

## Mrs Nettlebed's Year

“There are no rules of architecture for a castle in the clouds.”

— *G.K. Chesterton*

# Mrs NettleBed's Year



Sam Burnside



Green Road Press

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Green Road Press

## The Author

Sam Burnside lives close to the Derry–Donegal border and is married to Stella. They have three children and five grandchildren.

### Also by Sam Burnside

*New and Selected Poems* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2013),  
[booksireland.org.uk](http://booksireland.org.uk).

## In the Beginning

*Mrs Nettlebed's Year* started life many years ago as a set of bedtime stories about Brer Rabbit told to three children called John, Kate and Sarah. More recently, these stories transmogrified themselves into new versions, written down (for they live far away, around and about the wide world) for another generation of children, called Matthew, Aimee, Ben, Sophie and Jack.

These stories are meant to be read *by* children, but also *to* children. Sharing with an audience, even if it is an audience of only one or two, especially across the generations, has always been important in the realm of storytelling. So has the sense of theatre – of being there in the moment, together with others, communing and growing and exploring in the world of the imagination.

## Thanks

For their assistance and encouragement, thanks are due to Jack Scoltock, Fintan Mullan, Tim Stampton, Anita Robinson, Alicia McAuley and, finally, to Stella.

## A Note on Some Big Words

You will find some long or unusual words in the text – words like “mollycoddle”. Despite exhortations (another Big Word!) I have decided to keep these, accompanied sometimes by explanations, since once a Big Word is met with and understood, it will become a friend.

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Spring



# 1

## Mrs Nettlebed's Arrival

The animals that live in the Woods do not have watches or diaries. They go about their business and they sleep. The Sun rises and the Sun sets and day follows night. Sometimes they don't even notice when big changes take place.

Take Mrs Nettlebed's arrival in the Woods. One day she was not there; the next day she was there. Brother Owl was the first to see her. He said she was tall and thin. Her dress was, he said, "decorated with nettle leaves".

"Yes, like the Stars in the sky," Wood Mouse replied.

Others said that her dress was black. Brother Rabbit said it was green. "The colour of moss," he murmured, scratching his ear. Others said she was not at all tall.

Suddenly, it was as if she had always been there.

It was the same with her house. One day it was not there; the next day there it was, tall and wobbly looking, as though it were made of jelly.

## MRS NETTLEBED'S ARRIVAL

The garden with its fence and gate and the garden shed were there, and so were the Meadow, the Lake, the Woods, the Green Road, the Black Path and the Dead Wood.

There she was, walking through the Woods in her stout boots and her big blanket of a dress, and her big, big bag in her hand, barely bending a blade of grass as she passed by.

Her fingers were cool and soothing when she touched any animal that had been hurt or injured. Her calm, nut-brown eyes seemed to hold and steady any animal that was confused, excited or upset. If she came across such an animal, she would simply pop it into her bag, take it home and care for it until it was better.

Despite being kind, Mrs Nettlebed, like many adults who should know better, had a bit of a temper! However, this was mostly at things going wrong, not at other living things. For example, she got very cross if she sat on a thistle by mistake, or when her best long scarf got up caught on a thorn or bramble.

Mrs Nettlebed seemed to know everyone's name and stopped to enquire after his or her well-being as she passed. As she meandered through the Woods (for she liked to wander and enjoyed the air and the views), everyone she met seemed to know her name. Rabbit said, "Good morning, Mrs

## MRS NETTLEBED'S YEAR

Nettlebed," even though before that day he had never seen her. Brother Fox smiled and said, "Good day, Mrs Nettlebed."

When Toad trod on a thorn and his foot swelled up, he went straight to Mrs Nettlebed. She put ointment on his foot and it got better immediately. Yet, before that, nobody had mentioned that Mrs Nettlebed was a Healer. A Healer, you know, is someone who makes an ill person feel better.

An even stranger thing was that everyone who found himself or herself helped by Mrs Nettlebed seemed not only to get better but also to become kinder and more thoughtful.

Brother Squirrel fell out of a tree and hurt his neck. Mrs Nettlebed put a warm poultice on it and soon he was his old self, only chirpier. Next day, Squirrel brought Mrs Nettlebed a gathering of sweet nuts from his own precious hoard that he had been storing away for the Winter when food would be scarce.

When Brother Badger heard about this, he was most surprised.

"Never knew that to happen before," he muttered. "As far as his food store is concerned, Squirrel is a very mean fellow, usually."

After she was fixed, even Mrs Goose, who had damaged her wing when she flew into the wire that Men had stretched

## MRS NETTLEBED'S ARRIVAL

above the Clearing in the Woods, brought a little pile of goose-down and left it outside Mrs Nettlebed's door. Mrs Goose is very shy, you know, and does not much like society, so she left her thank-you offering, secretly, in the very early morning, before anyone was up.

However, Mrs Nettlebed was already out of bed. She saw Mrs Goose and smiled a secret smile.

"I will give that goose-down to Mrs Thrush," she thought. "She has a bad cold and will appreciate the comfort of a warm goose-down covering on her bed."

In that way, Mrs Goose was happy, Mrs Nettlebed was happy and Mrs Thrush was happy too.

## 2

### Mrs Nettlebed Goes to Town

**M**rs Nettlebed lived far from Town. She did not possess a motor car and, even if she had owned one, she could not have used it, since she had no road to drive it on. There was only a narrow footpath that led eventually to the Green Road, which wound here and there, up and down, in and out, through the trees. The Green Road led to Town.

From her top-floor window, when she looked out and across the treetops, Mrs Nettlebed could see Town. She could see the Church Steeple; she could see the Town Hall. She could see the rows of little houses. She could see little wisps of smoke rising from chimneys.

Mrs Nettlebed could see quite a lot! If she was feeling lonely, she sometimes stood on her wooden chair so that she could see the Post Office and the Tea Shop next door to it. If she held her big telescope to her eye, she could see Mrs Pepper the Postmistress and Mr Dodder the Postman as they

MRS NETTLEBED GOES TO TOWN

made their way to and from the Post Office.

Mrs Nettlebed stood at her door. Today, Spring was in the air.

She could feel it. She felt nature swelling into life. She could sense it shift, moving among the trees and in the grass. The newly hatched chicks in the nests were calling out for food. She could feel the sap rise up from the earth, up through her boots, up into her knees. She could feel her toes twitch. She saw the evidence of Spring in Mole's return – there on the lawn, little piles of newly turned earth.

This morning, Mrs Nettlebed felt nervous and agitated. She wanted to be out and about. She felt as if she had been alone all Winter long. For once, she felt a need to see lots of people.

She decided to go to Town.

In a moment, she had pulled on her stout walking shoes and slipped into her coat and was outside on the path.

She stopped at the gate. She had forgotten her purse. She ran back to get it, and then remembered her shopping basket.

She set off once more. Again, she stopped by the gate.

"I had better take my umbrella," she remarked to no one in particular, and went back to fetch it. Then she remembered she might need her handkerchief. "Oh dear!" she complained. "I am in such a muddle!"

MRS NETTLEBED'S YEAR

Off she set once more. This time she only got as far as the front doorstep when she stopped to wonder what she would buy in Town. Her larder was nearly empty after the Winter, but what exactly did she need?

"I have forgotten to make up my list!" she said, crossly. "Oh dear, I shall have to go back and get paper and pencil!"

She went into the house but could not find a pencil, and could not find her paper. Then she bustled down to the larder, only to find she had locked the door and now could not remember where she had put the key.

"I need a cup of tea," she decided.

So she waited while the kettle came to the boil. Suddenly she heard a knock at the door.

Who was there but Mrs Hen? Mrs Nettlebed invited her to come in and they shared a piece of toasted crumpet (with a little strawberry jam).

Mrs Nettlebed looked at the clock and decided she had had such a busy day she might not have time to go to Town after all.

So she had a little more toasted crumpet. And, of course, her friend Mrs Hen stayed to help her eat it.



# 3

## Wrigley and Friend

**M**rs Nettlebed has a nephew called Wrigley. Wrigley has a friend called Glinch. Wrigley and Glinch are travelling by bus.

Wrigley has white hair. His mother always says, “No, it is *not* white, it is Platinum Blonde!”

Glinch sits on the seat beside Wrigley. Nobody knows what colour Glinch’s hair is! Nobody has ever asked the question, or even mentioned it. Wrigley thinks it very rude of them to ignore his friend, but says nothing.

Wrigley arrives, with Glinch, at Mrs Nettlebed’s house. It is February. They are here to spend the Half-Term Break.

They are staying for the holiday because Wrigley’s mother and father have been invited to a wedding. Wrigley has not been invited.

Wrigley arrives in Town by bus. Mrs Nettlebed has walked all the way there to meet him at the bus stop. It is his first

time visiting her.

Mrs Nettlebed thinks he looks rather pale.

He is pale! He is pale because he is terrified at the prospect of visiting an unknown aunt and because the bumping and jolting of the bus as it bounced along the country road has made him feel sick.

They have to walk all the way to Mrs Nettlebed's house. It seems to Wrigley to be a very, very long way. He is used to city life, with buses and trams and trains. He never walks!

"That," Mrs Nettlebed says, pointing, "is the Black Path. A very dangerous place. Never go there – it leads to the Dead Wood!"

Wrigley nods and promises himself he will not go to the Dead Wood.

They move along.

"This," says Mrs Nettlebed, stopping at a grassy path that leads off from the road, "this is the Green Road. This is quite safe. You may walk here and be quite contented."

Wrigley nods, but does not speak.

When they arrive at Mrs Nettlebed's house it is dark. Mrs Nettlebed shows Wrigley to his bedroom. She doesn't know much about small boys, but she knows they are always hungry, so she goes off to make him some cheese on toast.

She hands him the cheese on toast with a big glass of the milk that Mrs Goat has given her. Then she suggests that he might want to go to bed. He does look tired, she thinks.

Mrs Nettlebed sits down by her fire. She is tired after her long walk and feels drowsy. As she nods, and through the drift of sleep, she hears voices. She straightens up in her chair and looks around. There is no one to be seen. Again, she hears voices. They seem to come from Wrigley's room.

"But he is alone!" she thinks. "Who can he be talking to?"

She creeps to the door and, bending down, peers through the keyhole.

Now, Mrs Nettlebed knows very little about small boys, so when she looks through the keyhole and sees Wrigley's clothes scattered all about on the floor she is shocked.

"Goodness gracious me!" she mutters. "Something has happened. A storm or a typhoon ... or an earthquake, at least! What can have caused such a mess?"

Then she hears another faint murmur and bends down to put an ear to the keyhole. She cannot hear anything, so she decides to open the door.

Wrigley is talking quietly to Glinch. Wrigley turns, his mouth open. This never happens at home. Even his father knocks on his bedroom door before entering!

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Mrs Nettlebed stands in the doorway, her hands on her hips and a questioning look on her face. Her eyes move from Wrigley's face to the figure of Glinch, sitting upright on the pillow. Wrigley speaks.

"This is my friend, Glinch," he says, lifting the bear up. "I was just explaining to him where he is. He travelled in my bag, you know, in darkness. He feels a bit lost."

Now Mrs Nettlebed understands. She smiles a lovely smile. She steps forward and holds Glinch's little paw between her two hands.

"You are very welcome, Glinch," she says. "Would you like a glass of hot milk and a chocolate biscuit before you go to sleep?"

"Yes, he would!" Wrigley replies.

# 4

## Mrs Nettlebed Breaks a Leg

**M**rs Nettlebed pulled her woollen hat down over her ears and slipped on her gloves-with-no-fingers. Her brown eyes twinkled. Her cheeks glowed. She was ready for her daily walk to the Lake.

Trees surrounded Mrs Nettlebed's house. To the front and sides there were trees and, far off, beyond the Meadow, lay Town.

Behind the house lay the Lake, which she could see from her back door.

Mrs Nettlebed loved the Lake. She loved it for the way it changed, all year long – always the same, yet ever different. In Winter it was black and surly. In Spring the water began to shine, like a new mirror. In Summer it glowed and seemed to give off warmth. And in Autumn the Lake reflected the rich golden yellow and brown tints of the Woods' trees.

Once, Mrs Nettlebed took off her fingerless gloves and her

boots and waded into the Lake. She gathered up handfuls of mud and took them to the bank, where she made mud pies! What a mess she made of her dress! But what fun she had, throwing them at Brother Otter! Otter, of course, tossed them back and soon they were both splattered with mud.

Otter lived in the stream that ran into the Lake. Sister Vole lived on the other river, the one that ran out and away through the Dead Wood.

Each year, Mallards, Canada Geese and Moorhens came and went. Sometimes, Mrs Nettlebed saw Brother Heron, solitary and aloof, standing staring at the water, ignoring everyone.

A little stream flowed from the hill down into the Lake. On the far side, another stream flowed out and away, slowly and lazily, a mere trickle of water. At one place, it widened out into something like a big puddle, and here was Mrs Nettlebed's pride and joy, the Water-Lily Pond.

Many insects lived here, and Mrs Nettlebed had a little bench that overlooked the Water-Lily Pond that she liked to sit on, to watch the Dragonflies, Butterflies, Midges and Moths that came and went each month of the year.

Now it was late March and Mr and Mrs Frog had laid out clumps of Frogspawn. Soon the little Tadpoles would appear,

but for now, the spawn lay in black, glossy blisters at the water's edges.

Mrs Nettlebed shivered a little. The day was dreary. The water lay still.

She stood up and took a step forward, the better to see. Her foot went down into a hole in the ground and, quite suddenly, she tumbled head-over-heels. Her shoes made brown flashes in the still air. She fell to the ground with a crash that made her see stars.

After a little while, when she tried to move, she found she could not. She had broken her leg!

“What to do? What to do?” she thought.

Mrs Nettlebed looked around. The trees dripped water, the grey sky loomed and the Water-Lily Pond became blacker and blacker. The air was silent. No animal rustled; no bird stirred.

She lay on her back on the cold, hard ground and thought and thought.

The Woods were empty and the Lake was deserted. Mr Dodder the Postman had called earlier with a letter and would not call again today.

Then, in a flash, something brown and red suddenly appeared and settled on Mrs Nettlebed's brown shoe!

It was Sister Robin!

"Oh!" gasped Mrs Nettlebed, "I am so glad to see you, Sister Robin! Can you please help me?"

"What is wrong?" Robin asked.

"I think I have broken my leg! I cannot stand up!" said Mrs Nettlebed.

Sister Robin bobbed and dipped. She weaved, jogged and jiggled. She went pit-a-pat from one foot to the other, and back again. Watching her, Mrs Nettlebed felt quite dizzy.

"What can I do? What can I do?" Robin gasped. "I'm only small, after all!"

Mrs Nettlebed considered.

"You could carry a message," she said. "Here, take this!"

She drew from her pocket a handkerchief. It had her initials embroidered in one corner. "Take this to Town and give it to someone. Give it to Mr Dodder."

"Town is a long way away and my wings are very small," Robin stuttered, twitching in trepidation. That means that Robin was unsure if she could go all that distance on her own.

Mrs Nettlebed's leg hurt. The ground was growing harder and feeling colder and she had a headache.

The she had an idea.

"Give it to Pigeon," she begged. "He will deliver it!"

That is exactly what happened. Sister Robin flew to



MRS NETTLEBED BREAKS A LEG

Pigeon. Pigeon flew to Town. A short time later the Doctor came running across the fields.

But when the Doctor arrived, she found Mrs Nettlebed snug inside her house, and not another soul could she see. How had Mrs Nettlebed got there? No one knew. And Mrs Nettlebed did not say.

If the Doctor had been more observant, she might have seen the many eyes gleaming out of the darkness at the edge of the Woods.

“That,” thought Mrs Nettlebed, “is what this society of friends is for.” But still, she did not say a word.

# 5

## Mrs Nettlebed and the Easter Ass

**I**t was a matter of tradition. A tradition, Mrs Nettlebed always said, is just a habit. Every Easter since she could not remember when, Mrs Nettlebed made up a picnic hamper and set off to climb the hill behind her house.

Last year the climb had been hard, for Mrs Nettlebed finds climbing hills harder as she gets older. Last time, she had taken one big hamper, as she always did. It was her habit. She had found it very heavy. It had slowed her down as she climbed and dragging its weight had made her very tired.

Then, a few months ago, she came across two small wicker hampers in a shop in Town. She bought these, believing it would be easier to carry two small baskets than one big one. She thought they would balance her as she walked along.

She packed a flask of tea and a small bottle of milk and some sandwiches. She made sure to pack an apple and an orange. Then she put in a bar of chocolate. She considered

for a moment, and then dropped a packet of crisps into the hamper too. A packet of chocolate drops followed that. Mrs Nettlebed's favourite!

Next, she packed a picnic rug into the second basket. Then she carefully packed some Easter eggs that she had hard-boiled and decorated the day before. She looked forward to rolling the eggs down the hill before eating them.

"I might share them with some friend I meet," she thought.

Then she added a few chocolate coins, just for fun. Mrs Nettlebed did like her chocolate!

Mrs Nettlebed set off, carrying a basket in each hand. She grew tired very quickly so she sat down on a rock to rest. Just then, Brother Ass came stumbling along, swinging his head and twitching his tail.

"You look tired," he said, looking at the two baskets. "Put your baskets across my back and I will carry them to the top of the hill."

"Oh, thank you," she said.

That is just what she did. She put one basket on each side of Ass's back. He set off and soon she found she was left behind as he disappeared round a bend in the track.

When she arrived at the top of the hill, what did she see?

Treasure!

MRS NETTLEBED'S YEAR

A big pile of Easter eggs and a big pile of chocolate coins – many more than she had packed – sitting there in the very spot she always used for her picnics.

She sank to her knees before the treasure trove and reached out to gather in the Easter eggs.

But they disappeared!

She reached out to gather in the chocolate coins.

But they seemed to melt away!

She looked around.

No Easter eggs. No chocolate coins. No treasure!

No Ass!

“Oh!” she cried out. “You trickster! You bad Ass! You have betrayed me! You have made off with my picnic – my Easter eggs and my chocolate coins! And my chocolate drops!

She turned away and sadly made her way back down the path.

Then, after just a moment, she caught sight of Brother Ass. He had turned off down a little track. She followed him. Soon, he came to a clearing, where a family of poor people was camped by a deserted mill. They were a father and mother and seven children. They looked so very cold, hungry, and miserable.

Brother Ass stood close by, waiting for Mrs Nettlebed.

MRS NETTLEBED AND THE EASTER ASS

Mrs Nettlebed decided at once. She approached, took the two baskets down from Ass's back and opened them.

She spread her picnic rug on the grass.

She spread her picnic out on the rug.

At once, the family seemed to grow taller.

Mrs Nettlebed invited them to share her picnic and asked them to help her roll the decorated, hard-boiled eggs down the hill.

Their faces glowed.

Later, Mrs Nettlebed made her way home. Ass was by her side. She felt happy and satisfied.

"Thank you, Brother Ass," she said. "Thank you for showing me where my treasure really lay!"

Brother Ass raised his head, twitched his tail, brayed a little bray and smiled a little smile.

# Summer



# 6

## Mrs Nettlebed's Spoiled Summer's Day

**M**rs Nettlebed woke with a start. She opened one nut-brown eye, then the other nut-brown eye. The room was flooded with sunshine. Through the open window, she could hear the birds sing in the garden.

Her eyes twinkled with joy.

"It's Summer!" she thought. She jumped from her bed and rushed to the window.

"Today, I shall mow the grass," she thought. "But before that I shall collect a little milk from Mrs Goat and I shall collect some eggs from Mrs Hen."

She stopped, on her way to the bedroom door.

"But first I must dress," she remembered.

Then she stopped halfway to her wardrobe.

"Silly me! First I must wash my face and brush my teeth and put a comb through my hair!"

A little later, Mrs Nettlebed remembered that she should

have some breakfast before going to do her chores.

She made toast from bread she had baked yesterday. She spread some of the yellow, creamy butter the Farmer's Wife had given her in exchange for half of the carrots Brother Rabbit had given her in exchange for ... she could not remember what. Life was so busy and she had so much to do. She cut the slices of bread into little triangles. She could hear birds singing outside. Was life not wonderful, she thought, smiling as she cut and stacked the slices of toasted bread onto a plate.

Next, she got a little dish of the jelly she had made from the apples she had harvested from her tree last Autumn. She also got a little dish of marmalade. She carried all this outside to the big wooden box that served as a table in the garden.

The sky was blue. The Sun shone. The birds sang louder.

Mrs Nettlebed put a big helping of butter on the toast. She looked at the jelly and then at the marmalade. She decided.

The yellow butter melted on the warm toast and the golden marmalade melted into the butter. Mrs Nettlebed was about to take a first bite of the crunchy morsel when she heard the garden gate creak.

She looked up.

It was Mr Dodder the Postman.

"Good morning, Mr Dodder!" Mrs Nettlebed cried out,



delighted to see him.

"Don't know as it's so good," he grumbled. "My leg is playing up something terrible!"

"Oh dear," Mrs Nettlebed replied. A slight frown crossed her forehead.

"Aye! And Mrs Dodder has taken to her bed! Very bad Hayfever, she has."

"Oh dear, I do hope she gets better soon," Mrs Nettlebed said in a small, subdued voice.

"He looks so gloomy," she thought. He made her feel sad.

"Doubt it'll be much better soon," he muttered. "This terrible hot weather doesn't help."

He held out a postcard and Mrs Nettlebed took it.

"Would you like a cup of tea," she asked, "after your long walk? Or a cool drink?"

"No," Mr Dodder said. "Drinking between meals doesn't agree with me." Then he muttered, "Goodbye."

And with that, he limped off.

Mrs Nettlebed sat there on her big wooden box. She looked at the hard, cold toast. She looked at the cup of cold tea.

She listened. There was no noise. Just silence. The birds had stopped singing.

Suddenly, Mrs Nettlebed did not feel hungry any more.

# 7

## Mrs Nettlebed's Mother's Big Birthday

**I**t was Mr Dodder the Postman who started the rumour.

Mr Dodder had delivered a postcard to Mrs Nettlebed. Mr Dodder had read the message, although he was supposed not to. It said, "I am coming to visit you to celebrate my one-hundredth birthday. I will arrive on Midsummer's Day. Mother."

"A birthday. A Significant Birthday!" he whispered to his wife when he arrived home later. However, House Mouse heard him quite clearly.

House Mouse told one of the Field Mice, who told Rat, who told Hare. As the story was repeated, it became a *Very Significant Birthday*. Soon everyone in the Woods knew about Mrs Nettlebed's Mother's *Very Significant Birthday*.

When Hare mentioned the news to Rabbit, Rabbit immediately had an idea.

His idea was, "Why don't we organise a birthday party for Mrs Nettlebed's Mother?"

## MRS NETTLEBED'S MOTHER'S BIG BIRTHDAY

"I think that is a very good idea," Hare replied. He thought for a moment, and then, because he did not know, he asked, "How do we organise a birthday party?"

Rabbit did not know either, so he immediately called on Sister Owl and asked her. Sister Owl did not know, so she called on Brother Badger and asked him. Brother Badger did not really know, so he called on Mrs Hen and asked her.

Sister Owl is said to be very wise; Brother Badger is said to know everything but poor Mrs Hen is said to be rather silly. However, Mrs Hen was the one who knew how to organise a birthday party!

She started there and then, for, as she said, Midsummer's Day was very close.

She organised for Mrs Duck to bake a cake.

She organised for one hundred Fireflies to act as candles for the cake.

She organised for five hundred Starlings to provide a great flying display in the sky over the Clearing in the Woods.

She organised for the Nightingale and Skylark families to sing "Happy Birthday" for Mrs Nettlebed's Mother.

Finally, she organised for the smaller birds to collect lots of soft green moss. This they placed on the tree stump at the edge of the Clearing in the Woods to make a very special soft seat.

By Midsummer's Day everything was ready and the animals gathered at the side of the Green Road. They waited all morning; there was no sign of a traveller. No visitor appeared.

Then Sparrowhawk, who was up very high in the sky, reported that a woman dressed in black had suddenly appeared in Mrs Nettlebed's garden.

They all rushed to Mrs Nettlebed's house and there, sitting on a bench, was a very little old woman, all dressed in black. She grasped a big blackthorn stick in her hand.

Mrs Nettlebed appeared. She was very pleased to see her mother and she was also pleased to see so many friends.

The animals invited Mrs Nettlebed and Mrs Nettlebed's Mother to the surprise birthday party.

They walked to the Clearing in the Woods and there they sat on the soft green seat, side by side. Mrs Nettlebed opened her bag, took out two sunshades and handed one to her mother. Then the party started.

A wire stretched across the Clearing in the Woods. It was attached to tall poles and had been put there a long time before by Men. Nowadays, the birds used it as a perch.

The Nightingales and the Skylarks lined up on the wire and sang "Happy Birthday". Then the Starlings flew past, performing great swoops and sweeps across the sky.

## MRS NETTLEBED'S MOTHER'S BIG BIRTHDAY

Then all the animals had a feast of nuts and seeds and berries and apples and carrots and goodness knows what else.

Finally, Mrs Duck produced the cake from behind a bush, where she had hidden it, and the Fireflies did a sprightly little dance on its top. When they danced, Mrs Nettlebed thought they looked like those sparkling lights that you sometimes see, jiggling on a rope in the wind.

After they had all had a slice of birthday cake, Mrs Nettlebed's Mother said "Thank you very much!" to all the animals. Then Mrs Nettlebed said, "Thank you all – and a special thank you to Mrs Hen for all her hard work."

The animals all clapped and then Mrs Nettlebed and Mrs Nettlebed's Mother went home.

Brother Badger and Rabbit and Sister Owl and Mrs Hen met later and they all agreed it had been a wonderful birthday party. Brother Badger and Rabbit and Sister Owl agreed that Mrs Hen was a wonderful organiser.

The next day another rumour spread.

Nobody had seen Mrs Nettlebed's Mother leave, yet Magpie and Field Mouse had both been to the house that morning, and both were convinced that Mrs Nettlebed was all alone.

Of Mrs Nettlebed's mysterious mother there was neither sight nor sound.

# 8

## Mrs Nettlebed's Bargain

**D**usk was approaching and Brother Owl and Brother Badger were having a good old chat.

Brother Owl was sitting on the bottom branch of the Old Chestnut Tree, behind a big bunch of leaves. He had his back to the tree's bole. That is, he had his back to the tree's great round trunk. He opened his eyes wide and looked about.

Brother Badger was seated on a flat stone, under a bush, with only his snout visible.

Brother Owl and Brother Badger were discussing their neighbours. In other words, they were gossiping!

"You know," Badger reminisced (reminisced means he half-knew and half-guessed what had happened in the past), "I have heard it said that Mrs Nettlebed was at one time known as 'Ms Nettlebed' and for a little time as 'Miss Nettlebed'. Before that, she had been 'That Young Nettlebed' and for a year or so she had been known as 'Baby Nettlebed'."

"I know," Owl replied drowsily. "It does get very confusing, all this growing-up business."

"Well, it's not so much that," Badger mused. "We all change, just like the seasons change. Spring becomes Summer; Autumn turns into Winter. No, it is more the way Mrs Nettlebed changes, moment to moment ..."

"I know," Owl murmured. "It is like the Lake. One moment it is bright and smooth and peaceful. The next a bit of a breeze and it is all rills and riffs and ..."

"A little *roughness*," suggested Badger, "on the surface of the water ..."

"Exactly," Owl replied. He was very much wide awake now.

"Take a storm," he continued, "a cloudburst or a downpour – a heavy shower even – and what happens? The Lake is transformed! It churns! It boils! It is catastrophic! So many little lives lost: Mayflies and Caddisflies and Alderfly Larvae and Damselflies ... Water Beetles and Water Bugs and Pond Skaters ... Droneflies and Midges, and Wiggles of all kinds ..."

Just then, a sudden noise silenced the two animals. Crash! Crash! it went. They froze, the way animals do.

It was Mrs Nettlebed herself, striding along, slashing angrily at briars as she passed by, and complaining in a loud voice.

“Bother! Bother! The waste of it! The expense! Bother and bother again!”

Then she halted, right opposite where Brother Owl and Brother Badger thought they were hidden.

“It’s you!” she said, looking down at Badger. Then, pointing her stick up at Owl, “And it’s you!”

A smile broke on her face. She was pleased to see them.

“How nice to see you!” she said. “How are you?”

“More to the point, how are you?” Badger rumbled.

“I am very well, thank you.”

“We just heard you – complaining and grouching!” he said.

“Ah!” she said. “Well, I wanted to make gooseberry jam today. But, when I went out to the Gooseberry Patch, the bush was bare! All my gooseberries gone! Not one left!”

“You will just have to make do without,” Owl replied. “Whoever said gooseberry jam is a necessity?”

“The jam is not for me,” Mrs Nettlebed explained. Her face had grown a little red, for she did not take kindly to comments like this. “I had an agreement with Mr Tappit the Bootmaker that I would give him two pots of jam in return for his repairing my good leather bag.”

She held up the bag, which was missing one of its straps.

“Now I will have to pay him, and I really cannot afford to



do that! But I cannot possibly do without my bag!"

Brother Owl and Brother Badger looked at each other. Then Owl said, "Please go home and wait and see what happens."

Mrs Nettlebed was worried about this, but went home as Owl had suggested, and waited. Soon she heard the sound of many wings beating. When she looked out she saw lots and lots of birds, each one carrying a gooseberry in his or her beak.

"Now," said Owl, who was leading them, "you can make your gooseberry jam. Then you can close your bargain with Mr Tappit and have your bag repaired!"

Even as Owl spoke, Mrs Nettlebed had her apron on and was already hard at work!

# 9

## Mrs Nettlebed and the Mysterious Bag

**M**rs Nettlebed went out to walk under the trees most mornings. The truth is, she did not sleep very well and so got up very, very early.

On these rambles, she liked to take the little paths that ran here and there through the Woods. She liked the way you never knew where you might end up when you started out.

She especially loved to walk down to the Lake.

The first thing she did before she went out was to put on her stout walking shoes. Then her woollen hat. Then her gloves-with-no-fingers. Then she collected her bag from its home under the stairs.

Mrs Nettlebed's bag was a mysterious thing. It was very light, yet appeared to contain everything she ever really needed.

For example, one morning she found Sister Deer lying under a tree. Sister Deer had broken her leg!

MRS NETTLEBED AND THE MYSTERIOUS BAG

You may remember one time, weeks earlier, when Mrs Nettlebed was at the Water-Lily Pond and hurt *her* leg. She felt sympathy for Sister Deer.

Mrs Nettlebed opened her bag, reached inside and brought out two pieces of wood and a long bandage, all rolled up. She had a splint on Deer's leg in no time.

On another day, she came across Brother Hare limping along the path.

"What is wrong, Brother Hare?" she asked.

"I have a thorn in my foot," he replied. "It hurts so much each time I try to take a step!"

"Sit down," Mrs Nettlebed ordered. She opened her bag and took out a big pair of tweezers. Soon she had that old thorn out of Hare's foot and he was off, speeding along, as good as new!

Sometimes Mrs Nettlebed did not bring things *out of* her bag, but put things *into* it.

For example, one morning she was passing Brother Rabbit's Briar Patch when she heard a loud sobbing noise coming from the direction of Rabbit's house. She stopped to listen.

"Boo-hoo! Boo-hoo!" came the sobs.

"Whatever can that be?" Mrs Nettlebed wondered. "It's coming from Rabbit's garden but it does not sound a bit like

Rabbit's voice!"

Just then, Rabbit stuck his head out from the thicket. Mrs Nettlebed was so surprised she jumped in the air and dropped her bag.

"I am sorry, Mrs Nettlebed, if I startled you," Brother Rabbit said. "I am so pleased to see you! I have one of Mrs Duck's children here. She is very distressed and I don't quite know what to do."

Brother Rabbit looked very put out indeed.

"What happened? Is she hurt? How did she get here?"

"This morning young Duckling went off on her own and got lost. She told me how a dark shadow fell across the grass in front of her and how she saw Brother Buzzard ... um ..."

Here Brother Rabbit hesitated and looked swiftly at Mrs Nettlebed. She suspected she knew what was coming and she knew the animals never liked to talk of such things.

"Brother Buzzard was out ... hunting," she said, in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Exactly," replied Rabbit, relieved that he did not have to describe the matter further. "Buzzard picked Duckling up and carried her off, but as luck would have it she wriggled and he dropped her as he flew along. She fell into my Briar Patch!"

In a flash, Mrs Nettlebed reached into the Briar Patch and

## MRS NETTLEBED AND THE MYSTERIOUS BAG

picked up Duckling. She opened her bag and carefully placed the young bird inside.

“Goodbye, Brother Rabbit!” she called out, as she set off to take Duckling back to her mother and her home at the Lake.

When Duckling told Mrs Duck about the journey home in the bag, she said was not at all dark inside. And, she added, it was empty! Apart, that is, from the big white handkerchief that Mrs Nettlebed had wrapped her up in.

Mrs Duck just nodded and nodded. She was just so relieved to have her baby back, safe and sound.

# 10

## The Spider Who Thought She Was a Bird

**M**rs Nettlebed was young, once.

She sometimes remembered a time when she was very, very young. She remembered having a great desire to fly.

She told Brother Snail this once, and Brother Snail remembered it. He remembered her telling him about climbing onto a wall and jumping off, flapping her arms, the way Blackbird flaps his wings.

Snail remembered Mrs Nettlebed explaining how she had not succeeded, and how she had fallen to earth and hurt herself. That had put an end to her flying!

Snail came to Mrs Nettlebed's door one day in midsummer, when the Sun shone and the Lake was balmy and abuzz with insects, and the world was full of bees, and the air seemed heavy with honey smells and the scent of flowers.

"I have a problem I want to share with you," he said, rather spoiling the day for Mrs Nettlebed.

THE SPIDER WHO THOUGHT SHE WAS A BIRD

“What is that?” Mrs Nettlebed replied anxiously. She was afraid that Snail might be in some kind of Serious Trouble. Mrs Nettlebed did not like Serious Trouble.

“It’s Spider,” Snail said, getting a bit red and looking embarrassed. “She thinks she is a bird!”

“Oh dear,” Mrs Nettlebed said. “What do you mean?”

“She keeps climbing up my tree ... well, the tree I live under. She jumps off a branch and tries to fly and she always falls onto my shell. She has done it so many times she has put a dent in my back! It’s very annoying!”

“Yes, you must find that most troublesome,” Mrs Nettlebed sympathised. “Leave your problem with me and I will try to decide what to do.”

“It is troublesome,” Snail agreed. “But worse than that, I am afraid she might break one or more of her legs. She has eight, you know, but they are so thin. I remember you telling me you broke your leg (or was it your arm?) in similar circumstances.”

Now it was Mrs Nettlebed’s turn to feel embarrassed.

“Call tomorrow,” she said. “Goodbye. Goodbye.”

Mrs Nettlebed went to consult Brother Badger, and Brother Badger suggested they talk to Brother Owl.

Owl thought for a long time.

"Spider," he said thoughtfully, "spins a silk thread. The slender thread comes out from her tummy. It is light and elastic and as strong as steel! Tell her to attach one end of the thread to the tree branch before she jumps. That will stop her falling to the ground."

The next day, Snail returned. Mrs Nettlebed told him what Owl had said, and Snail passed his advice on to Spider.

From then on, Spider jumped off the branch and flew through the air, safe on the end of her strong elastic thread.

Snail was happy, and Spider jumped and jumped.

Then, one day, someone knocked on Mrs Nettlebed's door. It was Brother Hare.

"I have a problem I want to share with you," he said.

"What is that?" Mrs Nettlebed asked anxiously. She was a bit afraid that Hare might be in some kind of Serious Trouble.

"It is Spider," Hare replied. "She has begun to spin silk threads among the trees. My ears catch on them as I pass by, and they are sticky and put me off my hop! It is most annoying and ..."

"Hare!" interrupted Mrs Nettlebed. "What is a sticky thread catching on your ears compared to Spider ending up with eight broken legs? Go away, please, and do not bother me with such trivial matters!"



THE SPIDER WHO THOUGHT SHE WAS A BIRD

Hare went away. Spider carried on jumping and spinning her silken threads – as she does to this day, only now she spins them into intricate webs. (Intricate, you know, means complicated.) They sparkle in the sunlight and sway in the wind and in Winter they glisten in the cold, frosty early mornings.

So that is how Spider began to make her delicate webs. Look out for them the next time you go walking in the laneways or in the forest.

However, do be careful. Those webs can easily tangle in your hair and stick on your eyebrows. Ugh!

# 11

## Mrs Nettlebed's Hospital

**M**rs Nettlebed loved the peace of her little house and the quiet of her garden. She loved the view of the Lake and the sight of the Meadow in the changing seasons. Sometimes it was festooned in Summer flowers; sometimes it was carpeted in Winter snow.

She loved the Woods when the Sun shone on them, dappling the leaves. She loved the Woods when the storms blew, the wind waltzing with the branches. She loved the life and the noise.

Yet, the truth is, she did not like crowds of people. She thought, "I prefer to see the crowds of Town through my telescope!"

Nor did she much like crowds of animals. She thought, "I would prefer to meet them one by one as I walk in the fields."

However, Mrs Nettlebed was very kind and tended to like each person and animal she came across. She was very soft-

## MRS NETTLEBED'S HOSPITAL

hearted, even though she was a stickler for tidiness and good order.

This is how she found herself with a Hospital, even though Hospitals usually mean crowds of patients and visitors and doctors and nurses and porters and lots of hustle and bustle.

One day, Brother Hare turned up at Mrs Nettlebed's door. He had in his arms a young Field Mouse who had hurt his leg by doing something silly. (He had jumped off a big rock!)

Mrs Nettlebed looked at him. She looked all about – just to make sure he was alone. She did not want lots and lots of noisy Field Mice (and their cousins) running and scurrying all about her garden!

Then she took him in, tended to his leg and put him to bed with a hot drink and a storybook to read.

The next day, four of his cousins arrived. The Wood Mice were travelling around, even though it was daytime and they normally went about at night. They explained, in a very excited way, that it was an Emergency. They pointed to a big leaf that they had set on the ground. Stretched out on it was Sister Swallow. Swallow was injured.

“Oh dear, I am not sure if I have room for *another* one,” Mrs Nettlebed said at once. It was not that she did not want to help. It was just that she got a little flustered sometimes and,

when she got flustered, she often spoke without thinking. I suppose you know a few people like that. I know I do!

The Wood Mice became very excited and explained in a rush that Sister Swallow had just arrived from Africa and had been taken ill and they had heard about Mrs Nettlebed and her kindness towards their cousin and ... and ...

The little Wood Mice talked all at once and Mrs Nettlebed's head swam. However, she quickly understood that Swallow had fallen down in the Woods (she had been resting on the wire that ran across the Clearing). She was suffering from exhaustion after her long journey.

In no time Mrs Nettlebed had covered Swallow up under a blanket. She gave her a little water to drink, drew the curtains and left her to rest.

Then ...

Bang! Crash! Thump!

It was the sound of someone hammering on the door. It was Brother Rabbit, with Mother Hedgehog, who had sprained her leg. What a lot of injured legs there were that day!

"Oh! Dear me! Dear me! Have I any room left?" Mrs Nettlebed wondered anxiously.

She looked around her little living room. It was filled with sleeping injured animals. In addition, the noise was terrible.

They were all snoring! Big, fat, long, rumbling snores!

Mrs Nettlebed stood there, rubbing her forehead. Then she got her bag and hurried out to the garden shed. She stepped inside.

She opened her bag and took out, one, two, three, four, five, six beds! Each bed had pillows and sheets already in place. She delved into the bag (that means she stuck her hand and arm in) and took out six small boxes and six glasses and six jugs of water. In a flash, the boxes became bedside cabinets.

"My Hospital!" Mrs Nettlebed said, in a very satisfied way and to no one in particular.

In no time at all, Swallow, Mother Hedgehog and Field Mouse were all moved to the Hospital and tucked up in their fresh new beds.

Next, who do you think came limping up to Mrs Nettlebed's door? Brother Fox!

"The Man set a trap," he explained, "and I stepped on it. My paw is badly injured. Can you help me?" Then he added, "Please."

Mrs Nettlebed looked at him keenly, because she knew about Brother Fox's sly fox-tricks. She looked at his paw. It *was* badly cut.

Then she thought of Swallow and Field Mouse and Mother

Hedgehog lying in their beds. She said, "I will help you – of course I will – but you must promise to be very, very good and not do anything to harm others!"

So Fox promised, and soon he was in bed, all bandaged up and comfortable.

Mrs Nettlebed went outside and opened her bag. She took out a big sheet of paper and a brush and painted a red cross. Under it she wrote, "GARDEN HOSPITAL. WE MUST HELP ONE ANOTHER. WE MUST NOT HURT ONE ANOTHER." She pinned it to the door.

Just then the gate opened and Brother Badger came through. Mrs Nettlebed felt quite exhausted, but she did not complain.

"I do not feel at all well," Badger said in a very small voice. Mrs Nettlebed looked at him and immediately saw that he only wanted a bit of mollycoddling. Mollycoddling means being pampered and having your brow rubbed.

Mrs Nettlebed tucked him into bed and gave him a hot-water bottle for his feet and a big glass of hot water and lemon and honey.

At last, Mrs Nettlebed escaped into the peace and quiet of her very own house, but before closing the door she pinned another notice to it. The notice said, "DO NOT DISTURB!"

# Autumn



# 12

## Mrs Nettlebed's Birthday Party

**I**t was the first day of Autumn and Mrs Nettlebed was out in her garden, clearing away the fallen leaves.

Yes, it was the first day of Autumn but, more importantly, it was also Mrs Nettlebed's birthday! She was feeling excited. She was going to have a birthday party! That was the reason for cleaning the garden.

She finished brushing up the leaves and piled them into a big heap just by the hedge. When she had finished, she collected her wheelbarrow and her broom and her big shovel and stowed them neatly in her little garden shed before going indoors to make a cup of tea.

A little later, she came out to admire her morning's work. What a shock she had! The big pile of leaves was scattered all over the grass. The fruits of her hard work – ruined!

Then, around the corner of the hedge, she spotted the culprit. It was Master Cockerel, from the farmyard, scratching



## MRS NETTLEBED'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

and kicking among the scattered leaves, searching for a snack. Each kick of his heel caused a blizzard of brown leaves to fly willy-nilly over the grass.

Mrs Nettlebed was very cross. She yelled at Cockerel, and in her loudest voice, too!

“How dare you! How dare you come into my garden and make such a mess! You vandal!” (A vandal, as I am sure you know, is someone who deliberately damages someone else’s property. Mrs Nettlebed must have been cross to say such a thing to Cockerel!)

Well, Master Cockerel did not take at all kindly to being called a vandal. He did not speak, but strutted around a little, just to show Mrs Nettlebed that he did not care a jot for what she thought or said!

At that moment, Sister Hen appeared. She saw at once what had happened and got into a tizzy. She bowed and scraped; she bobbed up and down; she curtsied. She said, “Mrs Nettlebed, I am so sorry my naughty brother knocked over your pile of leaves!”

Of course, Mrs Nettlebed was so kind and so soft-hearted that she immediately replied, “Do not worry about it at all, Sister Hen. It will be all right. Now, please, calm down. Come in and have a glass of lemonade.”

So they went indoors and had lemonade (and a few of Mrs Nettlebed's buns).

When they came out, all the scattered leaves had been gathered up and left in a neat pile by the hedge!

Cockerel was nowhere to be seen. But they could hear him singing, the way cockerels do when they are pleased with themselves, over by the barn.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo! Happy birthday to you!"

Just then, Mrs Nettlebed looked up and saw her birthday-party guests coming out of the Woods. She watched them as they crossed over the grass.

Towards her came Brother Pig and Brother Rabbit and Mrs Duck and all the little Ducklings and the Chicks, row upon row of them (looking for their mummy and their big sister, Mrs Hen and Sister Hen). They were followed by Fox and Badger and whole families of Wood Mice and Field Mice.

Mrs Nettlebed bustled about and led them all inside her tall wobbly house, where they had more and more lemonade and buns and big slices of her special birthday cake.

As she looked at them, and as she listened to them singing, Mrs Nettlebed smiled and thought, "Yes! What a happy birthday it is!"

# 13

## Hullabaloo and Tallyho! An Autumn Hunt

**I**t was a clear, crisp day. A few leaves had already fallen in the Woods, even though it was only early Autumn. Apart from a crowd of Crows in the Big Oak Tree, the Woods were calm and peaceful. The air was still.

Mrs Nettlebed was down at the Lake, tidying up by the water's edge, where the Duck family had had a picnic the previous day. They had not been as careful about tidying up as they should have been!

Mrs Nettlebed stopped to gaze at the Lake. It was like a mirror, she thought, or a sheet of glass.

She heard a murmur in the distance. It became a strident, jarring noise. What could it be?

Then she recognised it for what it was: the Hunt! The hullabaloo of Hounds and the rise and fall of a hunting horn. And the din of horses' hooves on the hard ground.

"Toot, toot, toot ... aloo, aloo, aloo!" the bugle went,

calling the Hounds to rapid chase.

"Oh dear!" Mrs Nettlebed cried out, rushing up to her garden gate. From here she could see the Meadow and the Woods beyond.

They were coming down along the Green Road. Like approaching thunder, the noise grew louder. Then, there, over the branches, she could see the bob, bob, bobbing of the riders' black hats.

She could see the flash of crimson coats through the leaves as they rode past. She could see darting dogs and horses, and then more dogs in ever-changing shades of black and liver-brown and tan and white.

She remembered her love for the surging sound of horses' hooves. Even though she disliked the idea of the Hunt, Mrs Nettlebed could not help but feel a rising excitement, with all this noise and colour.

Just then, two Blackbirds sped past, without a sound. They did not even take time to say hello to her.

"That may have been the reason," she thought, "why the Woods were so silent this morning! The animals must have realised the Hunt was about to take place!"

Then she remembered poor Brother Fox. What if they were hunting him? What if they *caught* him?

“Poor Brother Fox!” she thought. “I hope they do not find him!”

At that moment, who should appear at Mrs Nettlebed’s gate *but* Brother Fox? Oh, he did look bedraggled and exhausted! His tail hung down and his coat was splattered with mud. He was panting from keeping ahead of the Hounds.

Mrs Nettlebed did not wait for him to speak. She dragged open the gate and led him swiftly along the path and into the safety of her garden shed.

Mrs Nettlebed then went and stood at her gate while the horses thundered past and the Hounds bayed and the Man with the bugle blew and blew.

One Huntsman fell off his horse as they tried to jump a hedge. Mrs Nettlebed smiled a secret smile, even though she did feel really rather sorry for him, and especially sorry for his horse.

Then the Man was back on his horse and, as quickly as it had appeared, the Hunt was gone.

Mrs Nettlebed had tidied Brother Fox up in a trice. The Woods came alive again. Thrush and Blackbird – and then all the other birds – began to talk and gossip.

Mrs Nettlebed saw Brother Fox stiffen. His ears pricked up. His tail went rigid. She looked out. There in the middle of her

garden stood a Hound! He too looked miserable and lost.

He explained how he had become separated from the rest of the pack. Mrs Nettlebed immediately brought him into the garden shed, but not before pointing to the sign on her door – the one that said, “GARDEN HOSPITAL. WE MUST HELP ONE ANOTHER. WE MUST NOT HURT ONE ANOTHER.”

“You must not on any account fight or injure one another!” she ordered, after reading the words out loud in a very stern voice and looking at each animal in turn.

And, of course, Fox and Hound readily agreed. They were very thankful to be safe and very glad to be looked after by Mrs Nettlebed.

# 14

## The Cat Who Called

**C**at was not a very sociable animal. Yet he often called to visit Mrs Nettlebed.

He would just turn up at the back door, unannounced, and walk in (it was always open).

Cat lived on the farm and came to visit when he was thirsty for a dish of goat's milk.

He would stroll in, curl around and around Mrs Nettlebed's leg and purr. He made it so clear that he loved Mrs Nettlebed!

When he had drunk what he wanted (the goat's milk, of course), he would curl up on the rug in front of the fire and snooze.

One afternoon in late Autumn, as the leaves were falling and turning brown and gold, he appeared, unannounced as usual. He purred and raised his tail and allowed himself to be stroked. He lay on his back and invited Mrs Nettlebed to tickle his tummy.

He enjoyed his dish of goat's milk and then he enjoyed the warmth of the fire.

The firelight danced off the walls and gleamed off his sleek black fur. The oil lamp had just been lit and threw flickering shadows across the floor. Mrs Nettlebed sat in her chair, contented, watching Cat rest.

Then the strangest thing happened.

In walked Cat!

He was jet black. He had a white tip on his tail.

Mrs Nettlebed jumped up! Cat purred and purred and curled and curled around Mrs Nettlebed's leg.

She looked from one Cat to the other Cat.

The first Cat jumped to his feet! He was cross!

The second Cat was even crosser!

Both Cats stood tall, tails up in the air. They stood on their toes, stiff-legged. They puffed out their bellies until they were like fat little balloons. Their coats of fur stuck out, black and jagged. They stalked here and there across the floor, all the time facing each other, their tails swinging stiffly.

Mrs Nettlebed regained her composure (that means she stopped being surprised). She reached out and grabbed at her broom.

Then she realised something.



THE CAT WHO CALLED

“Are you *both* visitors? Have you taken turns at coming here, purring? Have you *both* been drinking my milk? Soaking up the warmth from my fire? Pretending to be my friend? Oh! You sly, crafty, bad Cats!”

The two Cats were silent.

Mrs Nettlebed shook her broom at the Cats. She was so very angry!

The Cats did not say a word. They just slunk to the door and left.

Mrs Nettlebed did not see either Cat ever again.

# 15

## The Bootmaker and the Lark

**M**rs Nettlebed limped slowly along the Green Road. She limped because the sole of her right boot was loose and needed fixing. She was walking to Town to visit Mr Tappit the Bootmaker to ask him for his help. Mr Tappit had a small workshop just behind the Post Office.

As she walked, Mrs Nettlebed followed the grassy roadway as it ran between many small pools of water that lay on the ground. It had rained heavily the night before and the rainwater sat on the grass, each puddle still and shining like a new coin.

There she went, limping and meandering, limping and meandering. It did take her a long time to cover the distance between home and Town.

At last, she was there, outside the Bootmaker's workshop. She could hear the sound of his little hammer. Tap. Tap. Tap. She could hear him whistle as he worked. She opened the

door and stepped inside.

She saw it immediately. A wooden birdcage! And inside it, shut up behind the wooden bars, a Lark! A beautiful Lark. A prisoner!

She looked at Mr Tappit. He had stopped whistling. He had stopped hammering. He was smiling as he stood up.

“Good day to you, Mrs Nettlebed,” he said. “What a lovely day it is. What can I do for you?”

Mrs Nettlebed thought quickly. She was so angry on seeing the Lark caged like that. But she knew Mr Tappit.

“He really is a kind man at heart,” she said to herself. “He is just thoughtless. I had better not say anything to upset him. Least said, soonest mended.”

She did not wish to offend him. She wanted to have her boot repaired!

She took off her boot and Mr Tappit examined it. As he did so she said, “I see you have a Lark there. I have always wanted one. Do you think you might sell it to me?”

Mr Tappit looked at the Lark. It hung its head.

“It looks very dejected,” he thought.

He looked at Mrs Nettlebed. For the first time he noticed her dress. It was worn and threadbare. Then he looked again at her broken boot. He felt great pity for her.

"I will give the bird to you. As a present," he said, for he really was a kind man. He went on, "I bought her from a Travelling Woodsman, thinking she could sing for me as I worked. But since she arrived she has not uttered a note!"

He thought for a moment.

"If, the next time you are in Town, you bring me a jar of your excellent jam, I will be satisfied," he said. "That will be payment enough for the boot and for the Lark."

Mrs Nettlebed smiled. She opened her bag. There, inside, sat a big jar of homemade jam.

Mr Tappit fixed the boot and put the Lark in a little shoebox. Mrs Nettlebed gave him the jar of jam and then set off for home. As soon as she was outside Town, she opened the shoebox. Out popped Sister Lark.

"Thank you," said Sister Lark. "I was so afraid, shut up in that horrible cage! I am so glad you rescued me. The Woodsman clipped one of my wings, so I could not fly to escape!"

"You come home with me, and in no time your wing feathers will have grown and you will be able to fly wherever you want," Mrs Nettlebed said.

Off they set, Sister Lark sitting on Mrs Nettlebed's shoulder, singing a little in a low, low voice.

THE BOOTMAKER AND THE LARK

The Green Road stretched ahead. Mrs Nettlebed strode along, a smile on her face, Sister Lark on her shoulder and her boot as good as new.

The puddles of rain had disappeared and the Sun was shining. Do you know, then, Mrs Nettlebed's dress did not look the least bit threadbare?

WINTER



# 16

## Mrs Nettlebed, the Postman and the Two Goats

Occasionally, Mrs Nettlebed received a letter. Often there would not be a letter for weeks. Very occasionally, she might have two letters in one week. Once, she had three!

Mrs Nettlebed lived far from Town and, in Winter, Mr Dodder the Postman did not like the long walk, so he came only on a Monday morning and brought all the letters from the previous week.

Mr Dodder did like the journey to Mrs Nettlebed's house in Summer, however. First, he left Town by following the Green Road. Then he turned off along the path. Then he took the much narrower track through the Woods.

Because Mr Dodder was very old, and because he had been Postman for so long, all the animals in the Woods knew him.

In Spring and in Summer the Woods were filled with life. Mr Dodder had to stop and say hello to everyone he met and pass on whatever news he had.

In Winter, it was a different story. The road might be icy, the wind cold, the sky grey. On stormy days, the wind whistled through the treetops and the world seemed empty of life.

Many birds flew off to Africa for the Winter. The Swallows left. So did the Swifts and the Housemartins. Many of the animals stayed indoors. Some were asleep for the Winter, hibernating.

Mrs Nettlebed has a Meadow, just to one side of her house. Three Goats live in this field, in a little wooden house. There is Mrs Goat, who gives her milk to Mrs Nettlebed. Then there are her two children, a boy and a girl. Their names are Bo and Peep.

One Monday morning, Mrs Goat gave Mrs Nettlebed a little pail of fresh warm milk. Mrs Nettlebed was in such a hurry to get back to her house (it was very cold) that she forgot to close the gate.

Bo and Peep saw the open gate and made their way out. They ran up the hill, they ran down the hill, and then they ran all the way up again.

Then, as they trotted down the hill again, they saw Mr Dodder walking along, his bag over his shoulder.

For the two young ones, the sight was very tempting.



Bo put his head down and charged! Peep followed after. Down the hill and up behind Mr Dodder they chased.

Mr Dodder heard the sound of hooves striking hard on frosty ground, looked behind, saw the charging Goats and ran! How fast he ran! He ran up to the little hedge and leapt over it.

Just then, Mrs Nettlebed came to her front door. She saw the Postman run towards the hedge. She saw the two Goats charge up to the hedge and stop. She saw the Postman jump over the hedge and then fly through the air. She saw him land on one foot. She saw him skid on the icy path. She saw two letters fly out of his hand and she saw him fall to the ground. Thump!

Later, after she had helped him up and got him inside, they sat by the fire with mugs of tea and a big plate of toast and butter and strawberry jam. Mrs Nettlebed had opened her envelopes and now two Christmas cards were standing on the mantle shelf.

Mr Dodder was smiling, remembering the chase and thankful for his safe escape. He said, "I had forgotten how high I could jump!" He was pleased with himself.

Mrs Nettlebed was smiling also, remembering the sight of Mr Dodder leaping over the hedge. She was pleased with

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her cards and with the letter that was inside one of them. Her cousin had announced that she was coming to spend Christmas.

Bo and Peep waited in their hut. They were not smiling. They were in disgrace.

Mrs Nettlebed had promised she would have a word with them. Later!

# 17

## The Arrival of the Field Mice

**M**rs Nettlebed was nodding in her chair by the fire when a loud bang woke her. She went to the window and looked out. The day was grey and the garden looked empty and desolate.

“What could have caused that noise?” she wondered.

Then another bang drew her attention to the garden shed. Its door was swinging back and forth in the rising wind. She said, “Drat!” and put on her big coat and her hat and went outside to fasten the door.

When she looked inside the garden shed, there on the floor sat the young Field Mice, all in a circle. They did look cold and miserable.

“Whatever is the matter?” Mrs Nettlebed asked, stepping inside.

“Please, Mrs Nettlebed, we got lost,” one of the Field Mice explained. “The storm made it so very windy and we lost our

way," he repeated. "The trees were blowing and bending and we took a wrong path."

"And then we saw your house," another said.

"We thought we had better take shelter. We hope you do not mind," another added.

"No, no, dear. You were quite right, but you were out in the night!" Mrs Nettlebed exclaimed. "Alone, at this time of year! Whatever was your mother thinking, to allow you to go out?"

She did look surprised. Everyone knows that the Woods are dangerous for small animals at the best of times. They are especially scary in the dark days that come at the end of the year, when strange rustlings and sudden noises can be heard among the hedgerows and in the trees.

However, Mrs Nettlebed was too kind-hearted to say any more or to draw attention to the dangers. Instead, she went to the door and looked out. The wind was stronger. She smelled the air. It was raw. The light was going fast and darkness was falling.

She looked across the Meadow to the Woods. She imagined she could see the glint of many eyes in the shadows under the trees.

"I fear it might snow," she said, turning to the Field Mice.

## THE ARRIVAL OF THE FIELD MICE

“You had better stay here for tonight, for it will be dark soon and the wind is rising.”

She went on, “You do not want to be caught near the Black Path after dark, and in a storm! Or even on the Green Road at this time!”

“What is the Green Road?” asked a Mouse, timidly.

“What is the Black Path?” another asked, just as timidly.

“Come into my house. You can sleep in my bed tonight. Wait until I get you a little supper and you are ready for bed; then I will tell you the story of the Green Road and the Black Path,” Mrs Nettlebed replied.

However, she did not tell them the story of the Green Road and the Black Path. Later, as twilight turned to darkness and they lay cosy under the blankets, she told them the story of how the Stars and the Moon had come into being.

# 18

## The Making of the Stars and the Moon

**T**he Field Mice lay there, snug in Mrs Nettlebed's big nest of a bed. They lay in a long row along the top of the bed and in another long row along the bottom, their toes touching the heated stones she had wrapped in old cloths and placed in the middle.

They followed her with their big, big eyes as she moved about the room.

They had had their supper, and now they were waiting for Mrs Nettlebed to tell them the promised bedtime story.

She trimmed the lamp till only the smallest light flickered, throwing faint shadows around the room. Then she pulled her chair up to the bed. The Mice snuggled down in their cosy nest. Mrs Nettlebed began.

"It was a long, long time ago," she said, "and the world was still very new. The Woods were full of animals that had lots and lots to do. They had to make homes and find food.

THE MAKING OF THE STARS AND THE MOON

They were busy all day long. However, at this time of year ...”

“What time of year is this?” asked a Mouse.

“Well, today is the shortest day of the year. It is dark already ...”

“Is today called the Winter Solstice?” asked another Mouse.

“Yes,” Mrs Nettlebed replied. “It is the twenty-first of December. Now, please do not ask any more questions or I will not have time to finish my story.”

She told them of the time when there was only darkness and light, night and day, in the world. As a result, when the Sun went away, everything was black. The animals who ventured out bumped into thorn bushes, trees and boulders, and even into each other!

They were covered in bruises. Many had black eyes; many had scratched ears.

They called a council of all the animals. They met in the big Clearing in the Woods. There they discussed the matter of what to do about the darkness and all the injuries and accidents that occurred as a result.

In the end, they agreed to petition (to petition means to ask or to request) the Great One Who Lived All Around for help.

The Great One told them to go to the river and to find

the biggest, flattest circular boulder they could. They were to carry it to the top of the hill and, when the sky was black, they were to throw the boulder up high above the clouds.

This they did. It took a lot of effort and each animal had to lend a paw. But, in the end, they managed to throw the boulder up, up into the black sky.

It stuck there and immediately began to shine.

They had invented the Moon!

Then, the animals were able to go out at night without bumping into things.

The only trouble was, the Moon was not always the same size. It grew smaller and then disappeared and the nights were black once more. Then it grew bigger and bright, but not for long.

When the Moon was not there, the animals bumped into trees and each other once again.

So the animals met once again in the Clearing in the Woods, where they discussed the matter. They decided to petition (you remember, to petition means to ask) the Great One Who Lived All Around for help.

The Great One told them to go to the river and to find lots of sharp, jagged little stones. They were to carry these to the top of the hill and, when the sky was black, they were to



## THE MAKING OF THE STARS AND THE MOON

throw them up high above the clouds.

This they did. It took a lot of effort and each one had to lend a paw. But, in the end, the animals had a great pile of sharp, jagged little stones on the top of the hill. They threw the stones, one at a time, up, up, up into the black sky.

Then the animals discovered they could throw the stones and form patterns of light. From these they could make pictures of themselves. They made Great Bear and Little Bear, Big Lion and Little Lion, Scorpion and many more.

That night there was no Moon, but the Stars shone brightly and the animals were happy.

Mrs Nettlebed stopped there. She looked at the little Field Mice. They were all asleep. She smiled a little smile, tucked in their blankets and tiptoed out of the bedroom.

# 19

## The Black Path and the Green Road

**I**t was the next morning and everyone was up. They had finished breakfast.

“Mrs Nettlebed, you did not tell us about the Black Path or the Green Road! You promised!”

It was one of the little Field Mice. He was sitting at the table with the others. They were nibbling toast and drinking mugs of goat’s milk.

Mrs Nettlebed looked at the clock.

“I do not think we have time for a story,” she said. “Your mother and father should be here very soon to take you home – even though it is daytime and they do not like the daylight ...”

“Oh, please!” they chorused. “Please tell us the story. You promised!”

“Very well. First, did you enjoy last night’s story? The one about how the Moon and the Stars came into being?”

“Yes, yes!” they all said. “But tell us this one now.”

Mrs Nettlebed’s brown eyes twinkled. She smiled and began.

“A long, long time ago ...”

“Was this before we discovered how to make the Moon?” a Field Mouse asked.

“And the Stars?” another added.

Mrs Nettlebed decided to ignore them. She really did not like to be interrupted when telling her stories.

“A long, long time ago, the Woods were full of trees. Before too long the animals had made two tracks through the tangled undergrowth. One ran from the hill to where Town is now. The other ran from this side of the Woods to the part of the Woods that is now called the Dead Wood.

“The Woods were a happy place. Then everything changed. The Great Storm came! Thunder rolled around the sky and lightning danced among the trees!”

The Field Mice shivered a little, but only because they thought it was expected of them. Mrs Nettlebed saw them shiver and was gratified (that means she was pleased) that her story had had this effect.

She carried on.

“All of a sudden, a great bolt of lightning struck the

very centre of the Woods. The tree it struck caught fire. The brushwood caught fire. The bushes caught fire. In a trice, the whole Woods were on fire!"

Mrs Nettlebed paused. The Field Mice shivered some more.

There came a knock to the door.

"Hello," a tiny voice called out. "Is Mrs Nettlebed there? It is Mr and Mrs Field Mouse here, looking for our children."

The little Field Mice looked at Mrs Nettlebed. They so wanted to hear the end of the story.

Mrs Nettlebed whispered, "I will walk a little way with you and tell you the story as we go along."

This is what she told them as they walked.

"After the fire was over, the huge tree in the centre of the Woods, and all the bushes and smaller trees around, remained there, burnt and blackened, and you can see them today if you go down the Black Path to the Dead Wood."

"I have seen it," said Mrs Field Mouse, who was listening. "I saw it once only. It was horrid. The whole place was all black and the trees and bushes and grass all dead. It is a place full of beings you would not wish to see!" she went on, shivering. "Bad things live there ..."

Mrs Nettlebed said, "That is true. You stay away from the Dead Wood and the Black Path. Animals do not use that path

THE BLACK PATH AND THE GREEN ROAD

if they can help it. To this day it is covered in soot and ashes and nothing grows on it.”

They stopped.

“As you move through the Woods, keep to the Green Road. It is grassy and broad. And it is safe.”

“Now I must leave you,” she said, for they had crossed over the Meadow and the Woods lay beyond.

Mr Field Mouse shook hands with Mrs Nettlebed and Mrs Field Mouse put a protective arm around her children. They both thanked Mrs Nettlebed for her help and for her advice.

The Field Mouse family walked a little, then turned to wave goodbye. But Mrs Nettlebed had already disappeared, as if into thin air.

# 20

## Silent Night

**T**hey never did discover who the culprit was.

It could have been a Mouse. It could have been a Rat.

It was unlikely to have been the Church Cat, because whoever did it left teeth marks, and a Cat is more likely to scratch than bite.

Therefore, we can leave the Church Cat out of it. On the other hand, if it *had* been a Mouse, the Cat would have dealt with it, would he not? Mrs Nettlebed certainly thought so when Mr Dodder the Postman told her about what had happened.

Mr Dodder thought it could have been Otter but then, as Mrs Nettlebed said to him, what would Otter have been doing in a church, especially one so far from water?

They discovered the damage to the bellows on the day before Christmas. According to Mr Dodder, Mr Morgan the Organist had just sat down and tried to play the organ, but

## SILENT NIGHT

found he could not. There was a rush of air from the base of the instrument. He knew at once that there was damage to the bellows and that this would have to be repaired before he could play the organ.

The Christmas Carol Service was to be in a few hours' time. What was he to do?

He knew he had to find the puncture in the bellows. He removed the rear panel and set it aside. Now he could see the bellows where they sat along the bottom of the organ's structure.

The bellows had a great gaping hole in them!

He knew at once that he needed a piece of bellows cloth big enough to completely seal the hole and stop the leak. He knew he needed some glue too.

He knew he had neither!

He ran and told the Verger, who told the Vicar, who immediately said, "We cannot have a Christmas Carol Service without music! We must go to another church where there is an organ. Then our choir and our congregation and our visitors can sing properly!"

So they did. They went to the Church Down the Road. Their own church was left empty and dark and silent.

At midnight, something moved in the building's dark,

empty space. It was a Bat, dropping down from the Belfry, followed by others.

Then came a Rook, followed by a Crow, followed by Robins and lots of other birds. Termites came out of the old timbers and Leatherjackets from under the flags. Moles and Water Rats and Voles and Badgers appeared, followed by Rabbits and Hares and Grass Snakes and Eels, Beetles and Butterflies, Badgers and Cats and Grasshoppers, Dogs and Mice and Rats.

In no time, the place was full to bursting.

Then the singing began. All the different voices that were there joined to form one great choir.

It was not singing exactly. There was no sound. The deep silence became deeper, but was filled now with breaths of air, with pauses and with what those present could feel only as Peace.

Mrs Nettlebed called in at the Church the following day. As soon as she stepped into the Church, she halted. She closed her eyes. She heard the echoes of that silence. She heard its song rise up and hold, strong and gentle, like the soft snuffling of a newborn baby.