

# DOUGLAS ENGLISH

A BOOK OF  
NIMBLE  
BEASTS

# **Douglas English**

# **A Book of Nimble Beasts**

*[http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio\\_book/?art=34842886](http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=34842886)*

*A Book of Nimble Beasts / Bunny Rabbit, Squirrel, Toad, and «Those Sort of People»:*

# Содержание

PUBLISHER'S NOTE	7
INTRODUCTION	9
SOMETHING ABOUT BATS	10
SOMETHING ABOUT TADPOLES	23
A FROG HE WOULD A-WOOING GO!	36
ANIMALS' NESTS	72
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	82

**Douglas English**  
**A Book of Nimble Beasts /**  
**Bunny Rabbit, Squirrel, Toad,**  
**and «Those Sort of People»**



He held himself with an air, his body arched, one broad white pad uplifted, his tail curved decorously.—In Weasel Wood.



## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THE publisher may, perhaps, be allowed to call the reader's attention to the illustrations—particularly to the two of the Sand-Wasps, reproduced in colour. The difficulties of photographing from wild life active creatures of such small dimensions as hymenopterous insects are very great from an optical standpoint. The picture of *Spinipes* bringing the beetle grub to her tube took several years to accomplish successfully, and the strain involved by the conditions, a blazing June sun on the operator's back, an uncertain foothold, and the necessity of keeping the attention riveted for hours on one particular patch of sunlit sand, was exceptional. It is of course possible, probable even, that with the introduction of an improved lens system, which will enable fast exposures to be made at very short range on minute moving objects, this particular picture may be repeated and improved upon. But the odds against the second picture on the same page, that of *Spinipes* stinging the jewel-fly, *ever* being repeated, are enormous. It will be necessary in order to secure the repetition of such a picture, first, that the camera shall be focussed on one out of a score of tubes; second, that the parasitic jewel-fly shall enter that particular tube; third, that the Owner Wasp shall return while the jewel-fly is below; fourth, that the Owner Wasp shall pull the jewel-fly to the surface; fifth, that the jewel-fly shall cling to the rim of the tube; sixth, that the Wasp shall sting it in this position

—it will be noticed that the sting is directed at the junction of the thorax and abdomen; seventh, that the observer shall be ready to expose his plate at the exact psychological moment; and eighth, that he shall succeed in doing so. The first six conditions were, in Mr. English's case, fulfilled by chance. As regards the seventh he was unready. He was, in fact, some feet below his camera. But chance befriended him still further.

He caught the jewel-fly's glint, and caught the shadow of the returning Wasp. He flung his arm up, grabbed the dangling bulb, and pressed at random. This action dragged the camera from its moorings—to fix a camera on a Sand Cliff's side is no slight task—and it fell twelve feet down. Yet it had done its work and made the picture.

There are a score of pictures in this book, which are believed to be unique, not only by reason of the rarity of their subjects, but also by reason of the fact that they are the *only* pictures of such subjects, good or bad, in existence. The most remarkable among them is the picture of Spinipes stinging the jewel-fly.



# INTRODUCTION

I KNOW a Boy Scout who has never seen a weasel. Many weasels, I fancy, must have seen that Boy Scout.

And I know a Girl who has never seen a Harvest Mouse, but who might have, often.

There may be other boys and girls like these. There may be grown-ups also.

It is for them that I have written this book. It is to them that I offer its pictures.

I would lead them (with hushed voices and quiet feet) into God's Under-World; a World of queer small happenings; of sparkling eyes and vanishing tails; a whispering, rustling World.

I would have them, whatever their age be, approach this World as children. For children's eyes are closest to the ground.

*Douglas English*

Hawley, Dartford, 1910

# **SOMETHING ABOUT BATS**

## **(JANUARY)**



Natterer's Bat  
The best-looking Bat in Britain

YOU must all, I think, have seen Bats flying, or, at any rate, pictures of Bats flying, and you must all know that they are night, or twilight, beasties, though some of our English kinds fly about in broad daylight more often than most people think. But do you all know that they are the only four-footed creatures that *really* fly—for they are four-footed though they don't look it; and do you all know that there are, probably, more different kinds of Bats in England than there are different kinds of any other beastie; and that they are the very ugliest of British Beasties, taking them altogether; and that they all have very small eyes—which is a queer thing for twilight beasties to have; owls, of course, and dormice have very big eyes—and that they have either very wonderful ears, or very wonderful noses, but not both together? If you don't know all this, perhaps you would like to hear more.



### The Lesser Horseshoe Bat

You can see his nose-leaf, shaped like a horseshoe, very well in this picture. Both the Greater and Lesser Horseshoe Bats are wonderfully neat fliers

We had better, I think, begin with a Bat's wings, for, when we have learnt something about these, we may perhaps get some notion as to why a Bat is more clever in the air than a bird, and far, far more clever than a flying machine, worked by a human brain, is at present. The reason why a Bat is a cleverer, I don't mean a stronger, flier than a bird, is a reason which you young people will find to be a very common one, if ever you try your

hand at guessing Mother Nature's riddles. It is simply this—that *he has to be*. A Bat has to catch his food, tiny food mostly, in the air, and he has to catch it in a bad light, and, as far as we can tell, though we cannot be sure of this, his eyesight is not as good as, say, a swallow's eyesight. This means that he has had to pick up a wonderful quickness in checking his own flight, and in turning sharp in the air, almost head over heels sometimes, and in diving, and in soaring up again. To do all these things well he has had to be built in a very special way, and I will try to explain to you how he has been built by comparing a Bat with one of ourselves, for you must remember that a Bat belongs to the same great order of living creatures as we do, and that a Bat is much more like a human being than a bird is.

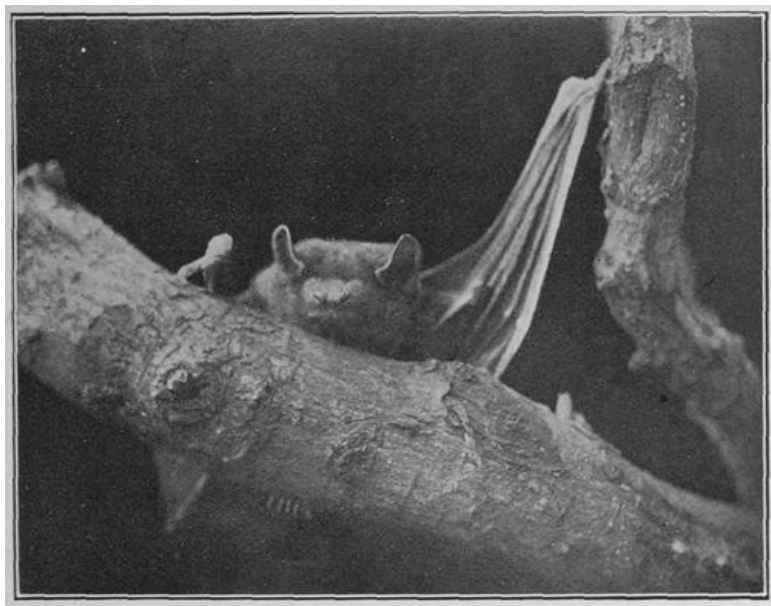


### The Noctule

You can see one earlet quite plainly, and his eye "starting out of his head"

Let us fancy, then, a small boy being turned into a Bat. The first thing that would have to happen would be that his legs would have to be bent at the knees, and shrunk until they were as thin as sticks. Then they would have to be twisted right and left until the knee-caps faced the wrong way about. His arms would have to be shrunk too, and his fore-arms would have to be stretched until they were twice their natural length, and his middle-fingers would have to be about a yard long, and his other fingers nearly a

yard long also. His thumb might be left as it was, but it would have to have a strong claw at the end of it. In between his fingers, and joining his arms to his body, and stretching down to his legs, and joining his legs together, there would have to be a web of skin, and then, perhaps, if his chest was brought well forward like a pigeon's, and his head pressed well back until it stopped between his shoulders, he might, if his muscles were strong enough, and the whole of him was light enough, be able to fly.



The Noctule

One of our largest Bats. He is sometimes more than a foot

across the wings, and his brown fur is as velvety as a Mole's—  
when he feels quite well



Lesser Horseshoe Bat

He is hanging head downwards, and beginning to wrap  
himself up in his wings before going to sleep



Now about a Bat's eyes. I have already told you that these are very small—at least they look very small in our English Bats—and that it does not seem likely that Bats possess the wonderful eyesight, which one would expect them to have. In some cases the eyes are so curiously placed in the head that the Bat can hardly be able to see straight in front of him at all. In the Leaf-nosed Bats, for instance, you can only just see the Bat's eyes when you look at him full face, because his leaf-nose all but hides them—you can see what I mean from the pictures—and in the case of one rare little bat, the *Barbastelle*, the eyes are set so far back that part of the ear comes round them like a horse's blinkers; and one can hardly imagine his being able to see much sideways, even if he can see quite well in front. There is just one little thing, however, which I have noticed in a large Bat called the *Noctule*, and this may mean that Bats have better eyesight than one would at first suppose. The *Noctule* can make his own eyes "start out of his head," until they seem to be almost twice as large as usual. If all Bats can do this it is quite likely that very few people have seen their eyes properly at all; that is, have seen them as they really appear, when the Bats are chasing moths in the twilight.

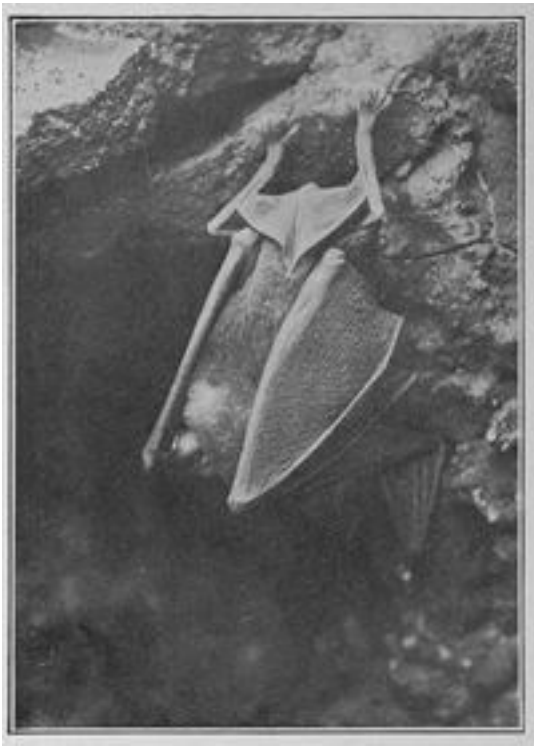


## THE GREATER HORSESHOE—A PIG THAT *DOES* FLY



### The Long-eared Bat

His ears are more than twice as long as his head, and beautifully pink and transparent when seen in the right light



### The Greater Horseshoe Bat

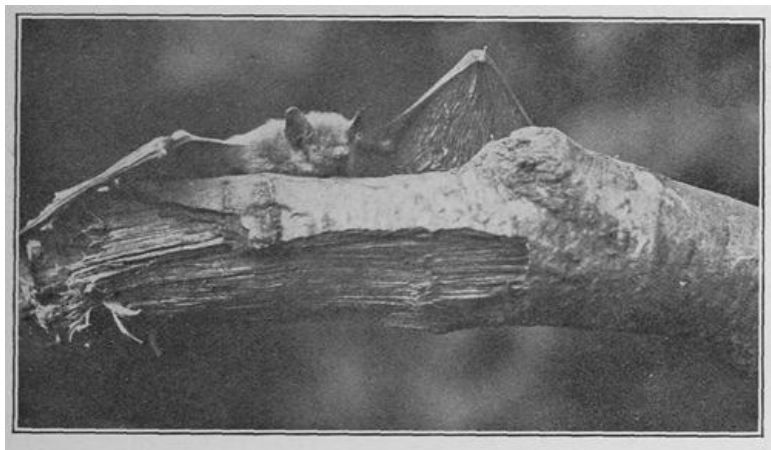
Hanging head downwards. Except when he is flying he always carries his tail cocked up over his back, as you see it.

I think I will leave the pictures to show you the ugliness of Bats generally, though I have purposely put one picture in to show you that all Bats are not ugly—for I am sure you will agree with me

that the little white-fronted Natterer's Bat, has quite a pretty face. I must tell you a little more, though, about Bats' ears and noses.

When we were turning, in imagination, our small boy into a Bat, we did not trouble ourselves about his ears and nose, but we ought to have done so, for there are some very wonderful differences between Bats' ears and noses, and the ears and noses of human beings. If you will look at anybody's ear carefully you will see that in front of, and just a little below the ear-hole, there is a small lump of flesh which points backwards across the opening. It is not much to look at in a human being, and does not seem to serve any particular purpose, but in many Bats it is evidently very important, for it is quite large and takes all sorts of curious shapes. It is called the "earlet." Sometimes it is pointed, sometimes square, and sometimes rounded. Sometimes it is long and thin and tapering like a dagger, and sometimes it is short and thick and blunted like a kidney-bean. You will see several of its different shapes in the pictures, and you will also see that the leaf-nosed Bats, who have such queer ornaments on their noses, do not have it all. Now some wise folk think that the ornament on the face of a leaf-nosed Bat, which makes him appear so very ugly to our ideas (though I have no doubt his wife thinks it very beautiful) may give him a kind of sixth sense which is neither seeing, nor smelling, nor hearing, nor feeling, nor tasting: a sense, that is, like that which blind people often seem to possess and which helps them, poor souls, through their world of darkness. If this is so (but you must remember that we can only guess about

it), it may be that the earlets of Bats do much the same, and that, therefore, Bats with earlets have no need of leaf-noses, and Bats with leaf-noses have no need of earlets.



### The Pipistrelle

A small Bat and one of the commonest

# SOMETHING ABOUT TADPOLES

## (FEBRUARY)



This is Toad's Spawn, which is laid in "Ropes"

HOW many of you can tell me the difference between a frog-tadpole and a toad-tadpole? I don't mean when they are so small that it seems a kindness to call them tadpoles at all, but when they are quite a good size, with great fat heads and shiny little eyes and squiggly little tails. And how many of you can tell me the number of different kinds of tadpoles which one can find

in England in the springtime? Most of you, I am sure, know a tadpole when you see one (sometimes he is called "pot-ladle," or "polly-wog," or "horse-nail,") and some of you may know that a fat frog-tadpole is brown with little specks of gold, while a fat toad-tadpole is black all over; but I don't expect many of you know that there are two kinds of frog-tadpole, and two kinds of toad-tadpole, and three kinds of newt-tadpole, to be met with in England, which makes seven kinds of tadpoles in all.

Now as these seven little tadpoles are all different from one another (though the two frog-tadpoles and the two toad-tadpoles are not *very* different), we may be quite sure that they grow up into seven different little beasties. I am going to tell you something about the frog- and toad-tadpoles now and leave the newt-tadpoles for another time, for it will be easier for you if you don't have too much to remember at once.

If you go into the country in springtime (the middle of March is the best time where I live, but in other places it may be a little earlier or a little later) and find a pond, or a brook which runs quite slowly, or even a hole in swampy ground which has water in it, you are almost sure to see a lump of stuff which looks like dirty grey jelly, either close to the bank or on the top of some of the weeds.

If you pick up a little of this, you will find (perhaps before it has slipped out of your fingers and perhaps after) that it is full of round black eggs.





### This is Frog's Spawn Floating on the Water

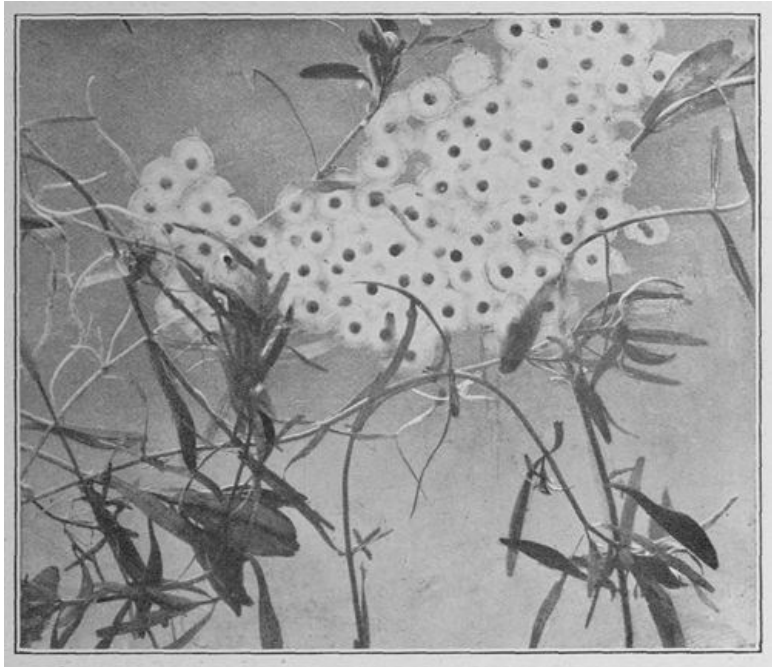
The grey jelly is either frog's spawn or toad's spawn.

If it is just a lump with no particular shape to it, it is frog's spawn, but if it is made up of small slimy ropes, which come apart from one another, and in which the eggs lie in rows like strings of black beads, it is toad's spawn. When you find toad's spawn, you may be sure that frog's spawn has been about for some time, for frog's spawn is always to be found rather earlier in the year. Whichever it may be you should take a little of it (quite a little

is best) and put it in a glass jam-jar half full of water, and stand this in some bright, warm place, where it will not get knocked over, and where the sun will not shine directly on to it.

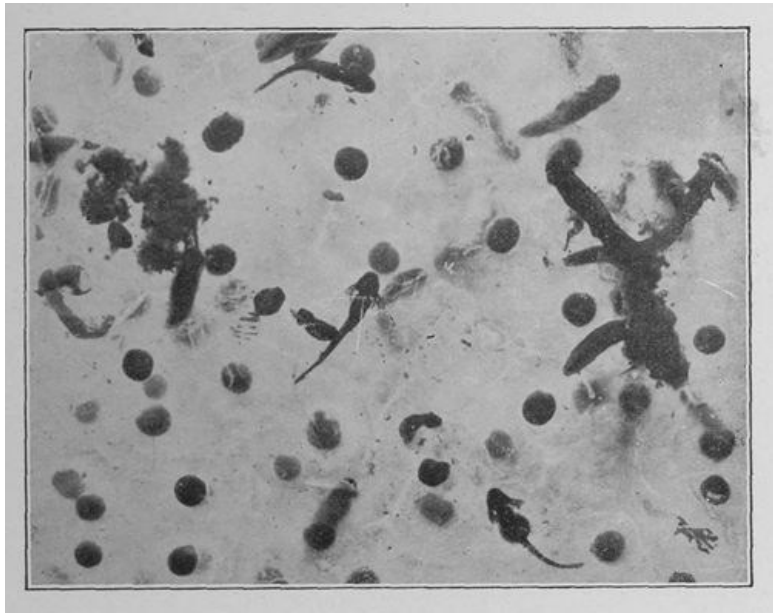
Frogs and toads usually lay their eggs in places where the sun *does* shine on them and warms them gently, and so hatches them out, but of course they do not lay them in glass bottles, and if the sun shines on these, the water will get warmer than is good for them, partly because there is no other water round to keep it cool, and partly because the bottle acts as a kind of burning-glass, and brings too much of the sunshine into itself, and so gives too much warmth to the eggs.

Some people think the jelly of frog's or toad's spawn acts like a burning-glass too; this, however, is a burning-glass which Mother Nature has arranged, and so there is no fear of its not acting properly.



This is Frog's Spawn When it is Quite Fresh

If you find frog's or toad's spawn soon after it is laid, you will see only a small quantity of jelly round it, but this soon swells out and gets much bigger.



This is Frog's Spawn, too

But I have photographed it with a microscope, so that you may see it a little bigger than it really is. Right in the middle is a Tadpole who has grown his feathery gills, and close to him is one like a little alderman. There is another Tadpole with gills towards the right hand bottom corner, but there is an egg behind which makes his shape wrong. All the round things are eggs and the long things are Tadpoles which have just hatched

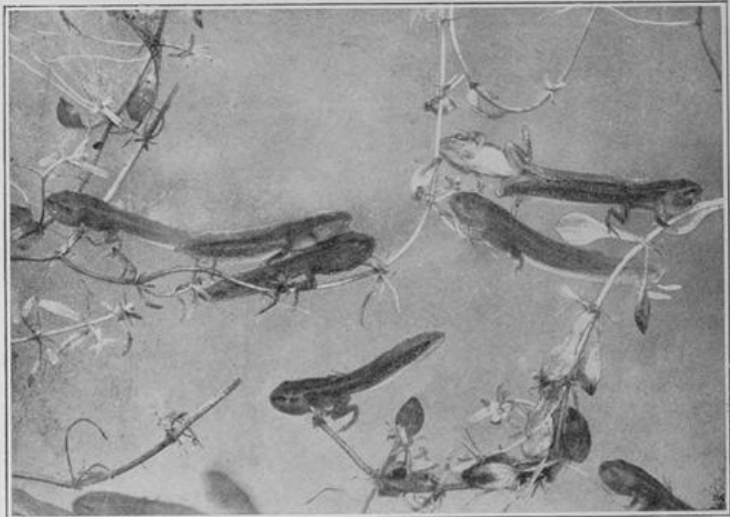


## Frog's Spawn

The Little Curly Tails are beginning to Grow

Have you ever seen Cook make a jelly? The first thing she does is to soak the gelatine in water, so that it gets soft and swells

to twice the size it was before. It swells because it takes up water inside it, and frog's spawn does just the same. Now we must try and think what the frog's spawn jelly is for. It is really the white of the eggs, the black beads being the yolk. You wouldn't understand all its uses, but one is that it makes the frog's spawn much more difficult to eat, because it is so slippery. A great many water birds are very fond of frog's spawn and would gobble it up very quickly if they had a good, big spoon, instead of a rather small bill. As it is, a great deal of frog's spawn and a good many tadpoles are eaten up one way or another, which is really rather lucky for us, for frogs and toads lay millions and millions of eggs, and, if they all hatched out, there wouldn't be room in the world for all little frogs and toads.



The Tadpoles are here seen Getting very like Frogs

Most of them have all four legs, but one has only his hind legs  
at present

Well, if you keep your glass bottle with the eggs in it in a good place and look at it every day, you will find something fresh to interest you every day. First the black yolks will grow larger and change their shape so that they seem longer than they are broad, and presently you will find that they are turning into tadpoles. The baby tadpole seems much too fat to begin with, and sticks out in front like a little alderman; but soon he gets slimmer again, and you find that he is growing a curly tail (which no alderman

ever did), and that there are tiny markings where his eyes and mouth are going to be. He is still very small (about a quarter of an inch long), but before he is much bigger a very wonderful thing happens—it has been happening all the time, though you have not been able to see it—he grows a pair of gills like a fish. They are delicate, feathery things, and stand out on either side of his head, I should like to say "neck," but I do not think I ought to because frogs and toads have no necks at all, and so I suppose tadpoles have none either. All this time his tail is growing too, and presently it is long enough for him to swim with. When this happens he slips out of the jelly and wriggles about in the water. At present he has no real mouth, but he has a little opening, shaped like a horseshoe, near to where his mouth is going to be, and he uses this to hold on to weeds when he is tired, which he very soon is at first.

Once he is fairly hatched, however, his mouth grows quickly and he gets a pair of rather hard little jaws with which he can nibble the water-weed. When this happens you must, of course, put some water-weed into the bottle, though grass will do if you can't get anything else.



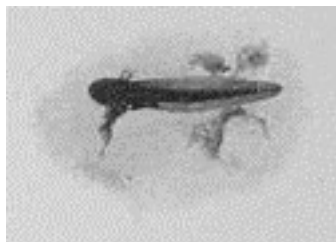


### Tadpoles Full Grown

They are covered with little specks of gold. At the bottom one can be seen feeding

I told you that he had gills like a fish, but they are curious gills at this early stage because they have no flap of skin to protect them. If you want to see a fish's gills you must lift up the hard flap of skin which covers them. The tadpole soon grows a flap of skin, though, just like a fish, and this always appears first on

the right side, so that at one stage he looks as if he had only one gill, the one on the left side. When both the flaps of skin have grown, the tadpole is really a little fish, and he stays in much the same shape, though he gets fatter and fatter, for about a month. At the end of this time he begins to grow legs, first the hind ones and then the front ones (newt-tadpoles grow the front ones first); but, in spite of his legs, he is still only a fish, because, instead of breathing the air with his lungs as a grown-up frog does, he breathes the water with his gills. During the next month, when he is getting on for three months old, another wonderful change comes over him. For a time he breathes both with his lungs (he has to put his head out of water for this) and with his gills, and so he is both a frog and a fish at once; but he gets more and more like a frog, and less and less like a fish. His lungs keep growing inside him, and his body and gills and tail get smaller and smaller, and his mouth and his eyes and his legs get larger and larger, and presently he leaves the water altogether, for he is tired of water-weeds and tired of his tail (he can swim beautifully without it), and he wants to make his meals off insects and slugs, and to learn how to croak and jump, and to be a great fat frog like Mother.



# **A FROG HE WOULD A-WOOING GO! (VALENTINE'S DAY)**



"THIS is better," gasped Bombinator.

Bombinatrix eyed him anxiously.

Only his waistcoat touched the ground. His eyes and nose had vanished. The right of either foot was now the left; the left of either hand was now the right; his head, subverted, curled to touch his toes, and, in his back, was a deep hollow.

This sounds involved, and that is just what Bombinator was.

"It's awful," said Bombinatrix.

"What do I look like?" spluttered Bombinator. "It's awkward talking to your feet."

"You're like—you're like a toadstool," said Bombinatrix, "a crinkled, gummy, yellow-spotted toadstool."

"That's the idea," said Bombinator, as he snapped back to shapeliness. "Now you try," and Bombinatrix tried.

"Passable," said Bombinator, "but not sufficient curl."

"It cricks my neck," she answered. Her head was slowly drooping.

"You *must* keep rigid," said Bombinator. "I can't see half the yellow. Throw back your head."

Bombinatrix threw back her head, until it grazed her toe-tips. Then she unstrung herself.

(I see you look incredulous. You ask and ask with reason: How came two fire-toads in an English garden? To this I answer frankly—I put them there myself.)

Even a fire-toad loves his liberty, though prison-life may have its compensations. The breakfast gong, for instance, two taps upon the glass. The sluggish fatted meal-worm, the feeling of full-fed security.

Nor had there been a lack of company.

The Natterjack had livened things—by running races with his own reflection. So had the mottled Green Toad, an alien like themselves; so, in his own quiet way, the Salamander.



"Passable," said Bombinator, "but not sufficient Curl"

Each welcomed freedom differently.

The Natterjack went straight into the pond (quite the wrong thing for him), and swam with short-legged jerky sweeps up to the water-lilies. There he met the Water-Rat, of whom more later. The Green Toad sought the nearest tuft of grass, and, scratching with his fore-feet at the roots, contrived a roomy burrow. He backed inside and sat there quite content, blinking his emerald eyes. The Salamander stayed where he was put—and smiled.

The fire-toads climbed upon a stone and practised squiggles—aposematic squiggles.

That resonant epithet comes, I think, from Oxford. It means, *you dare to touch me and you'll catch it*, or words to that effect.

"Apo," get out, and "sema," a sign. It is quite simple, really. Yet its significance (in toads) may need explaining, and, to be master of the sense of it, you must remember that fire-toads, though dusky olive green above, are orange red beneath. A patch of orange underneath each hand, a patch of orange underneath each foot, an orange patchwork waistcoat.

Now orange is a poison-label. It means in wild-folk speech, "Be careful," and yellow means the same; and when black joins the scheme, it means, "Be very careful, here is poison."

Sometimes the colour flaunts itself—witness the salamander, or the wasp. Sometimes it is concealed, witness the fire-toad. But fire-toads have the knack of showing it. Drop one upon his back and there he stays, knowing the underpart of him is fearsome. Startle one as he sits at ease, and he will flick into a knot, crinkly, immovable, unreal, with screaming labels at each corner. To be adept at this, the fire-toad needs spare living, one meal, at most two meals a day. When corpulent he finds the bend beyond him.

But corpulence is transient in toads. The first to find a waist was Bombinator, and Bombinatrix quickly followed. They now could travel with less apprehension. They made five equal hops and stopped. Before them stretched the pond, green-carpeted, a mirror-patch of water here and there, balsam and iris on the fringe of it, and fronting them, upon his leaf, the Rat.

The Natterjack had left him, and was swimming landwards. His head bobbed with each stroke, and he was slow in coming. "The surliest brute I ever met," he said.

"The Rat?" said Bombinator.

"The Rat," replied the Natterjack. "He grumbled at my ripples in the water—and *he* makes noise enough. Just listen to him."

The Water-Rat had left his leaf, and now was in the reed-stems. He held a two-inch cutting in his paws. They heard his munching plainly.

"This is a queer pond," said the Natterjack; "it's full of noises. A shrew-mouse chirped as I swam back, and half a dozen bubbles struck me. That means there's something grunting. My yellow stripe! what's that?"

It rose *crescendo*,

"*brek-ek-ek-ek-ek-ek-EX!*"

and finished *amoroso*,

"*KO-ax! KO-ax! KO-ax!*"

"I know it," shrieked Bombinator. His little eyes were starting from their sockets, as he sat up entranced.

"I know it," echoed Bombinatrix.

"Then you might share your knowledge," snapped the Natterjack. Jealousy had convulsed him, for he too can sing.

"A French Frog," cried Bombinator.

"A French Frog," echoed Bombinatrix, and in a rattle came the southern notes:

"*brek-ek-ek-ek-ek-ek-ek-EX!*"

"*KO-ax! KO-ax! KO-ax!*"

"I'll find him, if I hop all night," said Bombinator.

He plunged aside into the grass, and Bombinatrix followed at



his heels.

The Natterjack soon caught them. He ran with little mouse-steps.



His Little Eyes were Starting from their Sockets as he sat up entranced

"Are you quite prudent?" he jerked out.

"Prudent?" said Bombinator, "why, he's a countryman."

So all three went together, and dropped abreast into the Green Toad's burrow.

"Have you heard him?" said Bombinator.

The Green Toad was half dozing.

"Heard what?" he muttered sleepily.

"The French Frog," said Bombinator. "Come out and listen."

They pulled him out between them.



THE WATER-RAT HAD LEFT HIS LEAF AND NOW

WAS IN THE REED-STEMS. HE HELD A TWO-INCH CUTTING IN HIS PAWS. THEY HEARD HIS MUNCHING PLAINLY

The Green Toad slowly stretched himself.

"*That?*" said he, "that's not French." Then he relapsed to sleep again.

"What did I tell you?" said the Natterjack.

"You told us nothing," said Bombinator. "Let's ask the Salamander."

The Salamander had not moved an inch.

"Is that song French?" the Natterjack inquired.

The Salamander slowly raised his head, curled S-wise out and home again, blinked either eye three times, smiled fatuously at each toad in turn, and then smiled at the sky.

"Oh, come on!" said the Natterjack. The Natterjack is all on wires, and Salamanders madden him.

*"brek-ek-ek-ek-ek-ek-ek-EX!"*

*"KO-ax! KO-ax! KO-ax!"*

The Natterjack now led them, faster and faster as the song grew louder, hippy-hoppy, hurry-scurry, bumping against the snails and spiders, starting the flies and beetles, and rousing every sleeper in the grass.

Small wonder that they soon encountered trouble.

They wakened the King Toad.

Since you last knew him, the King Toad has grown. His waist

is fourteen inches. His mouth could welcome three small toads abreast.

The fire-toads crouched in front of him (the mouth seemed very wide); even the Natterjack hung back, and waited to be spoken to.

Ten minutes passed, and then the King Toad spoke, in slow, imperial-measured tones.

"Who are you?" said he, and fixed his royal eye on Bombinator.

Bombinator's mouth was flattened to the ground, and his reply was indistinct.

"Speak louder," said the King Toad.

But Bombinator kept his head. If he spoke louder he must move, and, if he moved, he might be swallowed.

Once more he muttered with closed lips.

The King Toad slowly raised one foot. Before it reached the ground again the Natterjack had vanished. So had the fire-toads, but in different fashion. Where they had been were now two spotted toadstools.

"That's a queer trick," said the King meditatively. "Orange underneath I see. Risky to eat without inquiries. Come back, Natterjack."



The Salamander had not moved an Inch

Two yellow eyes were peeping round a dock-leaf. The Natterjack slouched low in the Presence.

"Have you seen this trick before?" said the King Toad coldly.

"I have, Sire," said the Natterjack.

"Do it yourself," said the King Toad.

"Alas, Sire," said the Natterjack, "I am too stout."

"Not a bad fault," said the King more graciously, "not a bad fault. What is the meaning of it?"

"It means, Sire, that my two small friends are frightened."

"Frightened?" said the King Toad; "frightened of what?"

"Of you, Sire."







The Natterjack Slouched low into the Presence

"Of me?" said the King Toad. "Why should a toad fear me? I am the Protector of all toads." He swelled himself imperially.



"Have You Seen this Trick before?" said the King Toad

"These are strange toads, Sire," said the Natterjack, "they come from France."

"France?" said the King; "this must be looked to. The place is being overrun with aliens. Undo them, Natterjack."

The Natterjack looked pained.

"Sire," he gasped out, "they're poisonous. I bit one once, and

could not sing for days."

"Could not sing for days?" said the King. "Could not sing for days?" The shadow of a smile played round his mouth.

"Just fetch me that French Frog," he said.

"Sire," said the Natterjack, "it was during our unsuccessful search for him that we had the felicity of being so graciously received by your Majesty."

"You know him then," said the King, frowning.

"The fire-toads know his song, Sire. At least they said he was a countryman."

"They shall be made better acquainted," said the King, "much better acquainted. You will find the French Frog by the water's edge, beneath the furze-bush. You may go."

The Natterjack went scudding like a mouse.

He started in the wrong direction, but chance befriended him. Climbing upon a clump of moss, he opened out the circuit of the pond. The furze-bush stood on the far side of it. Its lower branches jutted from the bank, and, arching downwards, trailed into the water. From the first dip of them spread dancing waves.

The French Frog still was singing, and each note, caught and re-echoed overhead, crept down the boughs and rippled to the shore.

So far so good. His goal was plainly visible. But how to get there? He made a bee-line for the water's edge, and tumbled down the bank.



His first idea, to swim, was soon abandoned.

With no clear mark by which to set his course he might swim on till nightfall. But if he crept along close to the water? This seemed a certainty, so off he started.

It was uneven going. Sometimes a stretch of sticky mud, sometimes the mazy reed-stems, and sometimes, where the bank was hollowed out, deep water.

The Natterjack was nimble on his feet, and scuttling, crawling, swimming, made good progress. Before he paused, the furze-bush rose above him. Once in the shade of this, he moved discreetly. He slid from stone to stone, and at each stone he rose to reconnoitre. At the fifth stone, a bulky slanting one, he sighted the French Frog. The French Frog sat absorbed in his own harmonies, his mouthpiece taut, to right and left of it two filmy bubble spheres, now swelling now collapsing.

*"brek-ek-ek-ek-ek-ek-EX!"*

*"KO-ax! KO-ax! KO-ax!"*

It sounded like a challenge.

The last notes struck the listener squarely. He too could sing. Had he not sung against the wood-pecker, yaffle for yaffle, note for note? He swelled himself to bursting point, shut both his eyes, strained to their uttermost the voice-chords underneath his tongue, and loosed one mighty "Yaup!" It cut the last *"Ko-ax"* in half, and as its rattle spent itself, he looked to see what came of it. He looked in vain. The French Frog was not there.

The Natterjack at first was jubilant (a signal victory this) but quiet reflection sobered him.

His mission was to bring the French Frog with him. Now there was no French Frog to bring. He searched five yards each way, then gloomily retraced his steps.



The French Frog Sat Absorbed in his own Harmonies, his Mouthpiece taut, to Right and Left of it, two Filmy Bubble Spheres, now Swelling, now Collapsing

He found the King Toad sleeping, and pausing at a prudent range, croaked nervously.

The King Toad made no sign.

He croaked again, and louder.

The King Toad moved uneasily. His eyebrows twitched, and one eye half revealed itself. Upper and under lids stayed fast, but, in their crescent interval, a third lid fluttered, a filmy, shadowy, cobweb thing, which brushed aside the dream-mists.



"I see a Natterjack," he said, "a Starveling, Mouse Legged Natterjack. I sent for a French Frog"

So in due order, decorously, to open round-eyed vision. The Natterjack was palpably distressed.

His mouth drooped dismally; he shuffled each squat foot in turn.

At last the King Toad spoke.

"I see a Natterjack," he said, "a starveling, mouse-legged Natterjack. I sent for a French Frog."

"Sire," said the Natterjack, his voice a-quiver, "I f-found him, but he v-vanished."

"Fetch him," thundered the King Toad.

The Natterjack fled headlong.

"I shall have to find him," he muttered to himself.

He stumbled on the Salamander. The Salamander, after

working for an hour, had partially concealed himself. His smiling face alone was visible, framed by the grass-stems.

"Have—you—seen—the—French—Frog?" said the Natterjack, as loudly and as plainly as he could.



"Fetch him," thundered the King Toad. The Natterjack Fled Headlong

The Salamander turned his face away and smiled across his shoulder.

"Have—you—seen—the—French—Frog?" the Natterjack repeated.

The Salamander's face came slowly round again, still smiling. It was too much; no longer could the Natterjack contain himself. He ducked his head and pranced, his legs flung round him anyhow.

So for a mad five minutes; at last he got his answer, suave tones across the intervening grass: "Have I seen what?"

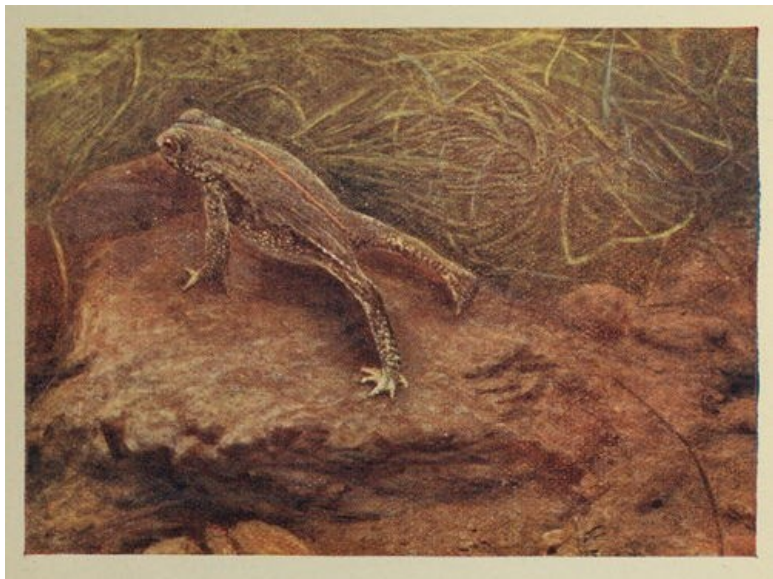
The Natterjack plunged straight into the pond. His nerves were over-wrought, his heart was racing. But for this cooling dive he must have burst. He rose among the lily leaves, and, clutching one, hung slantwise. Slowly the madness left him.

Then he commenced to paddle circumspectly.





The Green Toad slowly stretched himself. "That?" said he, "that's not French."



At the fifth stone—a bulky slanting one, he sighted the French Frog.

He steered a zig-zag course, and, scanning every leaf in turn, came to the outskirts of the cluster. Here he sank slowly down, until his nose alone was visible. The leaf on his right hand was moving. A ripple ran the length of it; then, close beside its stalk, appeared a snout, a quivering trembling snout; then two bead

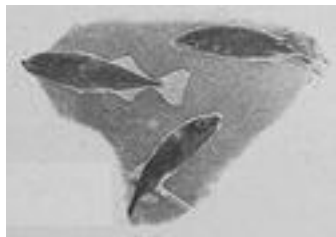
eyes; then a trim velvet body. The Natterjack brought up his head again. No danger here, only a water Shrew-mouse. The Shrew-mouse took no heed of him. She swam the circuit of her leaf three times, dived once or twice, then climbed upon its surface. Here she performed her toilet. The goggle-eyes in no way disconcerted her. At length the Natterjack found words:

"Can you tell me," he said, politely, "where the French Frog has got to?"

The Shrew-mouse gave a little jump. She had been combing out her tail, which was important.

"The French Frog?" she said; "the French Frog? I'm sick of the French Frog. What between him and the Water Rat—and the queer thing is that neither of them seems to know that the other—"

"Of course, he's very fond of me," she added. "Every day he sings *at* me, and so, of course, when he comes my way, I have to *ask* him to sing; and the worst of it is, when I *ask* him to sing, he *does* sing."



"I think that might be cured," said the Natterjack, "if you can

tell me where he is."

"Where did you see him last?" said the Shrew-mouse.

"Under the furze-bush," said the Natterjack.

"Under the furze-bush?" echoed the Shrew-mouse; "perhaps then I can find him. Swim behind me."

She slid so neatly off her leaf that not a drop of water reached her back. Then she commenced to paddle, her feet alternate, her square tail trailing, her nose and face awash. Twin ripples spread on either side of her, and, in between them, though their distance widened, the Natterjack swam stoutly, using his squat hind-legs alone, short jerky thrusts of them, and losing at each stroke.

He reached the shore two yards behind, but yet in time to see the last of her, a fluttering wavy tail-tip, which skimmed the summit of a stone and disappeared behind it.

This was disheartening. The Natterjack had spent his strength, and quick pursuit was out of question. He paused and stretched each limb in turn, scratched his chin doubtfully, and looked about him. He looked first at the water, then at the stone to fix it in his memory, and lastly at the bank above. Here his eyes rested, expressionless at first, lack-lustrous, but presently, with quickened interest, sparkling.



It must be, yes it was, the self-same furze-bush. He stared intently. It was the self-same stone. Perhaps the French Frog still was close at hand; perhaps the Shrew-mouse knew his hiding-place.

He flung his tiredness off him, and started running jauntily.

He had not far to go. Two scurries brought him to the stone, two scrambles to its summit.

There was the Shrew-mouse just below.

She was too occupied to note his coming. She coursed along the water's edge, her head dropped low, her face almost submerged. At times she paused and sniffed the air, her nose upturned and crinkly, her bristles fan-shape. Then she would drop her head again and probe the water.

The Natterjack watched quietly for a while, but soon impatience mastered him. He crept down and addressed her timidly.

"You said you might find the French Frog," he began.

"I have found him," said the Shrew-mouse; "he's down there—as usual."

"Down where?" said the Natterjack.

"Down in the water," said the Shrew-mouse, "down at the bottom of this pool, a good foot down."

"Would you mind asking him to come up?" said the Natterjack.

"I've asked him for five minutes," said the Shrew-mouse. "He must be fast asleep. I know he's there; I've seen his bubbles."

"How can we wake him?" said the Natterjack.

"You'd better dive," said the Shrew-mouse.

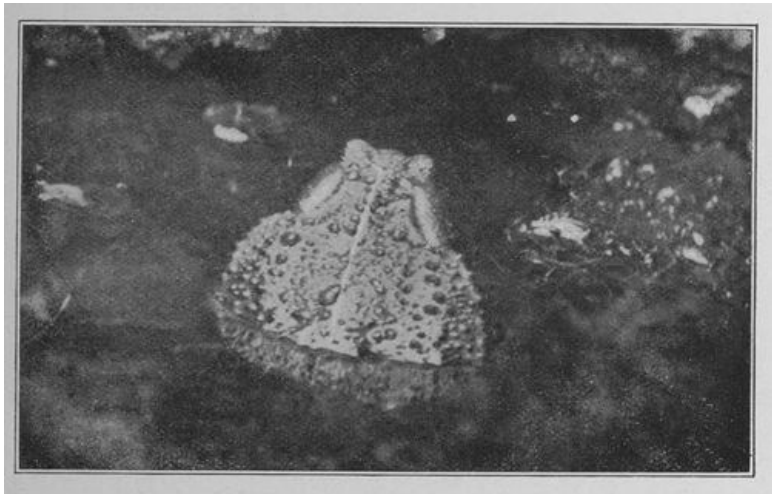
Now Natterjacks are bad enough at swimming; at diving they are hopeless.

"In you go," said the Shrew-mouse.

For very shame the Natterjack went in.

He swam to what he judged a likely spot, ducked down his head, his hands pressed tight against it, and lunged with both hind-legs. These, splashing on the surface, urged him on, but not one inch below.

Five times he tried, and five times his fat body, when half submerged, shot up and bobbed afloat.



Five Times He Tried, and Five Times His Fat Body, when  
Half Submerged, Shot Up and Bobbed Afloat



The Shrew-Mouse drew all Four Feet together and Slithered Eel-wise off the Ledge

The Shrew-mouse rocked with laughter.

"Again, Natterjack!" she cried. "Again! again!"

Shame-faced, he paddled back to shore.

"Be charitable, Shrew-mouse, be charitable. I did my best."

The Shrew-mouse looked at him inquiringly. "Never mind, Natterjack," she said, "I'll fetch him. It's hardly the right thing to do, but still—"

She climbed a ledge, drew all four feet together, and slithered off it eel-wise. She swam a yard and dived. The water closed like oil upon her going. Ten seconds passed and then she reappeared.

"He's coming, Natterjack," she said, and landed close beside him. The French Frog shot up like a cork, and half of him splashed clear above the surface. He took two strokes to reach the shore, and came out moist and shiny. He bristled with apologies—"It was unpardonable. He was altogether desolated. That a lady should have had to dive for him. Alas! he had been dreaming, and his dream, like all his dreams—"





## He Bristled with Apologies

The Shrew-mouse cut him short.

"The King Toad has heard your singing," she said, "and has commanded your presence. The Natterjack will guide you."

Ambition strove with gallantry, and, for a time, the French Frog wavered.

"And have I your permission, Shrew-mouse?" he said, at last.

"Please go," said she, "then come and tell me all about it." So both departed. The Shrew-mouse watched them out of sight, then swam to open water. She wished the Rat to see her next.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Sire," said the Natterjack, "it is my privilege to inform you that I have been successful."

The King Toad made no answer. His eyes turned from the Natterjack to his companion, and, after an appropriate pause, he signed with one fore-foot.

The French Frog tiptoed forward.

"I have heard your singing," said the King Toad, "and your singing has annoyed me intensely."

There was a queer strained silence.

The Natterjack turned to conceal his face, and saw the Green Toad perched above him. He too was struggling to keep countenance. Beside him was the Salamander, wreathed in smiles.



The Green Toad, too, was Struggling to keep Countenance

"Your singing has annoyed me intensely," repeated the King Toad.

Words failed the French Frog, who could only gulp.

"Sire," he burst out at length, "it was a love-song."

"A love-song!" said the King Toad, "a love-song! and what

nice-minded English frog would listen to *your* love-song?"



His Inside was Red-Hot

The French Frog might have scored a point, but prudence

checked him.

"I am a poor exile, Sire," he said, "and, when I sing, my heart is far away."

"So will your voice be, soon," said the King affably. "Come out, fire-toads." The fire-toads squirmed from underneath him.

The French Frog eyed them greedily. There are worse eatables than little toads.

"You may have the big one," said the King.

"Sire!" screamed Bombinatrix.

But she was too late. The French Frog's mouth had closed again, and all now visible of Bombinator was one distraught hind leg.



## He Lay as He had Fallen on His Back

"Excellent," murmured the King Toad, and watched the French Frog narrowly. He was worth watching. He paled a dirty ochre, his eyes rolled horribly, he scratched his sides with both hind feet, he dragged at his own throat, he gasped and foamed and spluttered.

"Most interesting," said the King.

But there was more to follow. The French Frog straddled with his toes wide spread; then came an uncontrollable explosion, which flung him four feet skywards, and, at the height of this great leap, loosed Bombinator.

Two thuds were heard, the first a sounding, floppy one, the second farther off and duller.

"I thought that would happen," said the King Toad.

The French Frog slowly pulled himself together, climbed up the slope, and sat with mouth agape. His inside was red-hot.

The Natterjack burst into song, the Green Toad joined him, the Salamander laughed outright, but Bombinatrix, with a heavy heart, hopped silently away.

She was not long in finding him. He lay, as he had fallen, on his back, his hands and feet outspread, his poor throat twitching. But he still breathed, breathed in short, wheezy, gasping sobs, which made his whole frame shudder.

She crept up close and whispered. I cannot tell you what she said, but Bombinator caught the sense of it. He stretched his legs

as far as they would go, and clasped his hands beneath his chin. This seemed to ease his breathing, and presently, from every pore, welled a bead-drop of moisture. He lay thus for an hour, and Bombinatrix mounted guard beside him.

At last he moved, but Bombinatrix checked him instantly. "Down, Toad of mine," she whispered, "down for your dear life!"

"What is it now?" he groaned.

"Ducks," whispered Bombinatrix, "Great, Fat, White Ducks!"



"Ducks," whispered Bombinatrix, "Great, Fat, White Ducks"

# ANIMALS' NESTS (MARCH)



WHEN a young friend of mine told me the other day that he was going birds'-nesting, and I told him in reply that I was going animal-nesting, I think that, if he had not been a very polite young friend, he would have laughed at me. As it was he laughed *with* me—which was really very nice of him, for he must have been thinking all the time that I was laughing at *him*. But I was quite serious really. I *was* going animal-nesting. I hear you ask at once, "What animal was it?" and I might tease you by saying, "Any animal, of course. When you go birds'-nesting you look for any kind of bird's nest *you* can find, and when I go animal-nesting, I look for any kind of animal's nest *I* can find." But I won't do that, because there are only a few animals' nests which can be found in the same way in which you find birds' nests. All



animals make some kind of nest for their babies, and most of them make some kind of nest to sleep in too. They make them in such queer, out-of-the-way places, though, that it would be quite impossible for any boy or girl, let alone a man or woman, to find them; for the first thing to be done would be to choose the right hole in the ground, and the next thing to be done would be to crawl down it. Some animals, however, make nests which are not in burrows, and though these are not nearly so easy to find as birds' nests, they can be found if you know the sort of place to look for them in.

There are four animals in this country whose nests can be found without having to dig, and these are the mole, the squirrel, the dormouse, and the harvest-mouse. Three of these build their nests above the ground, and the fourth, "the little gentleman in black velvet," builds the ground above his nest. I am going to tell you something about this one (the mole) first, because his nest, I think, is the easiest to see. I expect most of you know those queer little heaps of earth which are sometimes dotted about the fields and are called mole-hills (I want you to keep these in your minds for the moment), and I expect those of you who have got a natural history book will have seen a picture of what is called a mole fortress. I want you to put that out of your mind altogether; it is quite wrong. Now, the little mole-hills never have a nest in them, and I am not quite sure why the moles make so many, but if you ever find a really big hill among the little ones, as big as six or seven of these heaped together, and grub down into it (it is

quite soft, and you can do this with your hands if you don't mind getting dirty), you will find a mole's nest just about the place where you would find the grass growing if there was no hill at all. In May or June you may find the baby moles. Have a good look at them and put them back, for you won't be able to keep them alive, and the mother mole is sure to come back and look after them—when you have gone.



FOUR MOLES' NESTS TOGETHER. THE BIG HILLOCK OF EARTH ABOVE THEM HAS ALL BEEN TAKEN AWAY SO THAT THEY COULD BE PHOTOGRAPHED

Another animal's nest which is easy to find is the squirrel's, but of course it is no use looking for this anywhere but in woods and places of that kind where you know there are squirrels about. A squirrel's nest is in a hole, or fork of a tree, and always, always out of reach. When it is in a fork of a tree it looks like an untidy bird's-nest, made of rather big twigs. It has a soft, warm lining, though, and, if you can get up to it, you may find the baby squirrels inside in June. If they are furry you can take them away, for then they are quite easy to bring up and tame.



The Squirrel. "Squirrel means Shadowtail"

Then there is the harvest-mouse's nest, which is the most beautifully made of all, and is usually to be found in cornfields, built some way up the stalks, and looking just like a bird's-nest except that it is quite round and has no opening that you can see. One can't very well walk about in a cornfield, but you have another chance of finding a harvest-mouse's nest in the hay-time, for they often build in the hay, and once I found one with babies in it, on a haycock, where it had been thrown without any one noticing it.



## THE HARVEST MOUSE'S NEST

The most beautifully made of all

You have two chances, too, of finding a dormouse's nest, for this mouse builds one nest for the babies, and another to sleep in through the winter. Both of them are rather big compared with the harvest-mouse's nest, and they are generally made of moss and leaves, often honeysuckle leaves, which the mother dormouse seems to like, though I can't tell you why.

The dormouse often makes a sleeping-nest at the side of a path through a wood, and does not seem to fasten it very carefully, for one sometimes finds it in the middle of a path, as if the dormouse had turned over in his sleep and sent the whole thing rolling. It may be, though, that some hungry animal has pulled the nest out, and thinking the dormouse dead, preferred to take the chance of finding something alive and warm, and so left it.

If you ever find a sleeping dormouse, which will feel quite cold, you should take the nest and all and keep it somewhere out of doors. For if you bring it into a warm house, it will wake up before its proper time and very likely die; but if you leave it alone until the spring comes, it will wake up as Mother Nature meant it to, and you will have a pet which you will like much better than one which you looked at in a shop window, and could not resist buying.



## The Dormouse

Now there are other things for you to learn about animals' nests besides the kind of places in which you may hope to find them. To begin with, you must remember that an animal has not got the beautiful little nest-making tool which a bird has—I mean, of course, a beak. A bird's beak is used something like a knitting-needle, to thread the little wisps of hay and feathers and moss and things like that in and out and round about, until



they stick where the beak tells them. I expect that animals use their teeth a little in the same way, but they use them more, I think, in biting leaves into strips, in softening hard stalks, and cutting thick grasses into thin ones, and I feel sure that they would find knitting very awkward, because of their thick lips. Most animals, instead of building a nest in front of themselves, build it round themselves. The first thing they do is to collect a little store of nest-material, and this they manage by biting and nibbling at anything which they think will be nice and soft, and carrying it away in their mouths. I expect most of you have seen a house-mouse's nest. It is usually made of scraps of paper and wool and fluff and other little rubbishes, which they can pick up behind the walls and under the floor. Sometimes, though, Mousey is not content with a common kind of nest, and gets into a hat-box and spoils a pretty hat, or into a drawer and spoils valuable papers. Once a mouse nibbled the date and the signature off a valuable paper of mine. That was all she took, but it gave me a great deal of trouble, for it was a legal paper, and it had to be done all over again. Sometimes Mousey chooses even queerer places. I will tell you three I have heard of; the first was a tin of gunpowder, the second was a box of cigars, and the third was a plum cake. The last sounds the nicest, doesn't it? But mousey is very fond of tobacco, and I have often seen her, when the house was quiet, nibbling at scraps of tobacco which I had dropped on the carpet.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.