

Holy Moly by Frank Hibberd

‘I think we’ve been spotted,’ said Mole.

As if in confirmation, a shot rang out.

They both crouched down below the level of the river bank and peered into the darkness, parting the lush grass.

‘I think it was just a warning shot,’ said Badger. ‘Leave this to me.’

He stood up. ‘It’s Badger,’ he shouted. ‘Pax!’

Mole clutched Badger’s leg. ‘Oh! Be careful!’ he cried.

‘Advance, Badger, and be recognised,’ said a squeaky voice. Mole was sure he heard some giggling.

‘How dare they giggle at Badger,’ he thought. ‘Badger is very wise and important.’

He watched anxiously as the dark shape of Badger, just discernible in the starlight, moved up the bank. Then a low murmur of voices could be heard, squeaky weasel voices and the deeper tones of Badger. Eventually Badger called out.

‘Come on, Mole,’ he said. ‘We’ll be all right if we go away. Let’s get back across the bridge.’

The two animals walked along the river bank towards the bridge, taking care not to stumble on the rough ground. Mole looked back, but could see nothing of the weasels.

‘You’re very brave,’ he said. ‘I was terribly afraid they were going to kill you, or kidnap you.’

‘No, no,’ said Badger. ‘They know me well enough in the Wild Wood.’

Mole walked on, feeling a little nervous about his next question.

‘Badger,’ he said ‘did I *really* hear one of them call you “cousin”?’

‘Ah! Humph humph! Ah!’ Badger sounded rather reluctant to continue.

‘*Did* he?’ Mole’s curiosity had been aroused.

‘Well,’ said Badger, ‘as a matter of fact, they are distant relatives. They belong to a rather disreputable branch of the family.’

‘Oi!’ said a voice. ‘We heard that.’

‘We’ll have the law on you,’ said another voice.

‘And we *do* have a reputation,’ said yet another. There was the sound of mocking laughter.

‘Take no notice,’ said Badger, as they crossed the bridge. ‘You see, it’s why I can live in the Wild Wood undisturbed. The weasels know me, and the river-bankers don’t like the Wild Wood. Then, when I feel like it, I can come and visit you all. Er – there’s no need to mention this to the others, is there.’

‘All right,’ said Mole. ‘But I *like* living amongst friends.’

‘I know,’ said Badger. ‘We just happen to be different. It would be boring if we were all the same, wouldn’t it.’

They walked back under the stars towards Rat’s house, listening to the quiet noises and rustles of the night. Badger put his arm round Mole, who felt comforted and reassured by this affirmation of warm friendship.

Rat gazed out of his window at two moorhens as they dipped their beaks for food. Toad relaxed in the armchair near the fireplace. Mole, restless, walked up and down. Badger sat at the table finishing a pie. Each was thinking, in his own way, about the problem of Toad Hall.

‘We’ll get all the river-bankers together,’ said Toad. ‘Then we’ll push them and rush them and get our revenge.’

The Rat shook his head. ‘Too many of them. And they’ve got their defences too well organised.’

‘Why can’t we talk to them?’ asked Mole. ‘I met a very nice weasel once. He told me about the Wild Wood, and all the rabbits and stoats and squirrels and foxes and lots of adventures.’

Mole had thought the weasel was rather handsome and smart, with a sleek brown coat and an elegant white front. He hadn’t noticed the way the weasel had licked his lips with a gleam in his eye when looking at him; and then the stranger had suddenly disappeared when he saw Badger approaching.

‘Toad Hall is so big,’ Mole continued. ‘Why can’t a few weasels live there – in the west wing, say. I’m sure you would hardly notice them. And they could help with the housework. They would be glad of a nice warm home in the winter.’

‘What!’ Toad shouted, ‘let those scoundrels share my lovely home?’

‘I’m afraid Toad is right,’ said the Rat. ‘They are rough, malicious animals who cannot be trusted. As for them doing housework,’ – he laughed – ‘not in a million years. You’re being rather silly there, Moly’

‘Listen, listen to our dear, wise Ratty, he thinks that is totally batty,’ sang Toad.

‘Thank you, Toad,’ said Rat sarcastically. ‘But indeed, they are very unlike us. They are a different species.’

‘No, they’re not,’ said Mole. ‘They’re...’ he stopped suddenly as he saw Badger looking at him sternly.

Badger stood up and wiped the remains of the pork pie from his mouth. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘I’m going to tell you a secret.’

The animals all loved secrets. They listened attentively.

‘I learnt this from Toad’s father many years ago. There is a tunnel from the river bank, which leads to under the butler’s pantry in Toad Hall. The entrance is covered by a blackberry bush.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ said Toad. ‘Let’s go now, and chase them out.’ He stood up and stretched himself. ‘Come on.’

‘Now *you’re* being silly, Toad,’ said Rat.

‘Yes,’ said Badger. ‘We shall have to prepare properly for this. Let’s all have a good night’s sleep, and we’ll draw up a plan tomorrow.’

The animals started up the stairs to the bedrooms.

Toad waved Mole to go before him.

Mole’s heart had been warmed by the comradeship displayed by his friends, and he felt emboldened to declare himself.

‘Oh, I love you, Toad,’ he said.

‘Of course you do,’ said Toad. ‘Everybody loves Toad – clever, handsome, popular, successful Toad.’ Toad beamed and patted Mole on the head.

‘No,’ said Mole. ‘I *really* love you. I love you and I want to marry you.’

‘Well, well,’ said Badger. ‘That needs a bit of thinking about.’

Any thinking about it had to be postponed when there was a knock. The animals waited expectantly as Rat opened the door.

‘Hello, Otter,’ said Rat. ‘It’s good to see you. Come in and sit down. What brings you here?’

Otter bounced into the room. ‘Hello Ratty, I thought I’d check in to see what’s afoot. Hello Badger. Fancy you being related to those weasels, eh!’

He sat down on the chair recently vacated by Toad. The animals’ mouths dropped open.

Otter looked around at the astonished group.

‘Oh dear!’ he said. ‘Have I been indiscreet?’

‘Why did you say that?’ Badger demanded.

‘I overheard your little chat this evening.’

‘You must have been very close,’ said Mole. ‘But we heard nothing.’

Otter grinned. ‘That is what you must expect to hear when I’m on patrol.’

‘Look, Badger,’ he continued, ‘you needn’t be ashamed. The fact is, I’m also related. I think it’s best to have these things out in the open. I am firmly on the side of the river-bankers, and I’m sure Badger is too.’

‘Of course I am,’ said Badger.

‘Well said, cousin,’ said Otter. Badger looked a little disconcerted.

‘Well,’ said Rat, ‘are any more of us related? I don’t think I am. What about you, Moly?’

‘Not very likely, is it?’ said Mole.

Rat, as the host, took charge of the gathering. ‘I suggest we have a good night’s sleep, and sort it out in the morning.’

They all agreed that was a good idea, and trooped off to bed.

Rat was up early in the morning, cleaning guns, sharpening swords and picking out a belt for each animal. He was dividing them into neat piles when Badger came down to breakfast.

‘You’re very well organised, Ratty,’ said Badger, ‘but I don’t think we shall need all those weapons. It’s the stoats who have the guns, and we shall avoid them by going through the tunnel. With my cudgel, and stout sticks for the rest of you, we should be able to put those weasels to flight.’

After breakfast Badger explained his plan.

‘We know from Otter, after his clever chimney-sweep lark’ – he nodded acknowledgement to Otter, who smiled modestly. Toad felt very jealous – hadn’t he shown his cleverness at disguise during his adventures? – ‘that they are having a banquet this evening to celebrate the Chief Weasel’s birthday.

There’s also a distinguished visitor from overseas, apparently. I think 7.30 should be about the right time. So we shall leave here at seven o’clock with our sticks, and make our way very carefully,’ – ‘surreptitiously,’ said Rat – ‘thank you, Ratty, that’s a very good word. We shall make our way

sirreptoshushly down to the river, ferry ourselves over in Ratty's boat, and go down the tunnel. When I give the word it'll be up through the trap door, into the hall, and bash 'em till they give in'.

During the afternoon the animals were too excited to relax. Otter told tales of what his little son Portly had been getting up to. Mole walked up and down by the window, looking for any signs of activity on the far bank. Rat cleaned and loaded his gun – 'It's as well to be on the safe side,' he said. Toad wanted to reconnoitre in Rat's boat, but was forcibly restrained by the others. 'You're likely to muck up the whole operation,' said Badger. Toad then sat disconsolately in his favourite fireside chair, muttering to himself about 'officious bullies'. When Mole looked imploringly at him, he shook his head impatiently. Then he relented, and smiled at Mole.

'I think you're a lovely chap, and a wonderful friend, Moly,' he said, 'but I don't think marriage would be a good step to take. You'd go on at me about being untidy, and wasting money. And I would get cross, and run off to find some silly adventure. It just wouldn't do, old friend.'

Mole sighed. 'I suppose you're right,' he said. 'I expect I *would* soon find you very irritating. Ah, well. Never mind, eh?'

Toad's vanity was slightly wounded by this rather abrupt dismissal; but he managed to put this aside, and return his thoughts to the evening's mission.

As evening approached, Rat provided snacks of corned beef sandwiches and cakes, with plenty of hot tea, to fortify them all for their adventure.

At last the time arrived. The animals went quietly one-by-one down to the river bank. The boat could not take more than three, so Rat rowed Badger and Otter across first, then went back for Toad and Mole. As they disembarked, Toad fell into the water with a splash and a squeal of alarm, which he quickly suppressed.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Do you think anybody heard?'

The animals all listened carefully. There were no sounds of alarm. But there was a rustle from the direction of the blackberry bush. Badger opened the shutter on his dark lantern.

'Hello,' said Otter, 'what have we here?'

It was a ferret. He opened his mouth to cry out. Otter grabbed him tightly and kept his mouth closed.

'Asleep on guard duty, eh,' said Badger. 'The weasels won't like that.'

Rat, Mole and Toad came up the bank.

'You little wretch,' said Toad, and raised his stout stick.

'Wait!'" said Rat. He turned to the ferret. 'You're Fertie, aren't you.'

The ferret nodded as best he could, his eyes wide with fear.

'I once fished him out of the river,' explained Rat. 'Now look,' he said to Fertie, 'I'm going to ask Otter to relax his grip. If you try to cry out, I'll let Toad bash you with his stick. Do you understand?'

Fertie nodded.

Rat signed to Otter, who kept a tight hold but freed Fertie's head.

'I've had enough,' said Fertie. 'I didn't want this job in the first place. If you let me go, I'll go straight back to the Wild Wood.'

'You'll have to come with us now,' said Badger, 'just in case you change your mind. But what you *can* do is tell us about the visitor.'

'Well,' said Fertie, 'I've only had a few glimpses. He looks a big, really fearsome, savage beast. I didn't like the look of him at all.'

'Oh, dear,' said Toad, trembling a little.

Badger patted him on the back. 'Come on, Toad. We're all in this together, and we're a match for anyone.'

Toad nodded half-heartedly.

Rat pushed the body of the blackberry bush to one side, taking care to avoid the prickles, and ushered the troops into the dark tunnel. Rat went last, to encourage Toad, who went immediately in front of him.

The roof of the tunnel was very low in places - the animals sometimes had to crouch down. Badger's lantern gave only a fitful light, so there were occasional muffled cries of pain as Toad banged his head.

As they advanced they began to hear noises of applause, shouting and stamping on the floor. Badger called a halt when the noise was at its loudest.

'Right,' he said. 'Are we all here?'

'All here,' said Rat.

Badger felt above his head.

‘Here’s the trapdoor. Are we ready?’

Murmurs of ‘ready’ were heard, though rather tremulously from Toad.

‘Right!’ Badger threw open the trapdoor and scrambled upwards into the pantry.

‘Nobody here,’ he said.

They assembled in the little room.

‘Here we go,’ cried Badger.

He pushed open the door. The animals rushed through and set about the weasels with their sticks and cudgels, with war-cries of ‘A Toad’. Toad himself put aside his fears and leapt into action, swelling up to almost twice his normal size. The weasels panicked and ran away in all directions, looking for safety. Soon the hall was empty of weasels. One figure was left, seated at a table.

The figure was big – bigger than Badger. He was stocky, powerful looking. He looked calmly at the invaders, with his formidable teeth bared – was he smiling or snarling? His two upper canine teeth were long, sharply pointed, and curved back inwards – if he sank his teeth into you, he could release them only by tearing out the flesh.

Badger stepped forward. The two animals stared at each other, while the river-bankers held their breath.

‘Hello, Wolvy,’ said Badger.

‘Well, hello Badger,’ said the creature.

Both animals burst out laughing, and embraced each other.

Badger turned back towards his companions.

‘This is Wolverine,’ he said. ‘He visited when we were both young. We spent some time together.’

‘And had a few adventures, you naughty rascal,’ said Wolverine. ‘Do you remember the farmer and his orchard –’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Badger hurriedly, while the others nudged each other knowingly.

‘Yet another blooming cousin,’ muttered Mole.

‘And when we knocked that policeman’s helmet off,’ continued Wolverine.

‘Look,’ interrupted Badger, while the river-bankers said ‘oooooh!’ to each other. ‘there’ll be plenty of time for reminiscences later – that’s if you’ll come and stay with me?’

‘Certainly,’ said Wolverine.

‘So the question is, what do we do now?’ said Badger.

‘Well, it’s a question of inequality, isn’t it’ said Wolverine. ‘It may be their own fault, if they insist on breeding like – er –,’

‘Rabbits?’ suggested Rat

‘Well, yes, I suppose so,’ continued Wolverine, as he quickly checked that there were no rabbits in the group, ‘but anyway, there they are, living on top of each other, while Toad swaggers around in his spacious mansion.’

Beneath his bragging exterior Toad was quite soft-hearted, and he admitted to himself there was some truth in Wolverine’s remarks.

‘So what you have to do,’ continued Wolverine, ‘is throw them a few tit-bits, so they think you care.’

‘That’s rather cynical’ said Badger.

‘You may think it’s cynical,’ replied Wolverine, ‘but it’s a matter of practical politics, isn’t it, old man?’

‘I’m hungry,’ said Toad. ‘Let’s see what we can find to eat. I invite you all to dinner.’

‘Good idea,’ said Badger. ‘Then we can discuss the next steps.’

From an upstairs window Toad gazed at the new play area in a far corner of his land. There were many small animals, including weasel kittens, playing on the swings, slides, and merry-go-rounds. Some parents were watching, and some were operating the machines.

Toad himself had tried out all the slides, swings and rides – to make sure they were safe, he claimed.

At the moment he was studying the ride which had its cars fitted with bird-like wings.

‘Now there’s an idea,’ he thought, with a glint in his eye.