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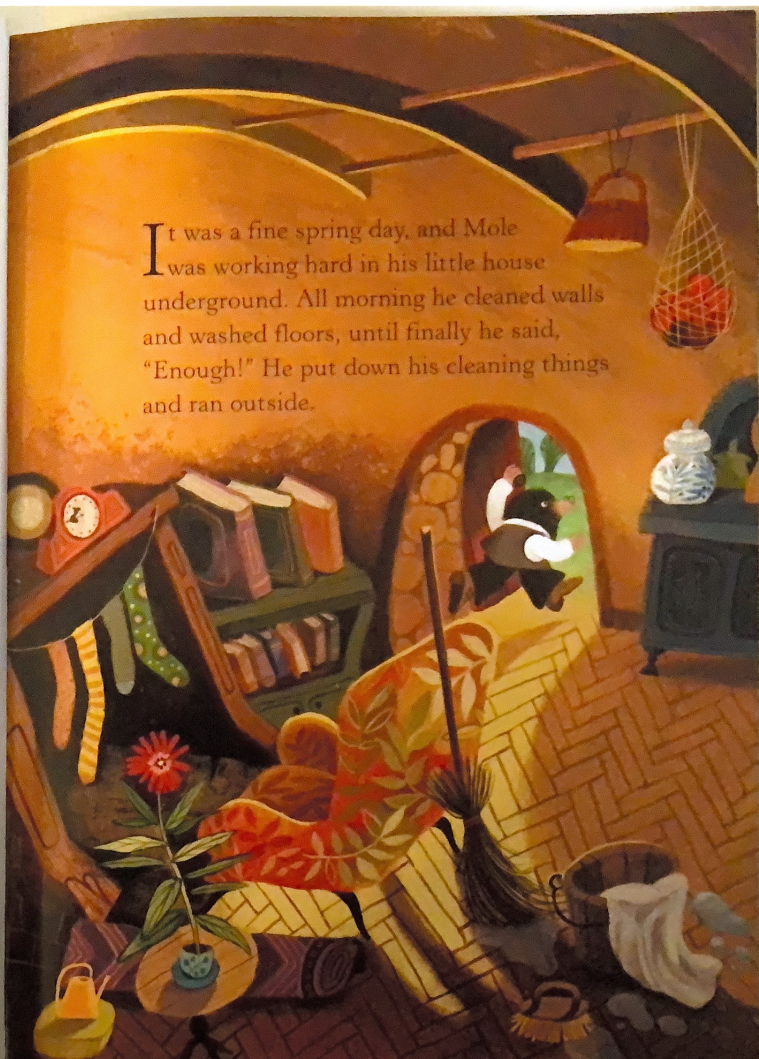
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You can listen to the story online here:
[www.usborneenglishreaders.com/
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It was a fine spring day, and Mole was working hard in his little house underground. All morning he cleaned walls and washed floors, until finally he said, "Enough!" He put down his cleaning things and ran outside.



He could hear birds singing, and see new spring flowers. "This is better than house-cleaning!" he said. He could see something bright on the far side of the field. The river was shining between tall willow trees, and the trees were moving in the gentle wind. Mole ran towards the water.

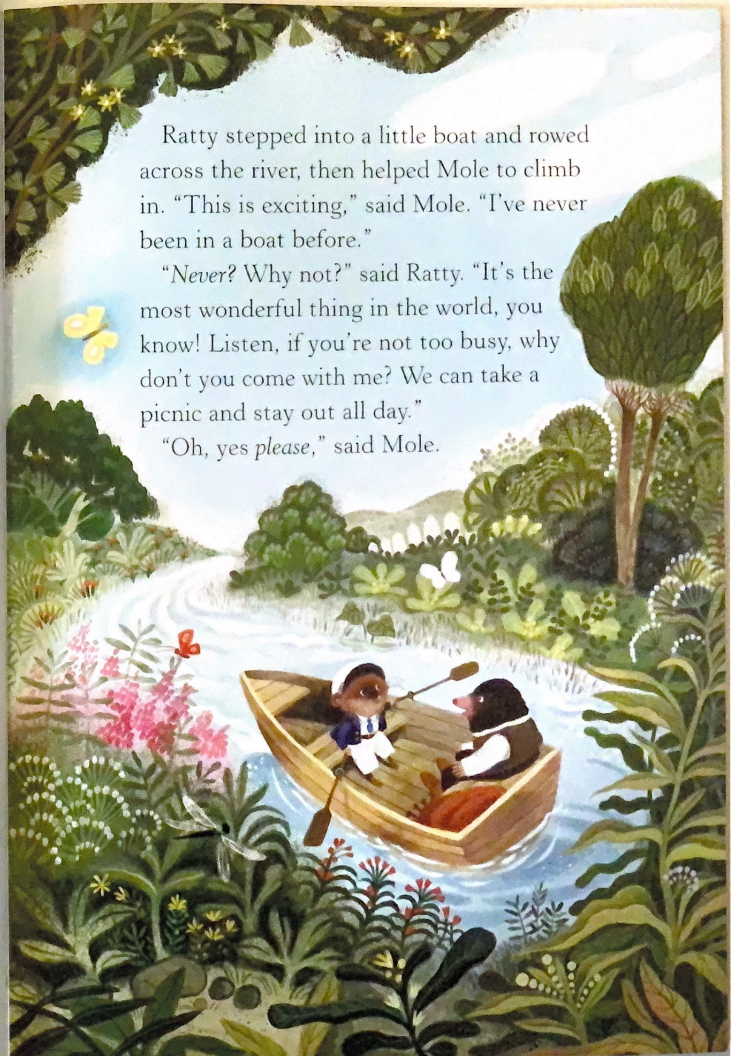


He saw a small face on the other side. The Water Rat said, "Hello, Mole! I'm Ratty. Would you like to come over here?" "How can I do that?" asked Mole.

Ratty stepped into a little boat and rowed across the river, then helped Mole to climb in. "This is exciting," said Mole. "I've never been in a boat before."

"Never? Why not?" said Ratty. "It's the most wonderful thing in the world, you know! Listen, if you're not too busy, why don't you come with me? We can take a picnic and stay out all day."

"Oh, yes *please*," said Mole.



Ratty rowed back to his house and fetched the picnic. Then he rowed along the river to a little island. Mole was very hungry, and the picnic was delicious.

At one moment they saw a black and white face on the river bank. "Hello, Badger!" shouted Ratty. "Sorry, Ratty, too many people," said Badger, and disappeared.



"He's always like that," said Ratty. "He's a kind friend, but he prefers being alone. He lives in the Wild Wood. One day we'll go and see him, but we'll have to choose a good time."

They finished the picnic and started rowing back. "Let me try," said Mole.

"Not yet," said Ratty. "It's more difficult than you think." But Mole jumped up, and fell over Ratty, and then the boat turned over and Mole was in the water, going down and down...



Two strong arms pulled him to the bank. "Oh, Ratty, I'm so sorry!" said Mole.

"Don't worry," said Ratty. "You wait here, and I'll bring the boat. And then – would you like to stay with me for some time? I can teach you to swim, and to row, and the river's very nice in the summer."

"Oh, yes *please*!" said Mole.

One morning, Ratty said, "Mole, I'd like you to meet my friend Toad. He talks about himself a lot, but he has a kind heart. You'll like him." They rowed to a beautiful old house by the river.

Toad was sitting outside. "I'm so pleased to see you!" he said. "Come and look at this!"



Behind the house was a little wooden caravan. Toad wanted to show them everything inside. "Isn't it perfect? We're leaving this afternoon."

"Toad, we can't just go," Ratty started to say, but Mole looked sad. "Oh, all right," said Ratty.

They helped to catch Toad's old horse, and soon they were on the quiet road. It was a fine way to travel.

Suddenly there was a roaring noise and a cloud of dust. The poor horse was terrified, and tried to escape. An enormous car drove past them. As it disappeared, they heard a 'Toot-toot!'

The caravan lay on its side, with a broken wheel. "Oh, Toad, I'm so sorry!" said Mole. "Toad, are you hurt?"



Toad was sitting in the middle of the road and smiling. "Toot-toot!" he said happily. "Toot-toot!"

The months went past, and it was almost winter. Ratty often went to sleep by the fire, and it was much too cold and wet for the boat. "Maybe we can visit Badger?" said Mole, but Ratty never wanted to leave the house.

"I'll just go by myself," Mole decided one afternoon. The sky was pale and the air was cold. Even without their leaves, the tall trees looked beautiful.

In the wood, the trees were closer and it was much darker. Suddenly Mole saw a face between the trees – a little, narrow, unfriendly face. He looked again, and it was gone – but then he saw another. He heard the sound of little feet all around him.



Mole was terrified. He started running, then fell over, then climbed inside a dead tree. He stayed there in the dark.

Some time later, he heard a strong, friendly voice. "Mole?"

"Ratty, is that you? Oh, I'm so happy to see you!"

"Silly Mole, coming to the Wild Wood on your own! We river animals never do that. It's no problem for Badger, of course. He likes it here. He's not afraid of the weasels and foxes – but for us, they're trouble. Let's go home. We can come back another day. Wait a minute – is that snow?"



The snow fell, more and more of it, and it was difficult to see their way through the trees. They walked this way and that, then Ratty stopped and looked around. Were they lost?

Then Mole fell over something. "Oh, my leg! That hurts!"

"Clever Mole!" said Ratty. "Look, it's a doorstep!"

"A doorstep? What a silly place to leave a doorstep," said Mole – but Ratty started digging, and soon they could see a door. "Hello!" Ratty shouted.



They heard a sleepy voice inside. "Who's making that noise, at this time of night?" Then the door opened. "Ratty!" said Badger. "What are you doing here? Are you lost in the snow? Come inside, quickly."



The two animals followed him to a warm kitchen with a wonderful bright fire. Badger took their coats and boots and brought dry clothes. Then he put a hot meal on the kitchen table, and the animals ate until they were full.

"Now, tell me the news about Toad," said Badger.

"Oh, it's bad," said Ratty. "He's a terrible driver, but nobody can tell him that. He crashes his car, then buys a new one, again and again. He's crashed six already. Soon, someone is going to get hurt."

"We must do something," said Badger. "When the weather is warmer, we'll talk to him and make him understand. Now, you need to sleep. Come this way." He showed them a comfortable bedroom.

In the morning they all had a good breakfast, and Badger took them back to the river bank. Soon they were safely at home in Ratty's little house.

It was spring again when Badger came to Ratty's house. "It's time to visit Toad," he said. "I hear he's bought a new car – another one. We must stop him!"

When the animals arrived at Toad's house, the car was waiting. Toad was on the doorstep. "This is perfect!" he said. "You must come... with..." He stopped when he saw Badger's face.



"Take him inside," Badger told Ratty and Mole. Then he told the car driver, "Mr. Toad has changed his mind. You can take that horrible machine away, thank you."

Inside the house, he said, "Toad, we need to talk." He and Toad went into a quiet room. Ratty and Mole sat outside. They could hear Badger's angry voice. When they heard Toad, he sounded quiet and sad.

Finally the door opened. "Tell them, Toad," said Badger. "Tell them you're sorry, and you'll never drive a car again."

"But I'm *not* sorry," said Toad with a smile, "and I *will* drive again. It's so much fun! I'll show you. The first car I see – toot-toot!"



"Then we'll stay here until you change your mind," said Badger. "You'll stay in your room, and one of us will be with you all the time. You'll be quite comfortable, but you won't leave the house. It's the only way."

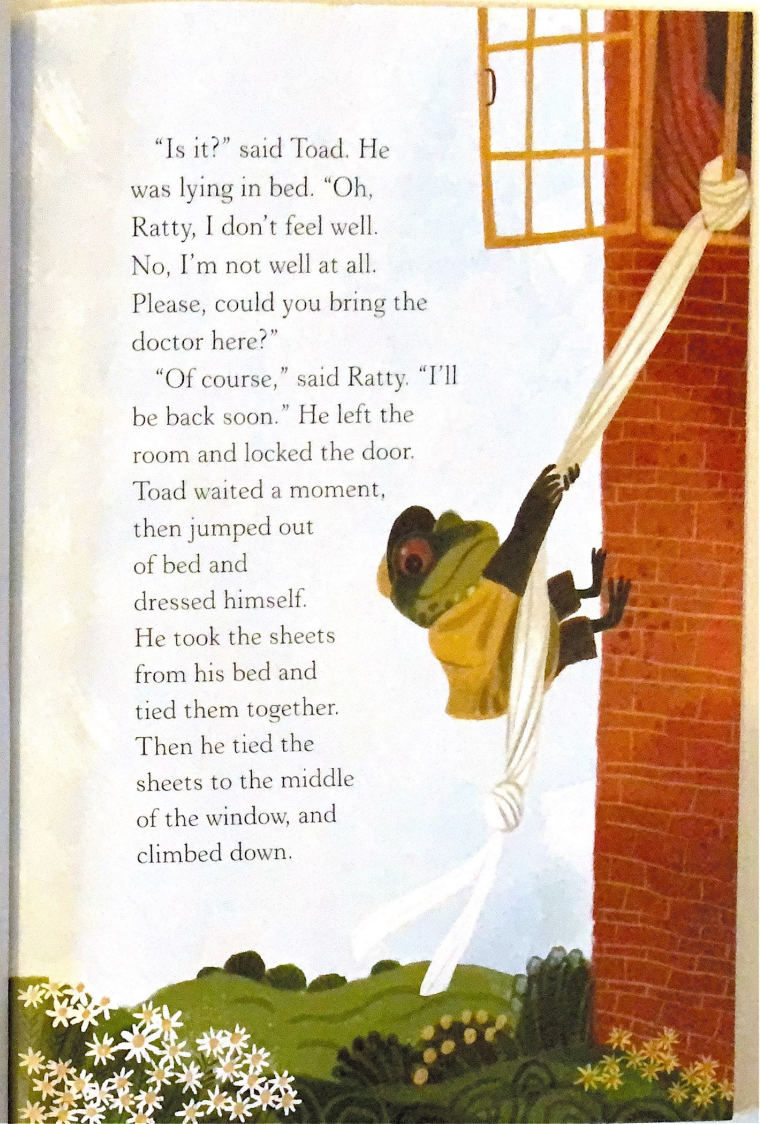
Toad looked sad, but he didn't argue. He stayed in his room for a week. One morning, Badger and Mole went out, and Ratty was alone with Toad.

"It's a lovely day," Ratty said.



"Is it?" said Toad. He was lying in bed. "Oh, Ratty, I don't feel well. No, I'm not well at all. Please, could you bring the doctor here?"

"Of course," said Ratty. "I'll be back soon." He left the room and locked the door. Toad waited a moment, then jumped out of bed and dressed himself. He took the sheets from his bed and tied them together. Then he tied the sheets to the middle of the window, and climbed down.



"Clever Toad!" he said to himself. He started walking across the fields, and soon he came to a village. In the middle of the main street he saw something wonderful.

"A car!" said Toad. "A lovely, shining blue car!" He walked all around it. "I wonder if it starts easily?"

