

The Riverbank

Chapter 1

It was a warm spring morning and a light breeze blew the smell of daffodils and bluebells through the wood. A path twisted and turned through the trees while birds in the branches above sung cheerful songs, the kind that make you feel tingly and nice. The grass was still wet with the dew and the dew drops sparkled in the sun. The path continued for some time until it came to a river where it split in two and wound its way along the riverbank in both directions. About five minutes walk along the left path, or perhaps ten minutes if you are rather small or like to dawdle and sniff flowers (but if you are both small and like to dawdle I would not like to say how long it would take you) there was a large oak tree with bright green leaves.

It stood a little way back from the path and right on the edge of the riverbank. A small boat was moored to one of the tree roots and bobbed gently on the river which was slowly meandering its way to the sea. Halfway up the tree trunk a large window was open towards the sun. Inside sat a squirrel reading a book in a large armchair. It was not a very big room but then rooms in trees seldom are. Houses of this sort have many rooms one on top of the other. In this particular house there were eight such rooms. A faint track ran from the main path to the front door of the house. On the door was a large brass door knocker and a polished brass name plate that read:

West Bank House

Residence of Mr Toby Squirrel

Actually no one used Mr Squirrel's first name, no one that is except relatives.

The front door opened into a room which was the closest thing you could have to hall in this kind of house. There was a coat and boot rack, a place to put your umbrella, a barrel of cider, some fishing tackle, two folding chairs and pictures of distant relatives on the walls. Because all of the rooms were one on top of the other, there was a spiral staircase in one corner which wound up through the house.

The next room up was the kitchen and pantry, which was always kept clean and tidy and often had delicious smells coming from it. Stone jars and glass jars, packets and tins lined the walls on shelves and on the floor. A big baking oven

and a bucket of coal for the fire sat under the window that looked out towards the wood.

The stairs went up to the living room where Squirrel was reading and occasionally looking out of the window at the sun and the puffs of white cloud floating by. It was almost a nice enough morning to sit outside in the sun on a deck chair he thought. But then again perhaps it wasn't, and he continued reading.

The living room was filled with interesting things. On the walls, on shelves and on the floor there were plants and jars and pictures and boxes. There were three windows, a large fireplace, an old wooden clock on the mantelpiece and two vases filled with freshly cut, lovely smelling flowers. Most interesting of all were the rows and rows of books on the bookcase which reached the ceiling. There were books on history and some on geography, books about plants, animals, parks, rivers, and fish and so on. Best of all were the poetry and story books with colourful pictures which could take you to another place and make you forget where you were. Just by looking through his house you could tell that Toby Squirrel was the kind of person you would like to know and perhaps go to visit on a rainy day to sit in front of the fire talking about all kinds of things.

From the living room the stairs went up to a clean, fresh bathroom with a small window open to the breeze. On one wall hung a long mirror and next to it was an airing cupboard filled with warm towels, sheets, cloths and flannels. Above the bathroom was the lounge. There were some chairs and a coffee table and three large windows which opened to the North, South and West. There was also a door on the East side which opened onto a veranda from which you could see both ways along the river and catch the best of the midday sun. In one corner of the room was a jug with six matching mugs. On warm nights when friends visited, Squirrel would fill the jug with cider from his barrel and carry it up to be sipped until the sun set.

Squirrel's bedroom was the next room up. It was a cosy room with a comfortable bed and a feather duvet. An old chest of drawers given to him by his grandmother sat against one wall, and a writing desk set against another. A large window let in the morning sun and there were two flowering plants on the window sill.

The stairs wound still further up to the spare bedroom which had bunks on one side of the room and a hammock on the other. A wardrobe was built into one wall and two windows, a mirror and a green rug completed the furnishings.

At the very top of squirrel's house was the storeroom which was fairly empty because it was spring. At the beginning of winter it had been filled with apples, nuts, jam, bottled fruit and sacks of vegetables. But now most of it had been eaten. There was still an unopened bag of porridge oats, a few jars of fruit, and

one of pickled onions. There were a few nuts and vegetables on the shelves and even a couple of jars of blackcurrant jam that had been saved. There was enough to last at least until summer when the stocks could be built up again.