

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Marlfox

Brian Jacques

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Before he started writing books for children, Brian Jacques' life was as full of adventure as the stories he creates. At the age of fifteen he went to sea and travelled the world, before returning to his hometown of Liverpool, where he still lives today. He has worked as a stand-up comedian and playwright and now hosts his own programme, *Jakestown*, on BBC Radio Merseyside. For twenty years, his bestselling Redwall books have captured readers all over the world and won universal praise.

For more information about Brian Jacques and his work please visit his website www.redwall.org.

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Click onto the Redwall website and find out more about your favourite characters from the legendary world of Redwall, and their creator, Brian Jacques!

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To the memory of a true Redwall friend and talented illustrator, Allan Curless

Act One

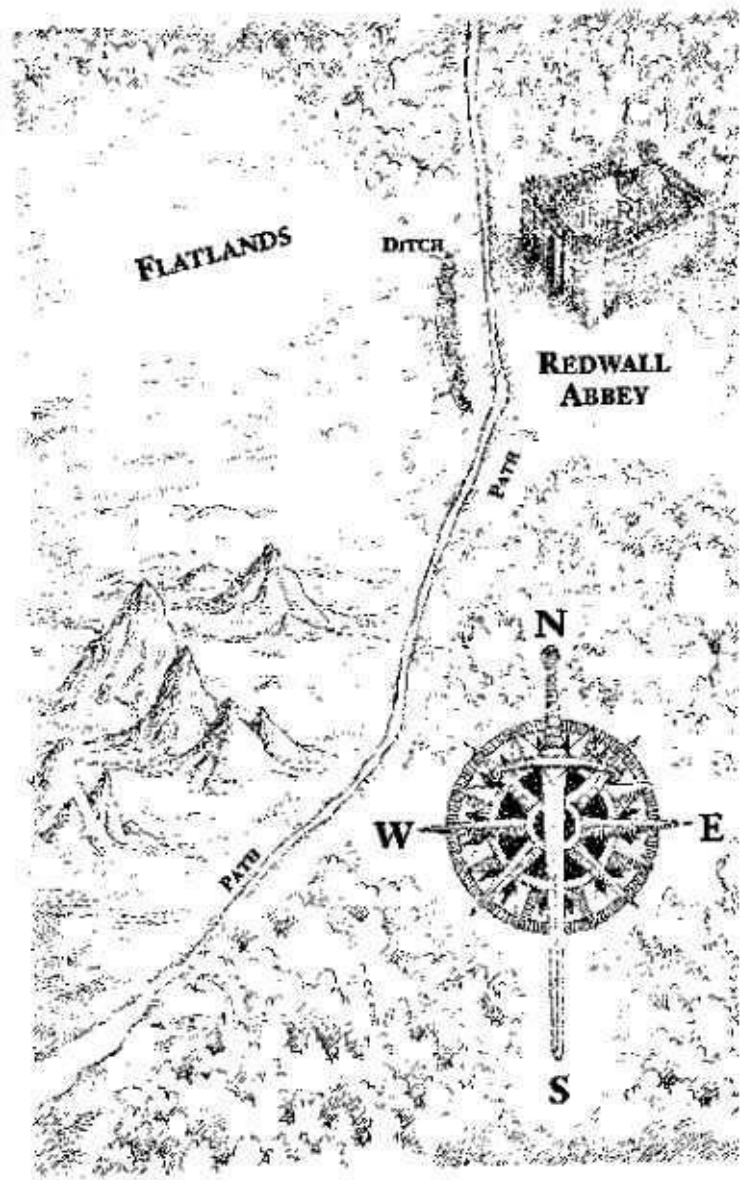
Enter the Players

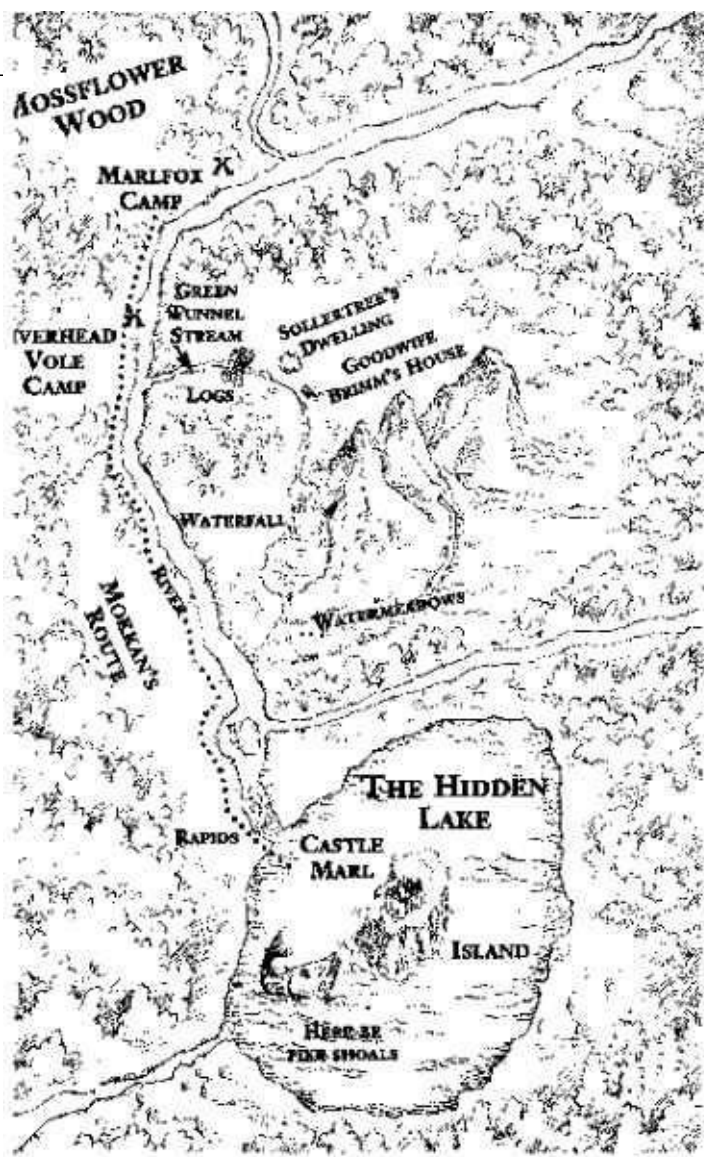
Act Two

Four Chieftains Going Forth

Act Three

The Queen's Island





To where will they go,
This is a secret nobeast may know.

Marlfo

Plundering murdering vulpine thieves,
Who blend with stone,
Or meld with leaves.

Marlfo

See the pale eyes and swirling cloak,
Appear like nightmare,
Vanish like smoke.

Marlfo

What steals upon the silent air,
Gleaming fangs, mottled fur,
A deadly axeblade lying there.

Marlfo

Nobeast living can hide from thee,
O thou who treads invisibly,
Cross hill and vale, through woods and rocks.

Marlfo

Marlfo

Marlfo

PROLOGUE

Who are we but strolling players,
Wand'ring through the long ago,
Joys and sadness, hopes and longings,
Keep us travelling onward though
The laughter and applause of others,
Who view the passing cavalcade,
Leave echoes hovering some far summer,
Floating round a woodland glade.
'Twas but a tale for your amusement,
Like my small unworthy rhyme,
Gone, alas, into those realms,
The land of once upon a time.

ACT ONE

Enter the Players





1

Eternally serene, the moon ruled over star-strewn vaults of cloudless sable night, like a round shield flecked amber, casting pale light to the earth below. Vagrant breezes from the distant sea drifted idly through Mossflower Wood's southwest margins, cooling the heavy warmth a bright summer day had left in its wake.

Janglur Swifteye sat at the edge of a well-worn trail, his back against the broad trunk of a fallen elm, savouring the calm summer night. He was an unusual squirrel, half as tall again as most of his species, with dark terracotta fur, untypically long and thick. A huge bush of tail added to the impression of his size. Beneath the fur Janglur's limbs were hefty and robust, with a stomach of considerable girth, which his mother constantly chided him about. His eyes were hooded and long-lashed, giving the impression he was always half asleep. However, anybeast who knew Janglur Swifteye was careful not to be fooled by his air of easygoing idleness. He was renowned as a quick and dangerous warrior, immensely strong and wise in the ways of battle. But there was another side to him: he was also an obedient son, a dutiful husband and a fond father. In the woodlands behind his family slept in their little travelling tent, his mother Ellayo, his wife Rimrose and Songbreeze, the daughter who was the apple of her father's eye.

From beneath half-closed lids Janglur Swifteye watched, missing nothing. Clusters of flowering dock nodded lightly against gnarled oak trunks, orange-berried arums and spiking flowered sedges swayed lazily between elder, chestnut and sycamore trees, nocturnal insects trundled or winged their various ways through the darkened forest. From somewhere deep in the thickets a nightingale warbled its short rich trill. Janglur whistled a reply to it on his reed flute, aware that somebeast was creeping up behind him. The only move he made was to blink away a midge from his eyelashes. He knew where the intruder was by the way she approached. Janglur chuckled.

'I hear ye, missie. Couldn't sleep, eh?'

His daughter Songbreeze climbed slowly over the elm trunk and slid down beside him.

'Nobeast could ever surprise you, old Swifteye. Phew! It's far too hot t'sleep and Grandma snoring like a score of hedgehogs after a feast.'

Janglur winked lazily at her. 'Huh, listen who's talkin'. Y'should hear yourself snorin' some nights. Y' drowns yore grandma's poor efforts out completely.'

She shoved her father playfully. 'I do not! Young squirrelmaids don't snore, ask Mum.'

Janglur snorted softly. 'Y'mother's worse'n both of you put together.'

The nightingale warbled its short melody again. Janglur picked up his reed flute. 'Listen t' that feller, thinks he can sing. Come on, Song, show him.' No creature who knew the tall pretty squirrel had ever used her full name.

Janglur played a brief introduction, then Song's voice rang out with such sweetness and clarity that a tear coursed its way down her father's cheek. Her voice never failed to move him.

'Flow'rs of the forest

Are bright in the spring,
Wake with the dawn
Hear a lone skylark sing.
Brooks gaily babble
O'er hillsides so green,
Streams ripple secrets
Of what they have seen,
Small birds give voice
Mid the leaves of great trees,
Which rustle softly
In time with the breeze.
I'll add my music
For what it is worth,
And sing just for you, love,
The song of the earth.'

As the last plaintive notes died away, Janglur put aside his flute and wiped a paw quickly across his eyes. Song nudged him gently.

'Big tough warrior, eh, crying again.'

Her father sniffed aloud, looking away from her. 'Don't be silly. 'Twas just a midge went in my eye, but I couldn't play for you an' wipe it out at the same time, had to wait till you were finished singin'.'

In another part of the woodland two foxes ceased their prowling through the undergrowth and listened to the sweet, plaintive melody floating faintly on the night air. Both beasts were identical; apart from the fact they were brother and sister they were alike in every other aspect. Ascrod and his sister Vanna were Marlfoxes, pale-eyed, with strange silver-white coats heavily mottled with patches of black and bluey grey. They wore swirling cloaks of drab brown and green weave. Ascrod's lips scarcely moved as he muttered to his sister: 'That singer warbles more sweetly than any bird I ever heard!'

Vanna's pale eyes glimmered in the moonlight. 'Aye, brother, and would trill even better at the court of our mother Queen Silth. Come on!'

In the space of a breath both Marlfoxes were gone, melted back into the night-shaded forest like tendrils of smoke on the wind.

Song plucked a blade of grass and tickled her father's eartip. 'Big old softie. Come on, play a live tune and I'll put a smile back on your face, eh?'

But Janglur was not paying attention to her. He stiffened, both ears twitching as he sniffed the breeze. Song caught the urgency of his mood.

'What is it? Can you hear something?'

Janglur's hooded eyes flicked. He watched the trees on the opposite side of the path, talking quietly but not looking at his daughter as he continued scanning the woodlands. 'Go quick t'yore mamma, Song an' tell 'em t'be silent. An' stay put! Hurry now!'

Song had seen her father like this before. She knew better than to stop and argue with him. Wordlessly, she slipped away to the tent.

Janglur took a dangerous-looking thorn dart, tufted with dried grass, from his belt pouch. Placing the missile in his mouth, he tucked it against one cheek, then sat back against the elm trunk. Idly he began playing his reed flute. Outwardly the big squirrel appeared calm, but inside he was poised like

lightning ready to strike. In a short while he made out the two foxes moving expertly from a patch fern to the cover of some bushes, coming closer to him by the moment. Janglur took the flute from his lips, calling out sternly, 'Quit sneakin' about an' walk on the path like decent creatures!'

Ascrod and Vannan had thought the squirrel was unaware of their approach. They hid their surprise by putting on a bold front, swaggering up to where Janglur sat. Ascrod kicked the squirrel's footpaw just hard enough to warn him that he and his sister were well in charge of the situation.

'You there, who was that singing a short while ago?'

Janglur did not bother to look up at Ascrod, though his voice was menacingly low. 'None o' your business, snipenose. Now get goin', an' take that other one with ye!'

Vannan winked at her brother and smiled nastily as her paw began to stray towards the single-bladed axe she carried beneath her cloak. Janglur appeared to ignore them, and went back to playing his flute. Ascrod leaned close to the squirrel, baring his teeth.

'You're very insolent for a fat lazy squirrel. Shall I show you what we do to beasts with insulting tongues?'

Pffutt!

Janglur Swifteye shot the dart from his flute, burying it deep in the tip of Ascrod's nose. As the fox shrieked out in agony, Janglur sprang upright: Whipping forth a loaded sling from round his waist, he hurled himself upon Vannan, who had her axe halfway out. She went down in an unconscious heap and the hard oval river pebble in the sling's tongue thwacked heavily across her skull. Ascrod was hopskipping about wildly, both paws clapped across his muzzle as he screeched with pain.

'Yeeeeeeek! Yaaaaarreeeeek!'

'Tails'n'scuts preserve us all! Who's kickin' up that awful din?'

Shaking with anger, Janglur turned to see his family dashing towards him, with Ellayo in the lead brandishing a blackthorn stick.

Janglur stared accusingly at his daughter. 'Song, I thought I told you to stay put an' keep 'em quiet?'

Rimrose placed herself between them. 'Tweren't no fault o' Song's. You jus' try stoppin' that ol' mamma of yours when she starts swingin' that stick!'

Janglur's paw shot out. He caught the tip of his mother's stick and held it tight.

Heaving on the blackthorn and stumbling on her long apron hem, the old squirrelwife berated her son. 'Leggo o' me stick, y'great boulder-bellied tree-walloper, leggo or I'll spank ten seasons' daylights out of ye!'

Song giggled and clapped her paws. 'That's the stuff, Grandma. You give him a good spankin'!'

Rimrose wagged a paw at her daughter. 'That'll be quite enough o' that, missie. Show some proper respect for yore elders!' Then, unable to prevent herself, she fell against Song, laughing helplessly. 'Oh, heeheehee! It'd be a funny sight to see yore grandma givin' that great lump a spank or two. Heehee!'

Grandma Ellayo let go of the stick and turned on Song and Rimrose, attempting to look fierce as she hid a smile. 'Hah! Don't you two think I couldn't tan his tail if'n I took a mind to do it. I'm still his mother, y'know!'

Janglur lifted his mother clear of the ground, hugging her fondly. 'You can skelp the fur off'n me any time ye wants to, my lovely ole barkbelter. Why, I'll bet y'could . . .'

Song interrupted suddenly. 'Look! The foxes are gone.'

All that remained of the Marlfoxes' visit was a few drops of blood from Ascrod's muzzle glistening darkly amid the disturbed dust of the path. Janglur peered into the dark woodlands. 'Ay, they've got away somehow. Won't catch 'em now, they've vanished.' He put a paw about his daughter's shoulders. 'Mark what I say, Song. They're Marlfoxes, strange blood runs in their veins.'

They can disappear like no other livin' creature.'

'C'mon, ladies, we best break camp an' get travellin'.'

Janglur's family had been wanderers since he was in his infancy, and breaking camp was a simple affair to them. Once the canvas they used as a tent had been folded, their few cooking implements were rolled in it to form a backpack. In the pre-dawn light they breakfasted on clear streamwater and travelling fruit and honey cake which Rimrose had baked two days before.

'Grandma, what's a Marlfox?' asked Song, between mouthfuls.

Ellayo tried to explain. 'The story goes back a long ways – 'tis far too long to tell in a short time. But I'll tell ye this much, missie. Somewhere there's a forgotten lake, a great stretch o' deep water almost an inland sea somebeasts say. That's where the Marlfoxes live, an' the most cunning of 'em all, if'n she still lives, is Queen Silth. Aye, they call her the most powerful magic creature alive. 'Twas said her island is a place o' great riches an' beauty. I heard all this from a poor creature who was snatched upon by a bunch of magpies while fishing off the island.'

Ellayo fell silent, and Janglur said, 'Don't bother your grandma further, Song. If Marlfoxes are loose in the land y'may learn more than you bargained for. Pick up that linen now, we need t'be travellin'. North an' east a touch, I reckon.'

Song folded the small tablecloth, which she had embroidered herself. 'What lies in that direction, Father?'

Janglur shouldered the tentpack, settling it comfortably on his back. 'The Abbey of Redwall.'

The young squirrelmaid's eyes grew wide with delight. She had never visited there, though she had heard tales of the fabulous place. 'Redwall Abbey! How wonderful! Oh, Mamma, will it be as nice as you told me it was when I was little?'

Rimrose smiled at her daughter's excitement. 'Even nicer, I imagine. Words can't fully describe a place like Redwall.'

Song took Grandma Ellayo's paw, supporting her as they walked. With Janglur in the lead, they set off as dawn was breaking. It promised to be another hot summer day, but the tree canopy was thick and would shade them as the sun rose higher. Song could not resist a final question to her father. 'Where are we going to Redwall?'

Janglur tucked the reed flute into his broad belt. 'Because we must warn whoever rules at the Abbey that there are Marlfoxes roaming the land.'



2

Farther south, on the flatlands close to the woodland fringe, a gaily painted cart stood propped straight on its two large wheels. It had a single shaft, crosstreed at the end by a well-worn pushing bar. Stretched over willow hoops a canvas cover was copiously painted in once bright colours, now faded by sun and seasons, though the lettering still read clearly.

‘The Sensational Wandering Noonvale Companions Troupe!’

On the nearby streambank a motley collection of creatures were preparing for a rehearsal. One of them, a theatrical-looking hare, stood forward. He was clad in a rumpled frock coat of lilac silk and a wide-brimmed straw hat, through which his enormous ears poked. He wore floppy yellow boots and carried a silver-tipped cane. The hare’s outfit had obviously seen better seasons, as had the cart and the entire troupe. Nevertheless the hare twirled his cane and boomed out in fine dramatic fashion as if addressing a vast audience.

‘Good morrow, one an’ all. I am Florian Dugglewoof Wilffachop, h’impresario an’ h’actor an’ manager. I present to you the Sensational Wanderin’ Noonvale Companions Troupe! Descendants of a talented tradition! Unrivalled throughout the entire land! Death-defyin’ feats! Hilarious comic plays! Music an’ magical virtuosity, jocular jigs an’ deelightful dancin’! Come one, come all! Witness our mellifluously marvellous, perfectly pleasurable educational entertainment! Entirely free of charge!’ He smiled winningly and continued in a loud stage whisper: ‘Home-made cakes, pasties and sundry comestibles, purely for the nourishment of the artistes, gladly accepted with profuse thanks. Ahem!’

From the cover of the cart a gruff voice interrupted Florian’s speech impatiently. ‘Oh, gerron wiv us afore us all falls asleep!’

The hare shot an outraged glance at the cart and snorted. Turning back to his imaginary audience, he beamed. ‘H’anda now, my bucolic friends, goodwives an’ rustic spouses – not forgettin’ you charmin’ young ’uns – we reach our fee-nah-lay! The very climax of our prodigious performance! Borrakul Ironchest an’ Elachim Oakpaw, the two strongest h’otters h’ever born, will h’attempt a darin’ display of muscle power, which H’i meself have seen kill ten h’other lesser beasts. If you are h’of a nervous nature, kindly look away, as swoonin’ an’ faintin’ may distract the h’artistes’ attention. These two mighty marvels will lift the h’entire, H’i repeat, the h’entire – disregardin’ me goodself, of course – they will lift the h’entire Wanderin’ Noonvale Companions Troupe . . . h’off thee gerround!’

Two burly otters, wearing tawdry gold-fringed pantaloons, skipped athletically forward, flexing their muscles and bowing. Puffing forth their chests and showing rows of white teeth in daredevil smiles, they performed a few limbering-up exercises and then went about their business. Seizing both ends of a long wooden bench, they started, with a great show of huffing and puffing, to lift. Standing on the bench were two moles, one dressed in spangled red bloomers, the other in a cloak and turban of jade green. Lying gracefully across the heads of the two moles was a mouse wearing a coronet of imitation flowers and a flowing sky-blue gown. Skilfully perched on one paw placed upon the mouse

midriff, a hedgehog balanced precariously, his spikes tipped with a mass of pennants, small flags and bunting. Up, up went the bench, with all aboard it wobbling perilously. The hare, Florian, muttered encouragement in a loud stage whisper.

‘Keep it goin’ up, chaps, that’s the ticket! Everybeast remain still now, hold y’positions. Up she goes, wot wot!’

Borrakul and Elachim grunted and strained artistically until they had finally lifted the bench over their heads. Suddenly Borrakul gave out a tremendous bellow.

‘Yahwoooooch!’

He released his hold on the bench and grabbed at his rear. Amid howls of dismay, the troupe and the bench came to earth in jumbled disarray. Florian dashed forward, furious. Down on all fours he liberated Borrakul, who lay trapped by the bench, still clutching his bottom.

‘Great seasons o’ sausages, you blitherin’ bangtailed buffoon! Why did y’let the bally bench drop?’

Crimson-faced, Borrakul gasped, ‘Because that perishin’ mousebabe shot me with a slingstone!’

Florian Dugglewoof Wilffachop drew himself to his full height, ears twitching, teeth grinding audibly. ‘Oho, he did, did he! Well, ’tis high time I had a serious encounter with that blisterin’ undersized miscreant. Dwopple! Come out o’ that cart, front’n’centre, this instant. Out I say, sir!’

Florian strode resolutely forward, but the mouse in the blue gown suddenly flung herself dramatically in front of the cart. One paw outstretched, the other across her brow, she declaimed, ‘O mister Florian, I beseech you, sir, touch not a hair of that babe’s tender head. Do nothing you will reproach yourself for in the sunlit seasons lying ahead. Hear a pitiful mother’s plea, and punish not the harmless innocent. Spare him, I beg of you!’

Runktipp the hedgehog chortled bitterly as he removed the bunting from his spikes. ‘Dwopple harmless innocent? Huh, that ’un’s about as harmless as a bucket o’ serpents an’ a sack o’ stoats! And you ain’t his mother, Deesum, yore only his auntie!’

Deesum shot Runktipp a haughty glance. ‘A mere detail. Do not quibble, sir. No mother could love a babe as I love Dwopple. Come to me, my precious little mite!’

Clambering into the cart, she grabbed a small fat mousebabe, who wore a stained oversized smock and a wicked scowl. Hanging from one of his grubby paws was a miniature slingshot. He wriggled and kicked desperately as Deesum smothered him with kisses.

‘Garraaagh! Leggo a Dwopple, stoppa kissy me. Blurrgh!’

Elachim the otter massaged a bruised paw as he glared at the infant. ‘You steamin’ liddle ni Dwopple, you ruined our re’earsal!’

Florian interrupted sternly. ‘Indeed you have, ye young ripcurdle. Apologize to the entire troupe this very flippin’ instant! Say you’re sorry, sir!’

From over Deesum’s shoulder, Dwopple grinned fiendishly at the company. ‘A soggy!’

The hare squinched his eyes at Dwopple. ‘Beg pardon, what did y’say?’

Deesum stamped her paw impatiently. ‘He said he’s sorry, isn’t that good enough for you? Would you like the little fellow to shed salt tears and roll in the dust? Isn’t the word *sorry* satisfactory to the heartless, driving taskmaster like you?’

Florian threw up his paws in despair. ‘Tchah! I suppose it’ll have t’be, wot!’

Deesum patted the mousebabe’s back reassuringly. ‘There now, my little treasure, they’ve all forgiven you, isn’t that nice. Will you give them all a big kiss?’

The hedgehog, Runktipp, backed off with a horrified face. ‘Let that liddle savage kiss me? No thanks! He’d prob’ly bite the snout off’n me!’

Florian wagged his cane severely at Dwopple. ‘Absolutely no need t’go kissin’ an’ huggin’ everybeast. Just behave y’self in future, m’laddo, particularly at rehearsals, wot!’

Turning on his heel, the hare strode grandiloquently off, only to be hit sharply on his bobtail by

missile from Dwopple's sling.

~~'Yowhooch! Bandit, fiend, pollywoggle, scallywag! I'll have y'tail for breakfast, sah!'~~

The sight of Florian's enraged face set Dwopple crying in distress. 'Wahaaah! Nasty wabbit gonna eat Dwopple's tail. Booohoo! Me on'y a likka baybee. Wahaahaa!'

Deesum hugged the mousebabe closer to her as she rounded on Florian. 'You callous monster! Fancy frightening the poor little fellow like that!'

Florian flung his hat down and danced upon it. 'Madam, I'll have y'know that wretch shot me in the posterior, an' called me a rabbit t'boot!'

Deesum stamped her paw hard. 'Enough! One more word, sir, and I'll resign from your troupe an' take baby Dwopple with me!'

Roop, the mole in the spangled bloomers, shook his head dolefully, grumbling in his curious molespeech. 'Hurr, no such lukk oi doan't surpose, burr no.'

Muggle, the other mole, gathered up a pail and trundled towards the stream. She wrinkled her velvety snout at her companions. 'Ee can stan' yurr arguin' all day. Oi'm goin' to get brekkist vittles readied. Bain't goin' to wurr moi jaws out a-shouten.'

Florian, who liked to issue all the orders, coughed officiously. 'Ahem, rather! Just what I was about to suggest m'self. Right, troupe, breakfast. Elachim, get a fire goin'. Runktipp, see to the larder, the rest of you make y'selves busy, wot. Quick's the word an' sharp's the action, wot wot!'

Runktipp spread the meagre rations on the bankside where Muggle was boiling water over the small fire Elachim had kindled. The hedgehog scratched his head spikes. 'Ain't enough grub left t'keep a fumblebee goin'.'

Deesum glanced at the two shrivelled apples, dandelion stalks, a stale loaf of ryebread which had crumbled into pieces and some half a dozen withered field mushrooms. 'Oh, seasons of mercy on us, the babe will starve!'

Ever the optimist, Florian began chopping the scanty provisions up and tossing them into the pail of bubbling water. 'Nonsense, marm. Fiddlesticks! Nature's bounty has provided us with sufficient food for a nourishin' broth. Let's all eat hearty an' look forward to better, more prosperous times, wot!'

The soup was dreadful, but knowing there was nothing else the Wandering Noonvale Companion spooned it down in stoic silence, until Runktipp began eulogizing on past dishes he had eaten, and hungry hedgehogs will invariably do. 'Crispy 'ot white bread, straight out o' the oven, that's the stuff. Goes down a treat with some good yellow nutcheese an' young onions fresh picked, all washed down with a foamy beaker of dark ale. Hoho! A feast fit fer a king, I say!'

Borrakul the otter closed his eyes dreamily.

'Pipin' 'ot scones, matey, spread wid meadowcream an' served wid fat juicy strawberries coated in honey, with a flagon of cold cider, o' course. Now *that's* a feast fit fer a king!'

Roop picked something dubious out of his soup bowl, wrinkling his nose as he flicked the offending item into the stream. 'Burr aye, well, seein' as 'ow you'm two bain't kings, whoi doan't ee use yo' mouths furr eatin' an' not makin' us'n's 'ungrier?'

The mousebabe, Dwopple, picked up his bowl and began toddling off. Deesum chided her charge brusquely. 'Dwopple, come back here. Where are you taking that soup?'

Dwopple nodded to a rock-strewn knoll along the streambank. 'Diss soop not gudd for baybee. Gunna give 'im to the fosskers.'

Elachim stared at Dwopple quizzically. 'Fosskers?'

Deesum translated. 'He means foxes.'

Florian was immediately on the alert. 'Foxes, what foxes? Where?'

Another pair of Marlfoxes, identical to the two who had accosted Janglur, rose up from amid the rocks where they had lain watching the Companions since dawn. Their names were Gelltor an'

Predak, brother and sister. Seeing they had been spotted, the pair approached the camp boldly, the drab cloaks flapping slightly in the light morning breeze. Borrakul cautioned his friends, keeping an eye on the strange pair.

‘Careful, mates, they’re carryin’ axes under those cloaks!’

Florian stood up. ‘Steady in the ranks, chaps, leave this t’me. I’ll do the talkin’. See those strange markin’s? I reckon I heard about these creatures, but I never thought I’d ave the bad luck to see ’em for myself. Marlfoxes they’re called – bad beasts!’

The foxes stopped a few paces short of the group. Florian walked cautiously out and greeted them. ‘Good day, friends. Beautiful summer mornin’, wot?’

Gelltor, the male fox, nodded slightly before speaking. ‘Who are you and where do you go?’

Florian bowed eloquently, sweeping off his hat with a flourish. ‘As you can see by our, ahem, carriage, we are the Wandering Noonvale Companions, a purely theatrical group of talented creatures.’

Predak, the female, moved closer to the fire. ‘What’s in the pot?’

Deesum dipped a short curtsy. ‘It’s a sort of soupy broth. You’re welcome to join us.’

Predak leaned over the pot and sniffed. She wrinkled her muzzle disgustedly. ‘Slops!’

Borrakul picked up a large pebble and tossed it from paw to paw. ‘Nobeast’s forcin’ ye to eat it and you weren’t asked to insult it either. Good manners don’t cost much, fox.’

Predak’s paw edged towards her cloak. ‘Mayhap I’ll teach you a few manners, riverdog!’

Florian was quickly between them. ‘Tush an’ pish, what’s all this?’

Predak drew her paw away from the axe beneath her cloak. ‘You’ve told us who you are, but you never said where you were goin’.’

The hare waved a paw airily. ‘Oh, thither an’ yon, y’know, thither an’ yon. A travellin’ show like ours doesn’t actually *go* anywhere, we roam as the mood takes us. But you, friend, will you tell us your names, and where you are bound on this summer’s day, wot?’

The Marlfox’s pale eyes stared insolently at the hare. ‘What we are called is not your concern, and where we go is nobeast’s business.’

Florian Dugglewoof Wilffachop’s ears quivered with indignation. ‘Soho! It’s bad manners and insult time, is it? Well, listen t’me, you popbellied, pickle-nosed, lousebound patchquilts! You can both take a runnin’ dive into that stream an’ boil your fat heads, an’ furthermore you can take your mange-ridden hides out of our camp before I assist you with a stout right boot. Good day to ye both!’

Gelltor had his axe half drawn when the otter Elachim picked up a thick pole used in a balancing act and flicked the air in front of the fox’s face with it. ‘I wouldn’t draw that axe if’n I was you, mate. This pole cracks ’eads easier’n it does eggs!’

Predak found herself facing Borrakul holding his big pebble ready to throw and backed by the two moles brandishing burning sticks from the fire. Runktipp dashed across to the cart and dragged out a long shining sword, a stage prop which bent and flopped about comically.

‘Now back off, both of ye, or get ready t’find out the colour of yore own insides. Move!’

The Marlfoxes knew they were outflanked and outnumbered, and backed off towards the rocks. Gelltor pointed at the troupe and snarled, ‘We’ll meet again, but ’twill be different next time!’

Florian threw the hem of his frock coat up across one shoulder and called back in an outrageous dramatic voice. ‘Indeed it will be different! The land will be rid of two rogues when next we cross paths, mark m’words, you spotty villains!’

Predak pointed beyond the troupe and shouted, ‘We’re not the only two here. There are others behind you!’

The entire troupe turned and scanned the landscape. After a moment or two Florian scoffed, ‘Not a earthly sight of anybeast. What do they think we are to fall for that one, a bunch of oafs, wot?’

When they turned back again the two Marlfoxes had vanished as if into thin air. Florian sighed.

‘Wish we could learn that trick. Ah well, comrades, onward ever onward.’

Deesum was still looking about fearfully. ‘Onward to where?’

With a great flourish the hare kicked the cooking pot over, letting the meagre broth spill into the stream. ‘Why, onward to Redwall Abbey of course, m’dear, where else?’

Roop chuckled and rubbed his stomach gleefully. ‘Hurr, oi dearly luvs ee vittles at Redwall h’Abbey.’

Florian issued the orders. ‘Attention, troupe! Load up the cart. Borrakul, Elachim, in the shaft please. Runktipp, you and I will walk behind armed with poles to protect our rear. The rest of you ride in the cart. We must get the news to Redwall, there are Marlfoxes in the land!’

As late morning heat shimmered on the flatlands and grasshoppers chirruped dryly beneath a hot summer sun, the cart trundled off towards Mossflower Wood, with the entire company singing.

‘Oh for the open road,

No dullard’s life for me,

The world is my abode,

Performing endlessly.

I’m free I’m free, companions we,

Travel the highways happily,

Performing deeds of derring do,

And plays of heroes good and true,

Tumbling singing in merry attire,

Pray tell me, sir, what’s your desire?

Come fiddle dum twiddle dum derrydownday,

A harum scarum hoopallahey,

Come one come all this day to see

The Wandering Noonvale Companeeeeeeeeeeee!’

At the very heart of Mossflower country the fastness of lordly, wide-trunked trees gave way to an expansive watermeadow, formed in a wide shallow basin at the juncture of two streams. Mid-afternoon heat haze shimmered on the far margin as Log a Log, Chieftain of the Guosim, stood waist-deep at the fringe of the tall reeds with his shrews. Though usually a loud argumentative band, the Guerilla Union of Shrews in Mossflower were unusually quiet. Each small scruffy furred fighter equipped with varicoloured headband and short rapier, watched their leader as he parted bulrush and marshwort. Raising himself on tip-paw, Log a Log shaded his eyes, peering about over the reaches of waterlily, crowfoot and brookweed. A large striped dragonfly hovered near the shrew Chieftain’s face investigating him. He growled at it. ‘Buzz off!’ Surprisingly, it did. He watched a brown trout fin idly by him, just beneath the surface. Log a Log wished that he could forget his tribe’s troubles and go fishing. Behind him a young shrew chewed noisily at some watercress, and Log a Log turned and fixed him with a severe stare. The young Guosim shrew stopped chewing and swallowed guiltily. An older shrew pointed across Log a Log’s shoulder.

‘Over there, Chief!’

Log a Log’s eyes narrowed as he turned and stared searchingly out over the sunstill reaches of the watermeadow. Over at the eastern edge, by a stand of weeping willows, an oar poked itself in the air waving back and forth thrice. He cupped both paws around his mouth and let forth a long ululating call.

‘Logalogalogalogaaaaa!’

Immediately the shrews behind him relaxed and began chattering.

‘That’ll be Bargle an’ the others!’

‘Then the coast mebbe clear, eh?’

‘Well, the Chief wouldn’t have called if ’twasn’t, stump’ead!’

Log a Log followed as they waded back on to dry ground, still disputing and debating.

‘Stump’ead yerself, wobblesnout. ‘Ow d’you know they ain’t still around?’

‘Wobblesnout? Lissen, matey, if I ’ad a snout like yores I’d keep me gob shut about others’.

‘Mebbe Bargle was alone. The others might’ve been ambushed.’

‘Nah, Splikker was with ’em. He wouldn’t let hisself get ambushed.’

‘Oh, wouldn’t ’e, then? Remember that time by the south rapids . . .’

‘Stow the gab an’ latch yore lips, mates. Mayon, see to the vittles!’

Log a Log stamped up on to the bank, shaking water from himself. The shrews were seated in a circle three deep when Bargle and his scouts came in. Log a Log motioned them to sit and he turned themselves to a beaker of rough cider each and some wedges of white celery cheese with shrewbread. When they were comfortably settled and eating, Bargle made his report.

‘We saw the two Marlfoxes just afore noon, Chief, west of ’ere, over by widestream. Then they vanished, right in front of our eyes!’

Log a Log undid his shoulder belt and let his rapier fall to the ground, rubbing the back of a paw wearily across his eyes. ‘No sign o’ those rats or our logboats, I suppose?’

The shrew named Splikker shrugged. ‘Never saw ’em, but we tracked their sign, an’ they’re bound west an’ a point south, Chief. By the seasons, they can paddle boats as well as any shrew can, believe me.’

Log a Log shook his head despairingly. ‘Stands to reason, doesn’t it? They’re water rats. West an’ a point south, y’say?’

‘Aye, Chief, but there’s a lot of ’em, so the logboats’ll be overloaded. I saw keel scrapin’s in the shallows. They can’t be travellin’ very fast, weighted down as they are.’

Log a Log drained his beaker and sat awhile, gnawing worriedly at his lip. The Guosim watched him in silence, until a scuffle broke out behind his back. Log a Log whirled round in time to see a hulking shrew deal the young one who had been eating the watercress a hefty blow. As the young shrew fell back holding his face, the hefty one began to kick him, rumbling bad-temperedly, ‘It was you, Dippler, sleepin’ on guard while those foxes’n’rats stole the boats from under yer nose, yer worthless, tail draggin’ . . .’

Log a Log was up in a flash. Launching himself sideways, he caught the hefty one a flying double kick to the stomach, sending him sprawling. The Chieftain stood over him, quivering with anger. ‘Lay a paw near Dippler again an’ I’ll boot yore guts through yer backbone, that’s if you’ve got any!’

The hefty shrew, who was called Fenno, glared up at his chief, his eyes filled with unspoken rage. Log a Log was older, smaller and lighter than him, but he was not Chieftain for nothing. Log a Log smiled, nodding back to his rapier on the ground. ‘C’mon, Fenno, yer a fine big beast. Carryin’ a blade, too. I’m not armed, but if y’figger yore brave enough t’carry out the beatin’s in this tribe, then why not try me? Come on, mate, let’s see what yore made of, eh?’

There was tension in the air as the Guosim watched both shrews. Then Fenno, still lying flat, placed a paw across his eyes, a sign of submission. A few chuckles broke out from the Guosim.

‘Ole Fenno did the sensible thing there, mate!’

‘Aye, so he did. Nobeast messes with Log a Log!’

‘Leastways, nobeast that wants ter grow old in one piece!’

Log a Log helped Dippler up. Throwing a paw round the youngster’s shoulders, he gestured for silence. ‘Hearken now, I don’t want any shrew complainin’ about young Dippler, or tryin’ to rough him up. We was all young once an’ we all made mistakes, some of ’em worse’n others. Dippler slept on guard an’ lost our logboats, all six of ’em – good craft too, they were. So the young ’un’ll learn

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