, made it this far, and then collapsed. Help me lift his head."

Mr. Ages had been unable to lift Brutus's head and the bottle at the same time. Now, with Mrs. Frisby's help, he forced open Brutus's mouth and poured in just a few drops of the smokey liquid the bottle contained. In a few seconds Brutus made a gulping noise, swallowed hard, and spoke.

"It's dark," he said. "I can't see."

"Open your eyes," said Mr. Ages.

Brutus opened them and looked around.

"I'm out," he said. "How did I get here?"

"Don't you remember?"

"No. Wait. Yes. I was in the hole. I smelled gas, an awful, choking, sweet smell. I tried to run, but I stumbled over somebody lying on the floor, and I fell down. I must have breathed some of the gas. I couldn't get up."

"And then?"

"I heard the others running past me. I couldn't see them. It was darker than night. Then one of them ran into me, and stopped. He pulled me up, and I tried to run again. But I was too dizzy. I kept falling. The other one helped me up again, and I went a few steps more. He kept pulling me, and then pushing, and somehow, finally, I got to the end of the tunnel. I saw daylight, and the air smelled better. But there was nobody else there; I thought the others must have left. So I ran a little farther, and that's all I remember."

Mrs. Frisby said: "What about the one who helped you?"

"I don't know who it was. I couldn't see, and he didn't speak at all. I suppose he was trying to hold his breath.

"When we got near the end, and I could see daylight, he gave me one last shove toward it, and then he turned back."

"He went *back?*"

"Yes. You see, there was still one rat back in there—the one I stumbled over. I think he went back to help that one."

"Whoever he was," said Mrs. Frisby, "he never came out. He died in there."

"Whoever he was," said Mr. Ages, "he was brave."

Epilogue

A few days later, early in the morning, the plow came through the garden. Mrs. Frisby heard the chug of the tractor and the soft scrape of the steel against the earth. She watched from just inside her front door, fearfully at first, but then with growing confidence. The owl and the rats had calculated wisely, and the nearest furrow was more than two feet from her house.

Behind the plow, in the moist and shining soil, the rudely-upturned red-brown earthworms writhed in a frenzy to rebury themselves; hopping along each furrow a flock of spring robins tried to catch them before they slid from sight. And when the plowing was done

and the worms had all disappeared, either eaten or safely underground, Mr. Fitzgibbon came back with the harrow, breaking down the furrows, and turned them all up again. It was a good day for the robins.

After the harrow, for the next two days came the Fitzgibbons themselves, all four of them with hoes and bags of seeds, planting lettuce, beans, spinach, potatoes, corn and mustard greens. Mrs. Frisby and her family kept out of sight. Thoughtfully, Brutus and Arthur had dug their doorway behind a tuft of grass, so that not even Billy noticed it.

Brutus and Arthur. Mrs. Frisby did not suppose she would ever see either of them again, nor Nicodemus, nor any of the others. Brutus, after swallowing Mr. Ages' medicine and resting for half an hour, had gone on his way into the forest to join the colony in Thorn Valley. There was no talk of their coming back, unless their attempt to grow their own food should fail—and she did not believe that would happen; they were too smart. And even if they did fail, they would probably not come back to Mr. Fitzgibbon's farm.

She thought that it would be pleasant to visit them and see their new home, their small lake and their crops growing. But she had no idea where the valley was, and it would be, in any case, too long a journey for her and the children. So she could only wonder about them: Were they, at that moment, like the Fitzgibbons, planting seeds behind their own plow? Some (like Isabella's mother) might grumble about the hardness of the new life they had chosen. Yet the story of what had happened to Jenner and his friends (if it *was* Jenner and his friends), to say nothing of the destruc-

tion of their own home, would surely help to convince them that Nicodemus's ideas were right.

The Fitzgibbons finished their planting, and for a week or two all was quiet. But it would not stay that way. The crops would appear, the asparagus was ready to sprout, and for the rest of the spring and summer the garden would be too busy a place for mice to live in comfortably.

So on a day in May as warm as summer, early in the morning, Mrs. Frisby and her children laid a patchwork of sticks, grass and leaves over the top of the entrance to their cinder block house, and then carefully scraped earth over it so that it would not show. With luck, they would not have to dig a new one in the fall.

They walked to their summer house, taking half a day to do it, strolling slowly and enjoying the fine weather, stopping on the way to eat some new spring leaves of field cress, some young poke greens and a crisp, spicy mushroom that had sprouted by the edge of the woods. For their main course, a little farther on, there was a whole field of winter wheat, its kernels newly ripe and soft.

As they approached the brook, toward the big tree in the hollow of whose roots they would make their summer home, the children ran ahead, shouting and laughing. Timothy ran with them, and Mrs. Frisby was glad to see that he showed no trace of his sickness. It was an exciting time for them. In the garden they were always alone with themselves, but along the bank of the brook in summer lived five other mice families, all with children. Within a few minutes of arrival, her four had gone with a group of the others down to the water to see the tadpoles swim.

Mrs. Frisby set about the job of tidying up the house, which had acquired a carpet of dead leaves during the winter, and then bringing in a pile of soft green moss to serve as bedding for them all. The house was a roomy chamber with a pleasant, earthy smell. Its floor was hard-packed dirt, and its wooden roof was an arched intertwining of roots, above which rose the tree itself, an oak.

On her way to get the moss she saw one of her neighbors, a lady mouse named Janice who, like herself, had four children. Janice ran over to talk to her.

"You're so late getting here," she said. "We all thought something must have happened to you."

"No," said Mrs. Frisby, "we're all fine."

"But don't you live in the garden?" Janice persisted. "I should have thought you'd be afraid of the plowing."

"As a matter of fact," Mrs. Frisby explained, "they didn't plow the particular spot in the garden where we live. It's behind a boulder."

"You were lucky."

"That's true." More than that Mrs. Frisby did not

tell; she had agreed to keep a secret, and she would do as she had said.

Still, she thought after quite a long deliberation, it was probably all right to tell her children, first making *them* promise to keep it secret. They were, after all, the children of Jonathan Frisby. For all she knew, and for all Nicodemus knew, they were likely to turn out to be quite different from other mice, and they had a right to know the reason.

The following evening, therefore, when they had finished an early supper, she gathered them around her.

"Children, I have a story to tell you. A long one."

"Oh, good!" cried Cynthia. "What kind of a story?"

"A true one. About your father, and about the rats."

"How can it be about father *and* the rats?" Teresa asked.

"Because he was a friend of theirs."

"He was?" said Martin incredulously. "I never knew that."

"It was mostly before you were born."

To everyone's surprise, Timothy said, "I thought he might be. I think Mr. Ages was, too."

"How did you know that?"

"I didn't know it. I just thought it. A couple of times I saw Mr. Ages leaving their rosebush. And I knew that Father used to visit him a lot. But I never saw him near the rosebush."

Probably, Mrs. Frisby thought, because he would have been careful always to leave through the blackberry bramble, just so we would not see him.

They sat down outside the entrance to the house, and beginning at the beginning, with her first visit to

the rats, she told them all that she had seen and done, and all that Nicodemus had told her. It took a long time to tell it, and as she talked the sun sank low, turning the sky red and lighting the tops of the mountains, beyond which, somewhere, the rats of Nimh were living.

The children's eyes grew round when she told them about the escape from Nimh, and even rounder when she described her own capture and escape from the birdcage. But in the end the eyes of Teresa and Cynthia were filled with tears, and Martin and Timothy looked sad.

Teresa said: "But Mother, that's terrible. It must have been Justin. He saved Brutus and then went back. And he was so nice."

Mrs. Frisby said: "It may have been Justin. We can't be sure. It could have been one of the others."

Martin said: "I'm going to find out. I'm going to go to the Thorn Valley, somehow, someday."

"But it's too far. And you don't know where it is."

"No. But I'll bet Jeremy knows. Remember, he told you the rats had a clearing back in the hills. That must be in Thorn Valley." He thought about this for a minute. Then he added: "He might even fly me there on his back, the way he did you."

"But we don't know where Jeremy is, either. We don't see the crows down here," Mrs. Frisby reminded him.

"No, but in the fall, when we go back to the garden —I could find him then. If I got something shiny and put it out in the sun, he'd come to get it." Martin was growing excited at his idea. "Oh, Mother, *may* I?"

"I don't know. I doubt that the rats will want visitors from the outside."

"They wouldn't mind. After all, you helped them, and so did Father. And I wouldn't do any harm."

"It's not something we have to decide tonight," said Mrs. Frisby. "I'll think about it. And now it's late. It's time for bed."

The sun had set. They went into the house and lay down on the soft moss Mrs. Frisby had placed on the floor of their room under the roots. Outside, the brook swam quietly through the woods, and up above them the warm wind blew through the newly opened leaves of the big oak tree. They went to sleep.