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Redwall

written by

Brian Jacques

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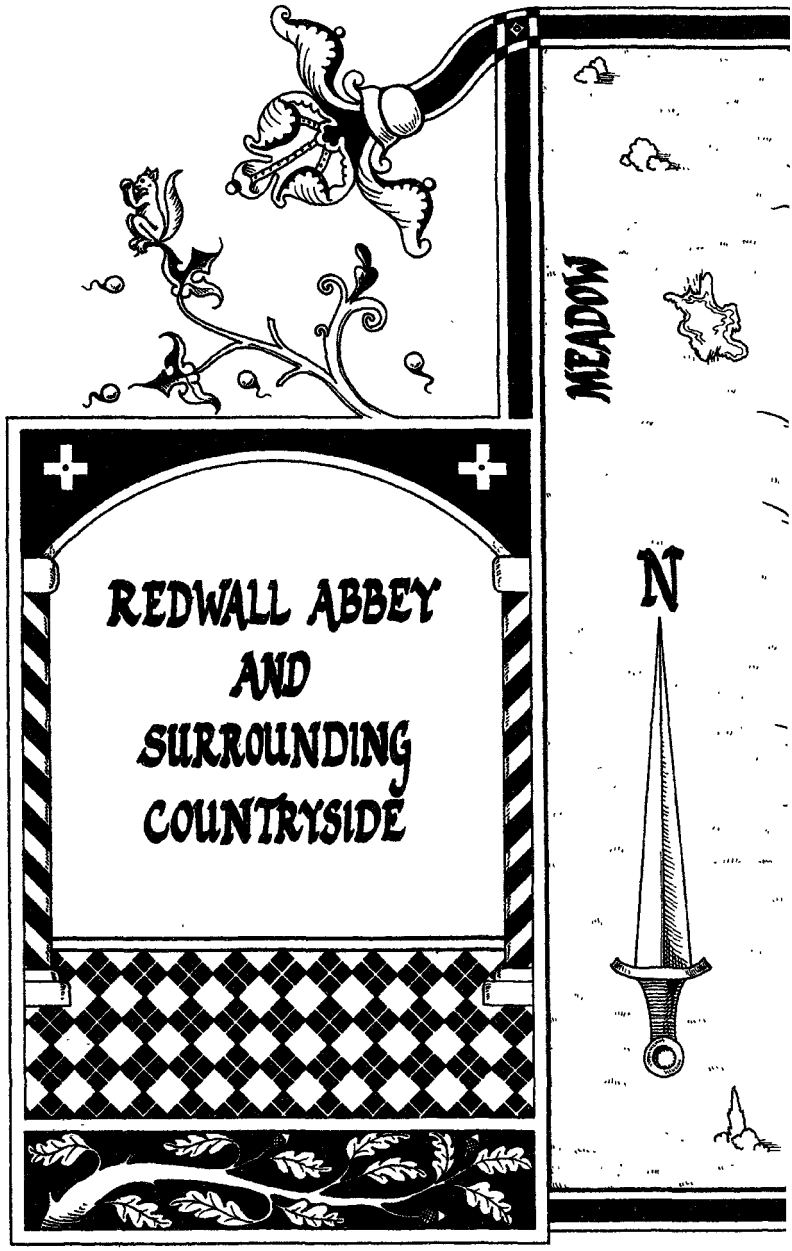
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MEADOW
N
REDWALL ABBEY
AND
SURROUNDING
COUNTRYSIDE

DITCH
MAIN GATE
ROAD
QUARRY
RIVER
FARM
MOSSFLOWER WOODS
MEADOW
St. NINIAN'S CHURCH

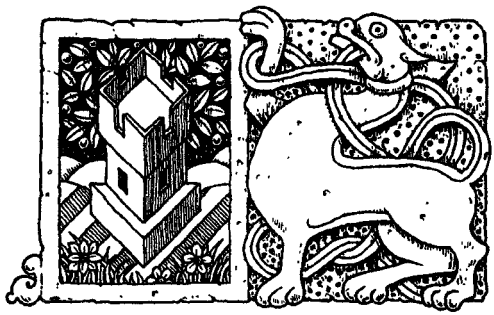
Who says that I am dead
Knows nought at all.
I – am that is,
Two mice within Redwall.
The Warrior sleeps
'Twixt Hall and Cavern Hole.
I – am that is,
Take on my mighty role.
Look for the sword
In moonlight streaming forth,
At night, when day's first hour
Reflects the North.
From o'er the threshold
Seek and you will see;
I – am that is,
My sword will wield for me.

(Rhyme from beneath
the Great Hall tapestry)

It was the start of the Summer of the Late Rose. Mossflower country shimmered gently in a peaceful haze, bathing delicately at each dew-laden dawn, blossoming through high sunny noontides, languishing in each crimson-tinted twilight that heralded the soft darkness of June nights.

Redwall stood foursquare along the marches of the old south border, flanked on two sides by Mossflower Woods' shaded depths. The other half of the Abbey overlooked undulating sweeps of meadowland, its ancient gate facing the long dusty road on the western perimeter.

From above, it resembled some fabulous dusky jewel, fallen between a green mantle of light silk and dark velvet. The first mice had built the Abbey of red sandstone quarried from pits many miles away in the north-east. The Abbey building was covered across its south face by that type of ivy known as Virginia creeper. The onset of autumn would turn the leaves into a cape of fiery hue, thus adding further glory to the name and legend of Redwall Abbey.



I

Matthias cut a comical little figure as he wobbled his way along the cloisters, with his large sandals flip-flopping and his tail peeping from beneath the baggy folds of an over-sized novice's habit. He paused to gaze upwards at the cloudless blue sky and tripped over the enormous sandals. Hazelnuts scattered out upon the grass from the rush basket he was carrying. Unable to stop, he went tumbling cowl over tail.

Bump!

The young mouse squeaked in dismay. He rubbed tenderly at his damp snub nose whilst slowly taking stock of where he had landed: directly at the feet of Abbot Mortimer!

Immediately Matthias scrambled about on all fours, hastily trying to stuff nuts back into the basket as he muttered clumsy apologies, avoiding the stern gaze of his elder.

'Er, sorry, Father Abbot. I tripped, y'see. Trod on my Abbot, Father Habit. Oh dear, I mean. . . .'

The Father Abbot blinked solemnly over the top of his glasses. Matthias again. What a young buffoon of a mouse. Only the other day he had singed old Brother Methuselah's whiskers while lighting candles.

The elder's stern expression softened. He watched the little novice rolling about on the grass, grappling with large armfuls of the smooth hazelnuts which constantly seemed to escape his grasp. Shaking his old grey head, yet trying to hide a smile, Abbot Mortimer bent and helped to gather up the fallen nuts.

'Oh Matthias, Matthias, my son,' he said wearily. 'When will you learn to take life a little slower, to walk with dignity and humility? How can you ever hope to be accepted as a mouse of Redwall, when you are always dashing about grinning from whisker to tail like a mad rabbit?'

Matthias tossed the last of the hazelnuts into the basket and stood awkwardly shuffling his large sandals in the grass. How could he say aloud what was in his heart?

The Abbot put his paw around the young mouse's shoulders, sensing his secret yearnings, for he had ruled Redwall wisely over a great number of years and gained much experience of mouselife. He smiled down at his young charge and spoke kindly to him. 'Come with me, Matthias. It is time we talked together.'

A curious thrush perching in a gnarled pear tree watched the two figures make their way at a sedate pace in the direction of Great Hall, one clad in the dark greeny-brown of the order, the other garbed in the lighter green of a novice. They conversed earnestly in low tones. Thinking what a clever bird he was, the thrush swooped down on the basket that had been left behind. Twisters! The basket contained only hard nuts, locked tight within their shells. Feigning lack of interest, lest any other birds had been witness to his silly mistake, he began jauntily whistling a few bars of his melodious summer song, strolling nonchalantly over to the cloister walls in search of snails.

It was cool inside Great Hall. Sunlight flooded down in slanting rainbow-hued shafts from the high, narrow stained-glass windows. A million coloured dust-motes danced and swirled as the two mice trod the ancient stone floor. The Father Abbot halted in front of the wall on which hung a long tapestry. This was the pride and joy of Redwall. The oldest part had been woven by the founders of the abbey, but each successive generation had added to it; thus the tapestry was not only a priceless treasure, it was also a magnificent chronicle of early Redwall history.

The Abbot studied the wonderment in Matthias's eyes as he asked him a question, the answer to which the wise mouse already knew. 'What are you looking at, my son?'

Matthias pointed to the figure woven into the tapestry. It

was a heroic-looking mouse with a fearless smile on his handsome face. Clad in armour, he leaned casually on an impressive sword, while behind him foxes, wildcats, and vermin fled in terror. The young mouse gazed in admiration.

'Oh, Father Abbot,' he sighed. 'If only I could be like Martin the Warrior. He was the bravest, most courageous mouse that ever lived!'

The Abbot sat down slowly on the cool stone floor, resting his back against the wall.

'Listen to what I say, Matthias. You have been like a son to me, ever since you first came to our gates as an orphaned woodland mouse, begging to be taken in. Come, sit by me and I will try to explain to you what our Order is all about.

'We are mice of peace. Oh, I know that Martin was a warrior mouse, but those were wild days when strength was needed. The strength of a champion such as Martin. He arrived here in the deep winter when the Founders were under attack from many foxes, vermin, and a great wildcat. So fierce a fighter was Martin that he faced the enemy single-pawed, driving them mercilessly, far from Mossflower. During the rout Martin fought a great battle against overwhelming odds. He emerged victorious after slaying the wildcat with his ancient sword, which became famous throughout the land. But in the last bloody combat Martin was seriously wounded. He lay injured in the snow until the mice found him. They brought him back to the Abbey and cared for his hurts until he regained his strength.

'Then something seemed to come over him. He was transformed by what could only be called a mouse miracle. Martin forsook the way of the warrior and hung up his sword.

'That was when our Order found its true vocation. All the mice took a solemn vow never to harm another living creature, unless it was an enemy that sought to harm our Order by violence. They vowed to heal the sick, care for the injured, and give aid to the wretched and impoverished. So was it written, and so has it been through all the ages of mousekind since.

'Today, we are a deeply honoured and highly respected Society. Anywhere we go, even far beyond Mossflower, we are treated with courtesy by all creatures. Even predators will

not harm a mouse who wears the habit of our Order. They know he or she is one who will heal and give aid. It is an unwritten law that Redwall mice can go anywhere, through any territory, and pass unharmed. At all times we must live up to this. It is our way, our very life.'

As the Abbot spoke, so his voice increased in volume and solemnity. Matthias sat under his stern gaze, completely humbled. Abbot Mortimer stood and put a wrinkled old paw lightly on the small head, right between the velvety ears, now drooping with shame.

Once more the Abbot's heart softened towards the little mouse. 'Poor Matthias, alas for your ambitions. The day of the warrior is gone, my son. We live in peaceful times, thank heaven and you need only think of obeying me, your Abbot, and doing as you are bidden. In time to come, when I am long gone to my rest, you will think back to this day and bless my memory, for then you will be a true member of Redwall. Come now, my young friend, cheer up; it is the Summer of the Late Rose. There are many, many days of warm sun ahead of us. Go back and get your basket of hazelnuts. Tonight we have a great feast to celebrate – my Golden Jubilee as Abbot. When you've taken the nuts to the kitchen, I have a special task for you. Yes indeed, I'll need some fine fish for the table. Get your rod and line. Tell Brother Alf that he is to take you fishing in the small boat. That's what young mice like doing, isn't it? Who knows, you may land a fine trout or some sticklebacks! Run along now, young one.'

Happiness filled Matthias from tail to whiskers as he bobbed a quick bow to his superior and shuffled off. Smiling benignly, the Abbot watched him go. Little rascal, he must have a word with the Almoner, to see if some sandals could be found that were the right fit for Matthias. Small wonder the poor mouse kept tripping up!



2

The high, warm sun shone down on Cluny the Scourge.

Cluny was coming!

He was big, and tough; an evil rat with ragged fur and curved, jagged teeth. He wore a black eyepatch; his eye had been torn out in battle with a pike.

Cluny had lost an eye.

The pike had lost its life!

Some said that Cluny was a Portuguese rat. Others said he came from the jungles far across the wide oceans. Nobody knew for sure.

Cluny was a bilge rat; the biggest, most savage rodent that ever jumped from ship to shore. He was black, with grey and pink scars all over his huge sleek body, from the tip of his wet nose, up past his green and yellow slitted eye, across both his mean tattered ears, down the length of his heavy vermin-ridden back to the enormous whiplike tail which had earned him his title: Cluny the Scourge!

Now he rode on the back of the hay wagon with his five hundred followers, a mighty army of rats: sewer rats, tavern rats, water rats, dockside rats. Cluny's army – fearing, yet following him. Redtooth, his second-in-command, carried a long pole. This was Cluny's personal standard, and the skull of a ferret was fixed at its top. Cluny had killed the ferret. He feared no living thing.

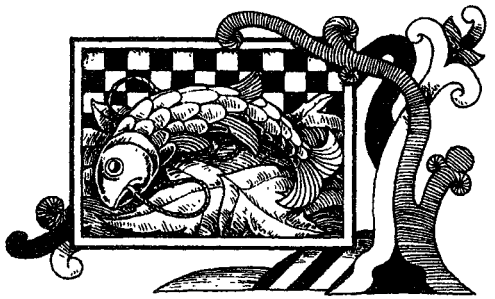
Wild eyed, with the terror of rat smell in its nostrils, the horse plunged ahead without any driver. Where the hay cart

was taking him was of little concern to Cluny. Straight on the panicked horse galloped, past the milestone lodged in the earth at the roadside, heedless of the letters graven in the stone: 'Redwall Abbey, fifteen miles'.

Cluny spat over the edge of the cart at two young rabbits playing in a field. Tasty little things; a pity the cart hadn't stopped yet, he thought. The high warm sun shone down on Cluny the Scourge.

Cluny was a God of War!

Cluny was coming nearer!



3

Beneath the Great Hall of Redwall, candles burned bright in their sconces. This was the Cavern Hole of the mice.

What a night it was going to be!

Between them, Matthias and Brother Alf had caught and landed a fully-grown grayling. They had fought and played the big fish for nearly two hours, finally wading into the shallows and dragging it to the bank. It was nearly two pounds in weight, a tribute to Brother Alf's angling skills combined with the youthful muscles of Matthias, and their joint enthusiasm.

Constance the badger had to be called. Gripping the fish in her strong jaws, she followed the two mice to the Abbey kitchen and delivered the catch for them. Then she made her farewells; they would see her at the Jubilee feast that evening, along with lots of other Mossflower residents who had been invited to share the festivities.

Brother Alf and Matthias stood proudly beside their catch amidst the culinary hustle and bustle until they were noticed by Friar Hugo. Busy as he was, the enormously fat Hugo (who would have no other title but that of Friar) stopped what he was doing. Wiping the perspiration from his brow with a dandelion which he held with his tail, he waddled about inspecting the fish.

'Hmm, nice shiny scales, bright eyes, beautifully fresh.' Friar Hugo smiled so joyfully that his face disappeared amid

deep dimples. He shook Alf by the paw and clapped Matthias heartily on the back as he called out between chuckles, 'Bring the white gooseberry wine! Fetch me some rosemary, thyme, beechnuts and honey, quickly. And now, friends, now,' he squeaked, waving the dandelion wildly with his tail, 'I, Hugo, will create a *Grayling à la Redwall* that will melt in the mouth of mice. Fresh cream! I need lots of fresh cream! Bring some mint leaves too.'

They had left Friar Hugo ranting on, delirious in his joy, as they both went off to bathe and clean up; combing whiskers, curling tails, shining noses, and the hundred and one other grooming tasks that Redwall mice always performed in preparation for an epic feast.

The rafters of Cavern Hole rang to the excited buzz and laughter of the assembled creatures: hedgehogs, moles, squirrels, woodland creatures and mice of all kinds – fieldmice, hedgemice, dormice, even a family of poor little churchmice. Kindly helpers scurried about making everybody welcome.

'Hello there, Mrs Churchmouse! Sit the children down! I'll get them some raspberry cordial.'

'Why, Mr Bankvole! So nice to see you! How's the back? Better now? Good. Here, try a drop of this peach and elderberry brandy.'

Matthias's young head was in a whirl. He could not remember being so happy in all his life. Winifred the otter nudged him.

'I say, Matthias. Where's this giant grayling that you and old Alf hooked, by the claw! I wish that I could land a beauty like that. Nearly a two-pounder, wasn't it?'

Matthias swelled with pride. Such praise, and from the champion fisher herself, an otter!

Tim and Tess, the twin Churchmouse babes, felt Matthias's strong arm muscles and giggled aloud in admiration. He helped to serve them two portions of apple and mint ice cream. Such nice little twins. Was it only three months ago that he had helped Sister Stephanie to get them over tail rickets? My, how they had grown!

Abbot Mortimer sat in his carved willow chair, beaming thanks as one by one the new arrivals laid their simple home-

made gifts at his feet: an acorn cup from a squirrel, fishbone combs from the otters, mossy bark sandals made by the moles, and many more fine presents too numerous to mention. The Abbot shook his head in amazement. Even more guests were arriving!

He beckoned Friar Hugo to his side. A whispered conference was held. Matthias could only hear snatches of the conversation.

'Don't worry, Father Abbot, there will be enough for all.'

'How are the cellar stocks, Hugo?'

'Enough to flood the Abbey pond, Father.'

'And nuts? We must not run short of nuts.'

'You name them, we've got them. Even candied chestnuts and acorn crunch. We could feed the district for a year.'

'Dairy produce?'

'Oh that, I've got a cheddar cheese that four badgers couldn't roll, plus ten other varieties.'

'Good, good, thank you, Hugo. Oh, we must thank Alf and young Matthias for that magnificent fish. What fine anglers they are! There's enough to keep the entire Abbey going for a week! Excellent mice, well done.'

Matthias blushed to his tail's end.

'The otters! The otters!'

A loud, jolly cry went up as three otters in clown costumes came bounding in. Such acrobatics! They tumbled, balanced and gyrated, cavorting comically across the laden tabletops without upsetting as much as a single sultana. They ended up hanging from the rafters by a strand of ivy, to wild applause.

Ambrose Spike the hedgehog did his party piece. He amazed everyone with his feats of legerdemain. Eggs were taken from a squirrel's ear; a young mouse's tail stood up and danced like a snake; the incredible vanishing-conker trick was performed in front of a group of little harvest mice who kept squeaking, 'He's got it hidden in his prickles.'

But had he? Ambrose made a few mysterious passes and produced the conker, straight out of the mouth of an awe-struck infant mouse. Was it magic?

Of course it was.

★ ★ ★

All activity ceased as the great Joseph Bell tolled out eight o'clock from the Abbey belfry. Silently, all the creatures filed to their allotted places. They stood reverently behind the seats with heads lowered. Abbot Mortimer rose and solemnly spread his paws wide, encompassing the festive board. He said the grace.

'Fur and whisker, tooth and claw,
All who enter by our door.
Nuts and herbs, leaves and fruits,
Berries, tubers, plants and roots,
Silver fish whose life we take
Only for a meal to make.'

This was followed by a loud and grateful 'Amen'.

There was a mass clattering of chairs and scraping of forms as everyone was seated. Matthias found himself next to Tim and Tess on one paw, and Cornflower Fieldmouse on the other. Cornflower was a quiet young mouse, but undoubtedly very pretty. She had the longest eyelashes Matthias had ever seen, the brightest eyes, the softest fur, the whitest teeth. . . .

Matthias fumbled with a piece of celery, he turned to see if the twins were coping adequately. You never could tell with these baby churchmice.

Brother Alf remarked that Friar Hugo had excelled himself, as course after course was brought to the table. Tender freshwater shrimp garnished with cream and rose leaves; devilled barley pearls in acorn purée; apple and carrot chews; marinated cabbage stalks steeped in creamed white turnip with nutmeg.

A chorus of ooh's and ah's greeted the arrival of six mice pushing a big trolley. It was the grayling. Wreaths of aromatic steam drifted around Cavern Hole; it had been baked to perfection. Friar Hugo entered, with a slight swagger added to his ungainly waddle. He swept off his chef's cap with his tail, and announced in a somewhat pompous squeak, 'Milord Abbot, honoured guests from Mossflower area and members of the Abbey. Ahem, I wish to present my *pièce de résistance*—'

'Oh get on with it, Hugo!'

After some icy staring about to detect the culprit, and several smothered sniggers from around the room, the little fat friar puffed himself up once more and declaimed firmly: '*Grayling à la Redwall*'.

Polite but eager applause rippled round as Hugo sliced the fish, and placed the first steaming portion on to a platter. With suitable dignity he presented it to the Abbot, who thanked him graciously.

All eyes were on the Father Abbot. He took a dainty fork loaded precariously with steaming fish. Carefully he transferred it from plate to mouth. Chewing delicately, he turned his eyes upwards then closed them, whiskers atwitch, jaws working steadily, munching away, his curled up tail holding a napkin which neatly wiped his mouth. The Abbot's eyes reopened. He beamed like the sun on midsummer morn.

'Quite wonderful, perfectly exquisite! Friar Hugo, you are truly my Champion Chef. Please serve our guests your masterwork.'

Any further speech was drowned by hearty cheers.



4

Cluny was in a foul temper. He snarled viciously.

The horse had stopped from sheer exhaustion. He hadn't wanted that: some inner devil persuaded him that he had not yet reached his destination. Cluny's one eye slitted evilly.

From the depths of the hay cart the rodents of the Warlord's army watched their Master. They knew him well enough to stay clear of him in this present mood. He was violent, unpredictable.

'Skullface,' Cluny snapped.

There was a rustle in the hay, a villainous head popped up.

'Aye, Chief, d'you want me?'

Cluny's powerful tail shot out and dragged the unfortunate forward. Skullface cringed as sharp dirty claws dug into his fur. Cluny nodded at the horse.

'Jump on that thing's back sharpish. Give it a good bite. That'll get the lazy brute moving again.'

Skullface swallowed nervously and licked his dry lips.

'But Chief, it might bite me back.'

Swish! Crack! Cluny wielded his mighty tail as if it were a bullwhip. His victim screamed aloud with pain as the scourge lashed his thin bony back.

'Mutiny, insubordination!' Cluny roared. 'By the teeth of hell, I'll flay you into mangy dollrags.'

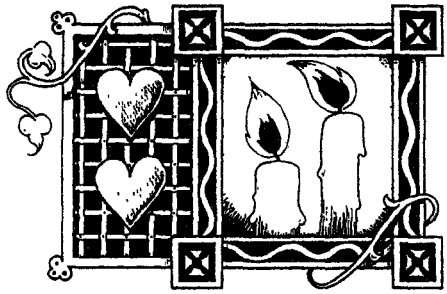
Skullface scurried over on to the driver's seat, yelling with pain. 'No more! Don't whip me, Chief. Look, I'm going to do it.'

'Hold tight to the rigging back there,' Cluny shouted to his horde.

Skullface performed a frantic leap. He landed on the horse's back. The terrified animal did not wait for the rat to bite, as soon as it felt the loathsome scratching weight descend on its exposed haunches it gave a loud panicked whinny and bucked. Spurred on by the energy of fright it careered off like a runaway juggernaut.

Skullface had time for just one agonized scream before he fell. The iron-shod cartwheels rolled over him. He lay in a red mist of death, the life ebbing from his broken body. The last thing he saw before darkness claimed him was the sneering visage of Cluny the Scourge roaring from the jolting backboard, 'Tell the devil Cluny sent you, Skullface!'

They were on the move again. Cluny was getting nearer.



5

Down in Cavern Hole the great feast had slackened off.

So had a lot of belts!

Redwall mice and their guests sat back replete. There were still great quantities of food uneaten.

Abbot Mortimer whispered in Friar Hugo's ear, 'Friar, I want you to pack up a large sack with food, hazelnuts, cheese, bread, cakes, anything you see fit. Give it to Mrs Churchmouse, as secretly as you can without attracting attention. Poverty is an ugly spectre when a mousewife has as many mouths to feed as she does. Oh, and be sure that her husband doesn't suspect what you are doing. John Churchmouse may be poor but he is also proud. I fear he might not accept charitable gifts.'

Hugo nodded knowingly and waddled off to do his Abbot's bidding.

Cornflower and Matthias had become quite friendly. They were young mice of the same age. Though their temperaments were different they found something in common, an interest in Tim and Tess the twin churchmice. They had passed a pleasant evening, joking and playing games with the little creatures. Tess had clambered on to Matthias's lap and fallen asleep, whereupon baby Tim did likewise in the velvety fur of Cornflower. She smiled at Matthias as she stroked Tim's small head. 'Ah, bless their little paws! Don't they look peaceful?'

Matthias nodded in agreement.

Colin Vole tittered aloud and remarked rather foolishly, 'Ooh, would you look at Matthias an' Cornflower there, a-nursin' those two babbies like they was an old wedded couple. Well, crumble my bank!'

Brother Alf reprimanded him sharply. 'Here now, you keep a latch on that silly tongue of yours, Colin Vole! Don't you know that some day Matthias will be a Redwall mouse? And don't let me hear you slandering young Cornflower. She's a decent mouse from a good family. Mark my words, Master Vole, I could say a thing or two to your mum and dad. Only last evening I saw you playing "catch the bulrush" with that young harvest mouse. What was her name now?'

Colin Vole blushed until his nose went dry. He flounced off, swishing his tail, muttering about going outside to take the air.

Matthias caught a nod and a glance from the Abbot. Excusing himself to Cornflower, he deposited the sleeping Tess gently upon his chair and went across to him.

'Ah, Matthias, my son, here you are. Did you enjoy my Jubilee Feast?'

'Yes, thank you, Father,' Matthias replied.

'Good, good,' chuckled the Abbot. 'Now, I was going to ask Brother Alf or Edmund to go on a special errand, but they are no longer young mice and both look quite weary at this late hour. So, I thought I might ask my chief grayling-catcher to carry out this special task for me.'

Matthias could not help standing a bit taller.

'Say the word and I'm your mouse, sir.'

The Abbot leaned foward and spoke confidentially. 'Do you see the Churchmouse family? Well, it's such a long way back home for them on foot. Good Heavens, and there are so many of them! I thought it would be a splendid idea if you were to drive them home in the Abbey cart, along with any others going that way. Constance Badger would pull the cart, of course, while you could act as guide and bodyguard. Take a good stout staff with you, Matthias.'

The young mouse needed no second bidding. Drawing himself up to his full height he saluted in a smart military

fashion. 'Leave it to me, Father Abbot. Old Constance is a bit slow-thinking. I'll take complete responsibility.'

The Abbot shook with silent laughter as he watched Matthias march off with a soldier-like swagger. Flip flop, flip flop; he tripped and fell flat on his tail.

'Oh dear, I'll have to get that young mouse some sandals that aren't so big,' the Abbot said to himself for the second time that day.

Well, what a stroke of luck. Fancy Cornflower's family living so close to the Churchmouse brood! Matthias was only too glad to offer them a lift home.

Would Miss Cornflower like to sit next to him?

She most certainly would!

Cornflower's parents sat inside the cart, her mum helping Mrs Churchmouse with the little ones, while her dad chatted away with John Churchmouse as they shared a pipe of old bracken twist.

Friar Hugo came out and dumped a bulky sack next to Mrs Churchmouse. 'Abbot says to thank you for the loan of bowls and tablecloths, ma'am.' The fat friar gave her a huge wink.

'All comfy back there?' called Matthias. 'Right, off we go, Constance.'

The big badger trundled the cart away as they called their goodnights. She nodded at Methuselah, the ancient gate-keeper mouse. As the cart rolled out into the road a sliver of golden moon looked down from a star-pierced summer night. Matthias gazed upwards, feeling as if he were slowly turning with the silent earth. Peace was all about him; the baby mice inside the cart whimpered fitfully in their small secret dreams; Constance ambled slowly along, as though she were out on a night-time stroll pulling no weight at all; the stout ash staff lay forgotten on the footboard.

Cornflower dozed against Matthias's shoulder. She could hear the gentle lull of her father's voice and that of John Churchmouse, blending with the hum of nocturnal insects from the meadow and hedges on this balmy summer night.

The Summer of the Late Rose . . . Cornflower turned the words over in her mind, dreamily thinking of the old rambler which bloomed in the Abbey gardens. Normally it was in

full red flower by now, but this year, for some unknown reason, it had chosen to flower late. It was covered in dormant young rosebuds, even now, well into June – a thing that happened only infrequently, and usually heralded an extra-long hot summer. Old Methuselah could only remember three other such summers in his long lifetime. Accordingly he had advised that it be marked on the calendar and in the Abbey chronicles as 'The Summer of the Late Rose'. Cornflower's head sank lower, in sleep.

The old cart rolled on gently, down the long dusty road. They were now over halfway to the ruined church of Saint Ninian where John Churchmouse lived, as had his father, grandfather, and great grandfather before him. Matthias had fallen into a deep slumber. Even Constance was unable to stop her eyelids drooping. She went slower and slower. It was as if the little cart and its occupants were caught in the magic spell of an enchanted summer night.

Suddenly, and without warning, they were roused by the thunder of hooves.

Nobody could determine which direction the sound was coming from. It seemed to fill the very air about them as it gathered momentum; the ground began trembling with the rumbling noise.

Some sixth sense warned Constance to get off the road to a hiding place. The powerful badger gave a mighty heave. Her blunt claws churned the roadside soil as she propelled the cart through a gap in the hawthorn hedge, down to the slope of the ditch where she dug her paws in, holding the cart still and secure whilst John Churchmouse and Cornflower's father jumped out and wedged the wheels firmly with stones.

Matthias gasped with shock as a giant horse galloped past, its mane streaming out, eyes rolling in panic. It was towing a hay cart which bounced wildly from side to side. Matthias could see rats among the hay, but these were no ordinary rats. They were huge ragged rodents, bigger than any he had ever seen. Their heavy tattooed arms waved a variety of weapons – pikes, knives, spears, and long rusty cutlasses. Standing boldly on the backboard of the hay cart was the biggest, fiercest, most evil-looking rat that ever slunk out of

a nightmare! In one claw he grasped a long pole with a ferret's head spiked to it, while in the other was his thick, enormous tail which he cracked like a whip. Laughing madly and yelling strange curses, he swayed to and fro skilfully as horse and wagon clattered off down the road into the night. As suddenly as they had come, they were gone!

Matthias walked out into the road, staff in hand. Stray wisps of hay drifted down behind him. His legs trembled uncontrollably. Constance hauled the Abbey cart back on to the road. Cornflower was helping her mum and Mrs Churchmouse to calm the little ones' tears of fright. Together they stood in the cart tracks amid the settling dust.

'Did you see that?'

'I saw it, but I don't believe it!'

'What in heaven was it?'

'What in hell, more like.'

'All those rats! Such big ones, too.'

'Aye, and that one on the back! He looked like the Devil himself.'

Seeing Matthias still stunned by what had happened, Constance took over the leadership. She wheeled the cart around.

'I think we'd best head back for the Abbey,' she said firmly. 'Father Abbot'll want to know about this straight away.'

Knowing that the badger was far more experienced than himself, Matthias assumed the role of second-in-command. 'Right, Cornflower, get in the cart and take charge of the mothers and babies,' he said. 'Mr Fieldmouse, Mr Churchmouse, up front with Constance, please.'

Silently the mice did as ordered. The cart moved off with Matthias positioned on the back providing a rearguard. The young mouse gripped his staff tightly, his back to his charges, facing down the road in the direction the hay cart had taken.