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Tarka the Otter

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The First Year

CHAPTER ONE

TWILIGHT over meadow and water, the eve-star shining above the hill, and Old Nog the heron crying *kra-a-ark!* as his slow dark wings carried him down to the estuary. A whiteness drifting above the sere reeds of the riverside, for the owl had flown from under the middle arch of the stone bridge that once had carried the canal across the river.

Below Canal Bridge, on the right bank, grew twelve great trees, with roots awash. Thirteen had stood there – eleven oaks and two ash trees – but the oak nearest the North Star had never thriven, since first a pale green hook had pushed out of a swelled black acorn left by floods on the bank more than three centuries before. In its

second year a bullock's hoof had crushed the seedling, breaking its two ruddy leaves, and the sapling grew up crooked. The cleft of its fork held the rains of two hundred years, until frost made a wedge of ice that split the trunk; another century's weather wore it hollow, while every flood took more earth and stones from under it. And one rainy night, when salmon and peal from the sea were swimming against the brown rushing water, the tree had suddenly groaned. Every root carried the groans of the moving trunk, and the voles ran in fear from their tunnels. It rocked until dawn; and when the wind left the land it gave a loud cry, scaring the white owl from its roost, and fell into the river as the sun was rising.

Now the water had dropped back, and dry sticks lodged on the branches marked the top of the flood. The river flowed slowly through the pool, a-glimmer with the clear green western sky. At the tail of the pool it quickened smoothly into paws of water with star-streaming claws. The water murmured against the stones. Jets and rills ran fast and shallow to an island, on which grew a leaning willow tree. Down from here the river moved swift and polished. Alder and sallow grew on its banks. Round a bend it hastened, musical

over many stretches of shillet; at the end of the bend it merged into a dull silence of deep salt-water, and its bright spirit was lost. The banks below were mud, channered by the sluices of guts draining the marsh. Every twelve hours the sea passed an arm under Halfpenny Bridge, a minute's heron-flight below, and the spring tides felt the banks as far as the bend. The water moved down again immediately, for the tide's-head had no rest.

The tree lay black in the glimmering salmon-pool. Over the meadow a mist was moving, white and silent as the fringe of down on the owl's feathers. Since the fading of shadows it had been straying from the wood beyond the mill-leat, bearing in its breath the scents of the day, when bees had blended bluebell and primrose. Now the bees slept, and mice were running through the flowers. Over the old year's leaves the vapour moved, silent and wan, the wraith of waters once filling the ancient wide river-bed – men say that the sea's tides covered all this land, when the Roman galleys drifted up under the hills.

Earth trickled by the gap in the bank to the broken roots below. Voles were at work, clearing their tunnels, scraping new shafts and galleries,

biting the rootlets which hindered them. An otter curled in the dry upper hollow of the fallen oak heard them, and uncurling, shook herself on four short legs. Through a woodpecker's hole above her she saw the star-cluster of the Hunting Dogs as faint points of light. She was hungry. Since noon the otter had lain there, sometimes twitching in sleep.

The white owl alighted on the upright branch of the tree, and the otter heard the scratch of its talons as they gripped the bark. She looked from the opening, and the brush of her whiskers on the wood was heard by the bird, whose ear-holes, hidden by feathers, were as large as those of a cat. The owl was hearkening, however, for the prick of the claws of mice on leaves, and when it heard these tiny noises, it stared until it saw movement, and with a skirling screech that made the mouse crouch in a fixity of terror sailed to the ground and clutched it in a foot. The otter gave but a glance to the bird; she was using all her senses to find enemies.

She stood rigid. The hair on her back was raised. Her long tail was held straight. Only her nose moved as it worked at the scents brought by the mist from the wood. Mingled with the flower

odours, which were unpleasant to her, was the taint that had given her a sudden shock; causing her heart to beat quickly, for power of running and fighting if cornered: the taint most dreaded by the otters who wandered and hunted and played in the country of the Two Rivers – the scent of Deadlock, the great pied hound with the belving tongue, leader of the pack whose kills were notched on many hunting poles.

The otter had been hunted that morning. Deadlock had chopped at her pate, and his teeth had grooved a mark in her fur, as she ran over a stony shallow. The pack had been whipped off when the Master had seen that she was heavy with young, and she had swum away down the river, and hidden in the hollow of the water-lapped trunk.

The mist moved down with the river; her heart slowed; she forgot quickly. She put her head and shoulders under water, holding her breath, and steadying herself by pressing her tail, which was thick and strong and tapered from where her backbone ended, against the rough bark. She was listening and watching for fish. Not even the voles peeping from their holes again heard the otter as she slid into the water.