

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

BARBARA SIMONITI
MARSHLANDERS. TALES
FROM THE GREENWOOD
FOREST

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Selected chapters

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First Chapter

Greenwood Forest, Marshland Mead and the Inhabitants Thereof

Greenwood Forest is a large and mysterious wood. Soundless paws, mitts and feet have beaten tracks through it, interweaving the whole Greenwood Forest. Dry and bright footpaths lead to sunny glades, while the shady ones lead to damp dells with clear brooks. And such a narrow, almost invisible footway winds into a silent shadowy dale – Marshland Mead.

A slow stream runs through Marshland Mead, meandering among the tree roots. It is rimmed by bushes of yellow marsh marigolds as well as tufts of spear-shaped marsh grasses. The gentle slopes of the Marshland Brook are covered with lush moss, while strutting ferns spread their branches above it. The whole dale is surrounded by mighty coniferous and ancient deciduous trees. Their crowns are so wide that the branches interlace, therefore a deep shade pervades the area beneath them. This is very important since all the inhabitants of Marshland Mead love dusk and dampness.

Marshland Mead is a settlement featuring a long and proud history. It began when the first Greenwood arrivals stemmed the Marshland Brook and built a wooden sluice there. The originally rapid stream slowed down, flooding out into the Marshland Mere. The water could be regulated by the sluice, thus running evenly from the Marshland Mere and turning the whole dale into a marsh. In that way the wetland of Marshland Mead was created. The news of a fertile wetland spread rapidly and new settlers poured in from everywhere. Although they came from distant parts of the Greenwood Forest and differed among themselves, they all began to call themselves the Marshlanders.

Marshland Mead is divided into various districts. Some of them are moist and mossy, while others are almost dry and grassy, and others again are marshy and lushly overgrown. Each district has its own name and each is inhabited by different residents.

The moist district of Dampmoss Downs stretches over the upper part of Marshland Mead. The undulating ground is covered with round hillocks of velvety moss. Various tree hollows and mossy houses there are occupied by respectable salamanders, as well as toads and some frogs. The mayor of Marshland Mead, Wadewick the salamander, is also among them.

At the bottom of Dampmoss Downs, the Marshland Brook is forked into two branches. The first one is the rapid Cornel Current, while the other one is the slow Rush Runnel. Spruce Stub stands in the junction of the Brook and is washed by water from all sides. It is a tall stump of an ancient tree, overgrown with silky moss, with a thicket of spruce saplings shooting out of its roof. A firm footbridge spans the Marshland Brook from both banks onto Spruce Stub. The green hollow of its stump houses the Mayor Mansion, where all the aldermen and notables of Marshland Mead gather on important occasions under the guidance of their mayor. The

bifurcated Marshland Brook runs further down through two districts: the Cornel Current dashes alongside of Hornbeam Hurst, while the Rush Runnel meanders through Soakfeet Sward.

Hornbeam Hurst is the driest part of Marshland Mead and it is scattered with some trees. The inhabitants there are mostly salamanders: on account of that Hornbeam Hurst is called the salamander district by other Marshlanders, and the residents thereof are being teased as the Drylanders. – Soakfeet is the Marshlandish name for wetland that is only waterlogged enough so as to get one's feet drenched in it, at the utmost. – Soakfeet Sward is overgrown with grass and low moss climbing up the occasional tree or stump. The root houses and tree dwellings there are inhabited by all kinds of frogs: toads, fire-bellied toads, tree frogs, as well as green and brown frogs. The tree crowns are occupied by some spiders, the overspreading branches being spacious enough for them to interweave their cobwebs there. Spiders are the reticent inhabitants of Marshland Mead, usually staying in the background. The gloomy dampness of the wetland suits them and they keep out of the everyday dealings of other Marshlanders. The only exception is Crosscroft the spider, who takes care of every sprained ankle or broken claw.

In the lower part of Marshland Mead, the ground is expanded and levelled out into a plain so that the wetland is turned into a proper marsh with pools and dead ends. – A dead end is the Marshlandish name for a backwater with water standing still as if it were dead, while, actually, it is teeming with life. – Hornbeam Hurst ends up in Sedge Swamp while the Rush Runnel spreads out into Marigold Mire. The third watery district is Cress Morass at the bottom of Marshland Mead, where all the waters come to a standstill. All three marshy districts are settled primarily by newts and various frogs. Their diverse waterside dwellings are built on muddy banks since they feel happiest with water reaching up to their thresholds.

In Marshlands everything is directed by water, therefore even the seasons are named somewhat differently: spring is followed by dryspell, and autumn is succeeded by snowtide. The trees, bushes and stumps in Marshland Mead all have their names so that the houses in their roots, hollows or branches have no numbers, but names. Thus it is easy to know for all the residents who they are and where they come from.

A family of salamanders has recently moved into Hawthorn Hurst: father Frecklecott, mother Frecklecate and their son Freckles. Safely hidden behind the evergreen ivy leaves, their house in Hawthorn Haven can hardly be spotted. Frecklecotts the salamanders arrived from a distant part of Greenwood Forest because father Frecklecott got an excellent job in Marshland Mead: he became the lock-keeper of the Marshland Brook.

Since marshiness is vitally important for the moist-loving inhabitants of Marshland Mead, the sluice on the Marshland Brook is always tended by a lock-keeper. A Marshlander with sufficient expertise of water as well as plentiful experience with the weather is always selected for this job. In hot months, when the moss begins to lose its colour and crumble under the fingers, that is a clear sign of the approaching draught. Shortage of water is a severe misfortune since the wetlands dry up and, as a consequence, parch fever can spread among the

Marshlanders. During dryspell the lockkeeper must therefore husband the Marshland Mere very prudently so as not to run out of water. However, when everything is in vain and there is no rain whatsoever in sight, all the strong Marshlanders gather on the wooded plain above the sluice. They dig canals from all directions to divert the moisture from nearby as well as far-flung springs or pools into the Marshland Mere.

Nevertheless, the draught is not the only adversity that threatens Marshland Mead. For the moist-loving inhabitants, too much water can be similarly dangerous as too little of it. The Marshlanders are no fish, after all. They are neither Drylanders nor Waterlanders, but something in between. Their way of life is beneficial intermediacy: marshes are permanent, stagnant waters and not brisk rivers with everyone rushing about somewhere. The lock-keeper of Marshland Mead must therefore guard over the waters during downpours as well, when the Marshland Brook gets muddy and swells enormously. The rushing torrential waters could flood the settlement and wash away the below-moss dwellings as well as waterside quarters. In times of deluge, the sluice is therefore closed by the lock-keeper and the flood diverted through a canal to the neighbouring, uninhabited valley called Downpour Dale.

The work at the sluice is so important that Frecklecott the new lock-keeper occupies a very special place in Marshland Mead, right after the mayor. And Wadewick the mayor is, anyway, the most distinguished Marshlander of them all. He is so important that no salamander, frog or newt in Marshland Mead would dare shed a hair – had any had any – without the mayor knowing of it. Not even Frecklecott the lock-keeper can helm the sluice without informing Wadewick the mayor of any significant changes either of the weather or water.

Wadewick the salamander takes trouble to present all his mayorly distinction already by his deportment. When on duty, he struts more slowly than usual, deliberately setting his paws into the mud and moss. On such occasions he also speaks more slowly, using only long and complicated Marshlandish words which Freckles the little salamander could not even repeat, let alone understand them.

Marshlandish is a language rich with words for everything that is significant for Marshlands and the inhabitants thereof: the moss, water, mud and the weather. It is so important that it is spoken by all the inhabitants of the Greenwood Forest, when they want to communicate properly. And on account of that, all our tales about the Marshlanders from the Greenwood Forest are likewise written in Marshlandish.

Second Chapter

Arrival in Marshland Mead

Frecklecotts the salamanders have moved to Marshland Mead from a distant shaded part of the Greenwood Forest. Black Tarn is a salamandrine settlement in the hills, built in dusky rocky banks above the water. It is inhabited by a numerous family of entirely black, highland salamanders as well as some families of lowland salamanders featuring yellow spots. The Frecklecotts originate from the latter.

Father Frecklecott used to work as the weather watcher in Black Tarn. He was assistant to the renowned Lakewin the weatherman. However, on a rainy day in early spring two visitors from Marshland Mead turned up there: Rainwright the frog and Wadewick the salamander. Rainwright was the waterman of Marshland Mead and the eldest of the aldermen, while Wadewick had been the mayor there for some years. They invited Frecklecott to join them and become the lock-keeper of the Marshland Brook and its sluice.

Frecklecott the salamander knew immediately that this was an opportunity he could not let slip through his fingers. He would have remained an assistant to Lakewin for years to come, whereas the offer meant an independent position! He therefore promised Rainwright and Wadewick to consider their proposal and pay a visit to Marshland Mead very soon. Then he ran home excitedly to let his family know of their prospects.

Mother Freckleate did not think so highly of the possible development: after all, it was not so easy to exchange a clear mountain pool for a muddy lowland marsh. Nevertheless, she did not want to dampen her husband's spirits. Their son Freckles, however, brightened up upon hearing the news. It would be wonderful to move to a distant and such a different town! He would certainly make many new friends there!

Thus father Frecklecott soon set off on a journey to Marshland Mead in order to have a proper look of the unknown Marshlands. On returning to Black Tarn after a few days, he spoke so enthusiastically of the town in shady wetlands, of the house in a blossoming tree, of the school by a marigold pond, of the friendly Marshlanders and so on that mother Freckleate could no longer stop him – especially since little Freckles rejoiced with him. And thus they decided to move.

Father Frecklecott swiftly informed Rainwright the alderman of his decision to accept the job as the lock-keeper of Marshland Mead. In reply, he received a large green letter sealed with a clay seal. Rainwright the waterman officially announced in it that the job awaited him and everything would be ready for their arrival in a few days. The letter was signed by the mayor as well as all the aldermen of Marshland Mead.

Now the Frecklecotts had only to prepare for their change of abode. And on a nice wet

morning they set out along a broad road through the Greenwood Forest. Although father Frecklecott sent most of their belongings by salamandrine post and although they moved with their necessities only, there were finally still a lot of trifles to be reckoned with so that they were all loaded with luggage.

Mother Frecklecate had a difficult time leaving the Firmlands, despite her knowing that a better job and a house of their own awaited her husband in Marshland Mead. She was sorry for the Lichenous Lair in Tor Terrace where they used to live. To be true, their rocky flat was cramped, yet in the course of time she managed to transform it into a snug home. But now she had to take leave of all their Firmland neighbours and friends and start afresh! And in Marshland Mead everything would be different: the house in tree roots, the whole place slimy and the inhabitants so strange! Apart from salamanders, there would be newts, frogs, toads and other unknown Marshlanders. She could not help herself but consider them somewhat ugly and undistinguished. She was quite worried how she would get along with them.

Little Freckles was a good child: he always brushed his teeth and obeyed his parents, whenever he could. Nevertheless, he could not agree with his mother about frogs, toads and newts. He was convinced that living with them in Marshland Mead would be even more interesting than it was in Black Tarn among salamanders only. The marshy pools and mossy slopes would offer countless opportunities for ever new games.

“Just a little longer and we’ll be there!” said father Frecklecott to rouse his wife from her deep thoughts. They had walked along the forest road tirelessly for hours. “I can hardly wait!” cried Freckles, while mother Frecklecate only sighed, readjusting her big backpack.

“Hazel Hills end after that bend,” explained father Frecklecott. “Then the Marshland Mere will come into sight and Marshland Mead right after it!”

Freckles kept his eyes peeled to see the promised place as soon as possible.

“I can see it! Over there, the surface of the water is gleaming!” he suddenly skipped up pointing with his paw.

Somebody spotted them from the other side of the Marshland Mere and started waving. Three frogs leaped towards them: they were Puddlepitt the newspaper editor, FitzFrog the teacher and MacToad the farmer. Father Frecklecott had known them already.

“Welcome, the Frecklecotts! We’ve been on the lookout by the sluice all day to spot you coming!” the frogs greeted them, shaking paws with them merrily. The luggage was swiftly taken away from mother Frecklecate and little Freckles. Father Frecklecott initially intended to keep his backpack, but the sturdy MacToad only waved his paw in disagreement and snatched it from his shoulders.

The Frecklecotts were greeted beneath the sluice by the entire FitzFrog family: mother FitzFrieda embraced mother Frecklecate warmly, daughter Frieda handed her a huge bunch of

anemones and primroses, while son Fitz was eager to meet Freckles as soon as possible. Meanwhile somebody ran to inform Wadewick the mayor so that he could sound the mayor's rattle, used for announcing special events. Now all the Marshlanders in Marshland Mead knew that the new lockkeeper was coming. They were opening their windows and doors, while the most curious ones set out along the lane to meet the salamandrine.

In Dampmoss Downs the Frecklecotts were awaited by the aldermen of Marshland Mead: Rainwright the waterman, Moorlynn the alderwoman, Dampier the storekeeper, Drench the school janitor, as well as Glenda the mistress cook. They were all in their Sunday best, greeting the guests solemnly. Ivy wine and sorrel lemonade were prepared on the veranda in front of the general store in Bearded Birch, a tall tree overgrown with old man's beard. Sitting down gladly, the exhausted Frecklecotts refreshed themselves. They were joined by Wadewick the mayor and his wife Wadewynne, both festively attired. A sudden noise could be heard from the kitchen.

"The Marshladies are somewhat loud with their cooking today," smiled Dampier the salamander waggishly.

The door opened and a long table laden with delicacies came into sight. Now everybody became merry! The Marshlanders and newcomers greeted one another, toasting with ivy wine and helping themselves to food. Little Freckles and Fitz were sneaking among the plates so as not to miss any of the Marshland goodies.

"Well, son, what do you say of Marshland Mead?" asked father Frecklecott, patting Freckles on the back and glancing simultaneously at mother Frecklecate.

"Everything is great, but these duff is the best!" replied Freckles with his mouth full.

Everybody around him laughed, while father Frecklecott was relieved to see the face of mother Frecklecate clearing up as well.

"And that's not all!" said Glenda the salamandress. "The best is yet to come! – Rainwright, I think it's time you showed our guests their new home," she turned to the alderman. "They must be very tired and on top of that it's getting dark!"

"Certainly, certainly!" replied Rainwright the brown frog throwing his chest out and grabbing the large buttons on his double-breasted blue coat, as was his habitual posture.

Frecklecotts the salamanders thanked the Marshlanders for their warm reception and a scrumptious treat.

"If you need anything, my door in Beech Butt is always open!" Glenda the mistress cook reassured mother Frecklecate, shaking her paw once again.

Accompanied by a bunch of Marshlanders, Rainwright the waterman led the Frecklecotts further along the lane into Hawthorn Hurst. Mother Frecklecate was so tired that she could only numbly follow their hosts until they stopped in front of a mighty tree house. However, there she could not help but cry out with surprise. Father Frecklecott was delighted.

“Welcome home! This is Hawthorn Haven,” said Rainwright the alderman, pointing to the house sign proudly. Then he solemnly handed the key to Frecklecott the lock-keeper so that he could open the door.

“Whee!” screamed Freckles with joy and ran as the first into the house.

“Here is the kitchen and there the living room,” Wadewynna the mayor's wife showed them around the house. “The bathroom is at the back, the bedrooms upstairs and the room for Freckles in the attic!” She was equally proud that the new lock-keeper was so well received in their midst.

“The main furniture has arrived already,” added Puddlepitt the editor, “that is the wardrobes and beds. For everything else that is lacking you should contact Toadisham the wickerwork master at Waterside Willow!”

“Thank you so much for everything!” thanked father Frecklecott. “I think we're only a proper rest short of perfect happiness!”

Once again everybody shook paws with the Frecklecotts, taking their leave. Freckles was running from one room to another so enthusiastically that his parents were hard put to get him into his bed after a hasty froglick.

“Well, what do you think now?” asked father Frecklecott turning to mother Freckleate after they were left alone in their bedroom.

“I agree with Freckles,” smiled mother Freckleate waggishly, feeling the moss mattress, “with the only difference that I prefer our bedroom over duff!”

They both smiled merrily and, each from one side, climbed into the wide bed woven out of willow osiers. Holding paws as every evening, they fell asleep at once.

Third Chapter

The Marshland Gazette

For the whole week Rainwright the alderman had been introducing Frecklecott the new lock-keeper to all the peculiarities of the Marshland way of life. However, being himself an experienced weatherman, Frecklecott soon learned how to deal with the sluice on the Marshland Brook. Early on Friday morning he made sure that everything was right with water and the weather was reliable. Then he handed over the steering wheel of the sluice to Rainwright the frog, who always put on his blue coat with large buttons for work, while Frecklecott the salamander hurried home along the main street past Spruce Stub.

At Hawthorn Haven mother Freckleate waited for him, dressed in an especially pretty frock. She only had to take her bag into her paw to be ready. Father Frecklecott first exchanged his working gaiters for his Sunday ones. – It is customary for the Marshlanders to wear gaiters or spatterdash instead of shoes so that they always keep their feet firmly on the moist ground. – Then casting a look at himself in the mirror, he brushed his coat. Making sure that everything was at its place, he took his briefcase made of ivy leather and they set off out of the house. Father Frecklecott locked the door and put the key into his pocket.

It was a nice, grey day, so that the Frecklecotts trod cheerfully down the shady lane. They were heading towards Elm Estate on the other side of Hawthorn Hurst. That was the residence of Puddlepitt the frog, editor of the newspaper The Marshland Gazette.

Puddlepitt the newspaper editor leaped about during the week, collecting news and preparing his articles. On Fridays, however, he held a news meeting in the great hall of the editorial office in Elm Estate. All the inhabitants of Marshland Mead as well as its outskirts were invited to report on news, events, as well as developments or stories suitable for the newspaper. Puddlepitt the frog then edited the texts and printed The Marshland Gazette by Monday in the printing shop in the attic.

When Frecklecotts the salamanders entered the hall on the ground floor of Elm Estate, there were numerous Marshlanders as well as several outskirters gathered there. They had their green papers spread on the table and were talking animatedly. When the newcomers were spotted, they were greeted kindly. Glenda the mistress cook of Beech Butt waved to them and beckoned them to sit by her:

“Nice of you to come,” whispered Glenda the salamandress to mother Freckleate, “this is the quickest way for you to learn about our way of life!”

“Well, let us begin on page one,” said Puddlepitt the frog, initiating the meeting after an

introductory cough. "First and foremost: the conditions of the water and the weather in Marshland Mead. Frecklecott the lock-keeper of Hawthorn Haven will oblige us with his first report!"

"There is nothing out of the ordinary at the sluice," replied father Frecklecott. "Together with Rainwright the alderman of Bankside Beech, we've established that there is sufficient water in the Marshland Brook for the time being, yet there are hot and dry days on the horizon."

"Right," concluded Puddlepitt, "let's prepare our usual Water Report. – We move on: The Main News. – Has anything happened in the last few days?"

Everybody brooded deeply in their thoughts.

"I'm afraid almost nothing," uttered MacToad the farmer of Elder Earth after a long consideration, scratching his head.

"Well, postman," inquired Puddlepitt the editor, "do you know of any event?"

Trickle the postman from the family of fire-bellied toads was an open-minded toad, seeing and hearing everything on his rounds. On top of that, there was a lot to be learned at the post office in Juniper Jut.

"Humph, it seems that drought has already stricken here," replied Trickle the fire-bellied toad, stretching his legs in typical gaiters of postal yellow, by which he was commonly known. "Let me think a little!" Fixing his glance at the ceiling, he began enumerating:

"Froglyanne the innkeeper's wife slipped on a bar of soap in the laundry in Lime Lodge on Monday, Dampier the storekeeper received a new delivery of hay ropes for his store in Bearded

Birch on Wednesday, and Mudberta the newtess of Turf Tuft boiled over her soup today!"

"Nothing will come out of that for The Marshland Chronicles," announced Wadewick the salamander in dismay, while Mudbert the newt was visibly relieved that the burnt soup of his wife would bring no shame upon his family.

Wadewick the mayor never missed the news meetings since he wanted to be kept informed. Mudbert the newt accompanied him on his official rounds as the town clerk, keeping record of everything. The greatest news and events significant for their history were subsequently copied by Wadewick the salamander at Poshe Pine into the thick volume of The Marshland Chronicles that had been kept by mayors of Marshland Mead since time immemorial.

"Well, nothing will come out of that, to be sure," sighed Puddlepitt the editor shaking his head. "Has there been at least a teeny-weeny mishap of any sort?" he asked glancing at everybody there, hanging his paws by the thumbs from his waistcoat.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," replied Crosscroft the spider, who took care of all the injured animals in Aspen Aslant. When somebody had to stay there and recuperate in the infirmary, Puddlepitt the editor printed their name in big letters in the The Marshland Gazette so that friends could bring them presents and treats as soon as possible.

“Mossiter the boatwright struck his thumb with a hammer while repairing the pier in front of Hornbeam Hollow,” told Crosscroft the spider, beginning his report, “MacMire the paper maker stepped on a nettle thorn somewhere, yet he gumbols around briskly on all threes – as you can see!”

Everybody looked at MacMire the newt with his bandaged foot so that he smiled in consternation. Manufacturing coltsfoot paper in his paper mill in Quag Quarter, in the deepest part of Sedge Swamp, he was indispensable for the newspaper.

Crosscroft the spider continued:

“Toadisham's son Todd got cloyed with hazelnut cookies. He says he won't taste them again as long as he lives – which I seriously doubt,” he concluded, smiling waggishly.

“Do you have any other patients in Aspen Aslant?” persisted Puddlepitt the editor.

“None whatsoever,” replied Crosscroft the spider, shaking his head. “The last one left yesterday – joiner Strideshaw the centipede, who sprained seven of his ankles on the hillside of Birch Brow. – Anyhow, I'm thinking of greenwashing the infirmary!”

“That's the news!” leaped up Puddlepitt the editor, rubbing his paws in delight. “We shall summon all the Marshlanders to Aspen Aslant to lend you a paw!”

“Well then, it's fine by me: the more brushes the sooner we'll have it done,” concluded Crosscroft the spider, nodding in agreement.

“We move to page two of the newspaper: School News,” continued Puddlepitt the editor contentedly. “How are things at school?” he asked, addressing the teacher.

FitzFrog from the family of forest frogs harrumphed before speaking and readjusted his neckerchief:

“Nothing special there. With the school year coming to its close and dryspell approaching, we must consider when the holidays should begin. – However, I've brought the best school essays today as well as my article in natural science.”

“There's nothing historical in that, either,” established Wadewick the mayor, with disappointment again.

“But it'll do just fine for The Marshland Gazette,” broke in Puddlepitt the editor. “Does anybody have anything else? Under the rubric Tales, Happenings, Memoirs?” he tried to wheedle something out of them.

“I can remember quite well how often the tadpoles fooled around with my washing in Quag Quarter,” grumbled the usually cantankerous Toadbeth the toadess of Lime Lodge, readjusting her kerchief. Never missing an opportunity, she always complained about the Marshchildren.

“That's not for memoirs yet,” contradicted her Trickle the postman, “that's still happening!”

“There, there, the tadpoles will be scolded, but now let's get on,” interfered MacToad the farmer, scratching his head with his paw.

“How about Frecklecotts the salamanders write something about their arrival,” suggested FitzFrog the teacher, turning to the newcomers, “about their previous life in Black Tarn and how they found their bearings here, in Marshland Mead?”

“An excellent idea!” leaped up Puddlepitt the editor, who could make the best out of everything. “All three of you could write something so that we get different viewpoints!”

“All right, we’ll do it,” agreed Frecklecott the new lock-keeper, with his wife Frecklecate nodding in agreement.

“We move on,” resumed Puddlepitt the frog once again. “We’ve already come to Entertainment on page three. Has anyone brought any contributions?”

Several Marshlanders began fumbling with their papers on the table.

“I wrote something on lily-of-the-valleys for the Flowery Nook,” began Wadewynne the mayor’s wife, reaching into her bag made of water-lily leather.

“Well done!” praised Puddlepitt the editor. – “What about you, Glenda the cummer, you haven’t come empty-handed, have you?” he carried on.

“Very well,” replied the mistress cook of Beech Butt, snatching a sheet of paper from the wide pockets of her coat. “Today I’ve prepared ‘Marshland stew with hornbeam dumplings’ for the Recipes from Grandma’s Times.”

“Smashing!” exclaimed Puddlepitt the frog and couldn’t help smacking his lips.

“Mother MacTilda compiled a crossword puzzle,” added MacToad the farmer, spreading out a sheet of paper that he had kept in his jacket pocket.

“Equally smashing!” praised Puddlepitt the editor. “Anybody else?”

“I started building a new rocking chair,” said Toadisham the wickerwork master with considerable pride. He fell silent for a moment, waiting for everybody to pay proper attention:

“I’ve brought a sketch: there’s an opening for the tail in the back of the rocking chair that renders it equally suitable for the tailed Marshlanders,” explained Toadisham the fire-bellied toad, unfolding his paper eagerly. “I’m thinking of naming it rock-a-whisk since one can just whisk the tail through it!” Saying that, he tried to demonstrate how it was done, although being a fire-bellied toad, he had no tail at all. “Or did I think of whisk-a-rock?” he finally said absent-mindedly, stroking his forehead.

“Excellent!” broke in Puddlepitt the editor quickly, snatching the drawing before the inquisitive Marshladies could get hold of it. “This will make a great picture supplement for The Marshland Gazette! And, after all, I believe the new furniture acquisition can be listed among The Main News! – How about you, Herbinah the cummer?” he finally turned to the herbalist of Maple Mould, who sat at the opposite end of the table. “Don’t you have any new concoctions?”

“Well then,” replied Herbinah the toadess reluctantly, “I’ve brought a piece for the Cosmetic Tips: ‘How to take care of the yellow-spotted skin in dryspell so as to prevent its fading in the sun’.”

Rolling up the sleeves of her dress, she placed her huge haversack on the table. She began pulling

out various dry leaves, some herbal and some papery ones.

“This will be of particular interest to salamandrine ladies as well as newts and fire-bellied toads, but of somewhat less concern to us,” declared Puddlepitt the editor mischievously, himself

being from the family of tree frogs. Saying that, he meaningfully stretched his green arms and legs.

“If you, greenskin, get dried up by the dryspell sun, you will come running to me with your itch all the same!” admonished him Herbinah the toadess, somewhat offended. Rolling up a disobedient sleeve once again, she went on searching through her haversack.

“Not that one,” said MacToad the farmer in jest, “he can get under our skin well enough!” Everybody laughed, only Frecklecotts the salamanders didn't quite know why. Glenda the mistress cook leaned over to mother Frecklecate:

“In Marshlandish that means that he can annoy us,” she explained in a whisper, and now the Frecklecotts laughed as well, while Herbinah the toadess finally found her recipe.

“I'm afraid we've come to the end,” sighed Puddlepitt the editor, getting serious once again. “This issue of The Marshland Gazette will be rather meagre.”

“Never you mind, it'll be better next time,” concluded FitzFrog the teacher, waving his paw in dismissal.

Picking up their leaf papers and chatting merrily, the Marshlanders dispersed slowly.

Eighth Chapter

Celebration of Dryspell

The weather deteriorated from day to day, getting ever brighter and hotter. The moss on the outward edges of Marshland Mead withered visibly. The children attended school in Oaken Vault with an ever increasing restlessness. They could all reckon properly, write legibly, read clearly and swim excellently – to say nothing of their making bubbles in water. Not even Freckles, who had only recently arrived from Black Tarn, could be told apart from them. After all, the Highland and the Marshland schools were fairly similar.

On a warm evening, FitzFrog the teacher and other notables of Marshland Mead held an especially long meeting in Mayor Mansion on Spruce Stub. After a careful deliberation, it was established that dryspell was beginning, therefore a celebration had to be organized.

Nothing of any significance had ever occurred in Marshland Mead without a proper celebration. And the beginning of dryspell was no doubt a significant event heralding the onset of a way of life quite different from that in the safety of a damp spring. The news of celebration spread like rain through the wetlands, and festive preparations began in all the root houses and waterside dwellings.

After supper Frecklecott the lock-keeper headed off towards Bankside Beech at the edge of Hawthorn Hurst. Every evening the Marshlanders fetched water from the Cornel Current at the edge of Hawthorne Hurst. That was difficult work so that the Marshlanders gathered at Rainwright's were mostly men. They hoisted water from a timber gallery above the current with a pulley, while Rainwright the waterman took care that no accidents happened. This time they discussed all the details of the celebration by the water. Frecklecott the salamander played an important part in it as the lockkeeper of the Marshland Brook.

The celebration of dryspell began on Sunday morning in the square by the Spruce Stub. Mayor Mansion was festively decorated with plaits of grass and forget-me-nots, while all the Marshlanders were dressed in their Sunday best. Rainwright the waterman was in his blue double-breasted coat with large buttons. The celebration had always followed a traditional Marshland ritual that was connected with their greatest good – the water.

Children watched impatiently what was happening. Freckles was especially inquisitive, having never seen the celebration of dryspell before. In Black Tarn, at the shady end of the Greenwood Forest, dryspell was a damp enough season since the deep lake never dried up. Mac MacToad and Fitz FitzFrog described the celebration to him in general terms, yet they could not remember everything into detail from last year. Muddy Mudbert and Pitt Puddlepitt had likewise forgotten a good deal. On account of that, they all squeezed themselves through the spectators into the front row so as to see better.

First Rainwright the waterman, Wadewick the mayor and Frecklecott the lock-keeper took all three Marshland rattles into their paws, turning them simultaneously. They rattled thrice as loud as usually so that it resounded far over the edges of Marshland Mead. Standing sturdily, they were turning their rattles and the noise was ear-splitting.

“Why do they rattle so long?” asked Freckles in a whisper, turning to Mac who was the oldest among them.

“Rattling imitates the thundering that brings the rain,” explained Mac into his ear. “It’s an ancient Marshland custom to ensure sufficient water in the coming dryspell!”

Nevertheless, Freckles was relieved when the menacing rattling stopped.

Next Moorlynn the cummer cast a wreath of marsh flowers from the sluice into the water, while Wadewick the mayor rattled briefly with the mayor’s rattle. Everybody kept their breaths.

“Does that mean anything again?” Freckles wanted to know.

“An ancient custom again: may the Marshland Brook not go dry in the dryspell!” explained Mac as they went.

With rapt attention the Marshlanders followed how the wreath was carried downstream by the current, past Spruce Stub into the Cornel Current, with everybody waiting until it was washed down into the plain as far as Sedge Swamp. Then everybody applauded cheerfully.

“That’s always a good sign,” explained Fitz in a whisper.

Next the festive conclusion of the school year took place. The children were particularly delighted by the event, with Freckles, in this case, requiring no explanation for it.

The aldermen of Marshland Mead positioned themselves in a semi-circle in front of Mayor Mansion. FitzFrog the frog stepped into the middle to be followed by Drench the newt holding a stack of school reports. FitzFrog the teacher called the school children individually by their names, handing out their school reports. He shook paws solemnly with each of them, to be followed by the mayor and all the aldermen of Marshland Mead.

Freckles and his friends examined the solemn ivy documents with curiosity. The paper for them was made by MacMire the newt especially for the occasion. The school report contained a description of the school skills as well as a report of their achievement. The children congratulated one another, carrying the reports to their proud parents. This year all the children finished the class successfully, which meant they would all learn together at Oaken Vault in autumn.

After all the reports had been awarded, Drench the school janitor rattled with the school rattle once again.

“Hurray!” cheered the children leaping up with joy.

“Now the holidays have officially begun!” Muddy explained to Freckles.

When this was done, the second part of the celebration followed.

Led by Rainwright the frog, all the Marshlanders set out towards Sedge Swamp. At the

boathouse in Hornbeam Hollow Mossiter the salamander had manufactured something in secret for quite a while.

The aldermen and notables of Marshland Mead gathered in the shed of the boathouse, standing around a tilt made of coltsfoot that covered something large. Rainwright the frog motioned with his paw, Mossiter the salamander pulled at the cover with a strong tug – and a huge boat made of hewn boards was revealed. Exclamations of surprise were heard from all directions.

“Magnificent, Mossiter! – We've never had such a boat before! – And what of a boat – a veritable barge it is! – There's probably no equal to her in the entire Greenwood Forest!” praised the Marshlanders while the children pushed forward to catch a glimpse of the vessel.

Meanwhile Wadewick the mayor and his wife Wadewynne stepped to the barge. Wadewick tied a bottle of ivy wine to a beam by a long rope while Wadewynne took the bottle in her paw, saying solemnly:

“Dear Marshlanders! It's an honour for me on the occasion of the new dryspell to christen in the name of us all this splendid barge manufactured by our excellent Mossiter the boatwright of Hornbeam Hollow!”

Everybody applauded loudly.

“I solemnly name thee Marshbelle!” concluded Wadewynne, letting go of the bottle with a long swing. The bottle broke and the ivy wine ran down the side of the barge with a froth.

“Three cheers for Marshbelle: Hip-hip hurray!” the Marshlanders cheered and applauded, the children especially loud. Then the strongest men pushed the barge, launching it into water. Mossiter the salamander leaped quickly into it and steered the barge towards the pier, carefully tying it there.

Now everybody could have a proper look at the barge and Mossiter the boatman was soon persuaded by the children to take them on a trial run. They had never been driven so splendidly before! Mossiter was eventually assisted by other young Marshlanders since he soon got exhausted with the bargeload of so many passengers.

However, the delight over the new barge was interrupted by Frogley the innkeeper, who summoned them all to a festive luncheon at Moss Mound in Soakfeet Sward. In the garden of The Green Frog Inn long tables and benches had been set up from the previous evening. The tables were covered with leafy tablecloths and decorated with bunches of blooming weeds. Originating from an ancient family of green marsh frogs, the Frogleys always prepared choice dishes of the Marshland cuisine for the dryspell celebration. The menu read as follows:

Celebration of the Beginning of Dryspell

Menu

First Starter

Poached horse-tail in algae sauce

Second Starter

Dandelion-flower soufflé with mushrooms

Soup

Water-cress cream soup

Main Course

Filled marsh-rolls with birch-seed fries & mixed salad

Dessert

Large water-chestnut tart with dogwood berries

Beverages

Clear spring water, white ivy wine, red elder wine

Gathering quickly in the garden at Moss Mound, the Marshlanders sat down around the tables. Nobody had to be asked twice since everybody's mouth watered. They all tied the napkins around their necks, fidgeting restlessly on the benches.

Rainwright the waterman got up, knocking on his glass with a spoon. All the Marshlanders fell silent instantly. Harrumphing properly, he began speaking with an elevated voice:

“Right honourable aldermen and notables as well as other highly respectable fellow Marshlanders of Marshland Mead!”

“What does 'right' mean?” asked Freckles nudging Mac with his elbow.

“I suppose 'very',” replied Mac in a whisper. “It's an ancient Marshlandish word!”

Meanwhile Rainwright the frog continued, grabbing the buttons of his coat:

“As the waterman & alderman of Marshland Mead, it is my pleasant duty to raise my glass with you all for the dryspell celebration! The damp spring is coming to an end and an apprehensive & precipitous dryspell may lie ahead of us. May it be commendable & protracted,

yet devoid of excessive drought & storms so that the waters of our wetlands shall leave nothing to be desired! For that purpose, pray, let me invite you all most cordially to a toast with spring water! Our very good health! Cheers!”

Saying that Rainwright the frog raised his goblet, bowing slightly, and clinked glasses with Moorlynn the frogess.

“Cheers!” could be heard from everywhere.

Following his example, all the Marshlanders got up with goblets in their paws. They clinked glasses merrily with their neighbours to the left and to the right so that it jingled repeatedly. In doing so, it happened that somebody got sprinkled with the clear spring water. But little moisture has never harmed any descent Marshlander. Finally, they all drank a proper sip of water.

“And now, pray, let's eat!” concluded Rainwright the alderman, sitting down once again, next to Moorlynn the alderwoman.

Their example was followed by other Marshlanders, who began to feast on all the water goodies. They toasted repeatedly with spring water, talking animatedly.

The dryspell celebration was extended well into the afternoon, when they were surprised by a short, yet hefty downpour. Grabbing the dishes and cutlery and the tablecloths quickly, they carried them to Frogley into the large room of Moss Mound.

“Who knows whether it's a good omen that dryspell begins with a shower,” brooded Freckles, watching the raindrops bounce off the plates. “I suppose so!” he concluded with an armful of napkins, running after his friends under the eaves.

Twelfth Chapter

Cress Morass Disappears

After the hawthorn celebration, father Frecklecott woke up very early. He decided to make a proper round of Marshland Mead in the morning calm and coolness once again in order to inspect the conditions of the water. So far he usually went on water rounds with Rainwright the alderman, yet the waterman had travelled away to visit Moorley the mayor of Shady Sink for a few days. Thus father Frecklecott left home on his own, not starting his round at the sluice on the Marshland Brook, but heading off down the slope towards Marigold Mire once for a change.

“Good morning!” said Drench the school janitor, greeting him loudly. He was standing on the rush pier behind Oaken Vault with a box of tools by his side.

“Good morning!” returned Frecklecott the lock-keeper, roused from his thoughts. “What's up?”

“Nothing special, I'm merely scraping the fungi off the railings to prevent the mould setting in!” explained Drench the newt, showing how much he had already removed.

“It's wise to do that before they could spread out in the rain!” assented Frecklecott the salamander.

“Hmm, although I fear the drought will be so severe this year as to make even the fungi short of breath!” jested Drench the newt.

“That's why I set out on a thorough inspection of the water,” explained Frecklecott.

“May I join you?” asked Drench eagerly.

“Certainly! You'll help me with your experience!” invited him Frecklecott.

Drench the newt was pleased with the praise. Putting his tools quickly back into the box, he shook the dust off his paws. Then they set off together.

They walked slowly because Frecklecott kept prodding the mud with his long stick. Stabbing it into the bottom, he measured the depth of the water along the entire Marigold Mire. Drench halted with him each time, slanting his head and observing the waterside with an expert air. Thus they progressed very slowly indeed.

Frecklecott the lock-keeper seemed to discern from a considerable distance that things were not the way they should be in Cress Morass. The closer they got, the more his suspicions were confirmed. Falling silent, deeply in his thoughts, he wrinkled his brow into deep furrows.

“Upon stormy sludge – what's that?” cried out Drench the newt suddenly, leaping up in amazement. “Where is – Cress Morass?”

Cress Morass had disappeared, as it were! A huge muddy hollow gaped in front of them. The waterside was surrounded by bright rings of dried mud, indicating how far the water had only recently reached. Yet there was hardly any water left! A thick layer of silt and stranded algae

was all that was left there. The reeds around the embankment were sagging, while the cress, giving the Morass its name, was withering visibly.

They both stood there staring numbly for a while, but then Frecklecott cried out:

“Drench, look, there's somebody drowning in the mud!” pointing to the bottom of the dried up Cress Morass. “Make haste! We mustn't boggle about! It's a matter of life and death!”

Drench the newt bolted behind him. The ground was giving beneath their feet, with slime sloshing and chomping about, yet they struggled along. There were two water skaters there, Speedy and Knuckley, squirming in the dreggy slop at the bottom of the wallow. They were covered with mud so thickly that they could no longer get out.

Frecklecott the salamander stopped at the edge of the puddle with his paws wide apart, while Drench the newt grabbed him around his waist from behind like a live weight, and with combined effort they pulled the water striders from the ooze.

“Hang on with all your might so as not to slip away!” commanded Frecklecott taking Knuckley on his back, while Drench set Speedy on his back. Thus heavily loaded, they struggled gradually to the top of the slope, setting down the water striders cautiously into the cress.

“Both of you safe and sound?” inquired Frecklecott the lock-keeper briefly as soon as they could shake off some mud.

“Yes, we are! Thank you for your help, we'll manage from now on!” replied Speedy and Knuckley in unison, beginning to wipe themselves with soft cress leaves.

“What has happened to you?” asked Drench the newt, still panting.

“We're not quite sure,” reported Knuckley the water skater, wiping the black sludge from his face. “We were sleeping beneath a dandelion leaf at the edge of Cress Morass. Yet when we woke up, the water was gone!”

“Well then, if you are all right, we must press on!” declared Frecklecott the lock-keeper.

“We must press on!” echoed Drench the newt, putting on airs.

“We must get to the bottom of this,” muttered Frecklecott to himself after they had taken leave.

“Why, do you really mean it?” inquired Drench the newt cautiously when he saw the salamander descending back to the bottom of the wallow.

Yet there was no reply from Frecklecott the lock-keeper. He merely prodded the thick sludge with his stick, observing it with apprehension. “I don't like this at all,” he mumbled at last, furrowing his brow again.

“Drainable drought it is and it'll get worse still!” complained Drench the newt with discontent, having to wade through the chomping mud once again.

“I fear not,” replied Frecklecott the salamander silently.

“What – not!” Upon my wriggly tail, there's nothing but a rotten slush left!” cried Drench the newt in animation, pulling his tail forcefully with his paws from the ooze where it got stuck.

“True, the drought may still come,” agreed Frecklecott the salamander.

“Come, indeed! It's here already! Fiddlefrogs, if this isn't drought – then, then I'm a fish!” exclaimed Drench the newt all worked up.

To call any Marshlander a fish is considered a severe insult in the Greenwood Forest. Fish are numbscullid animals that can be fooled by any hook, therefore bearing no comparison to the Marshlanders.

However, Frecklecott the lock-keeper was still shaking his head:

“Look, there's plenty of water all around and it's only here that it's gone!” he exclaimed when they climbed back to the bank. “And yet all the waterholes are interconnected!”

Now Drench the newt grasped it too, looking around all aghast:

“Somebody has stolen Cress Morass!” he blurted out, but there was no reply from Frecklecott.

They both shook the sludge from their feet and began exploring the waterside minutely. Looking thus around, their eyes stopped on a huge hollow in the middle of the reed bed.

“Pelting pitch and a hail of cones!” exclaimed Drench the newt with his paws akimbo. “What's that?”

They encircled the dent, observing it cautiously.

“Whatever could've fallen here from the sky?” wondered Drench the newt, looking up at the clouds. “It wasn't a cone ... So round and flat ...”

“I'm afraid that nothing fell down,” murmured Frecklecott. “We must search the area meticulously!” And he began pushing the reeds asunder cautiously.

Drench the janitor followed his example, heading off in the other direction.

“Thunderbolt swamp and seventeen storms – and – there's another hole here!” cried out Drench soon, scared stiff.

Frecklecott the salamander came running after him.

“Drench,” spoke Frecklecott the lock-keeper after a long moment, “this is not a hole, but a – TRACE!” and turning slowly, he looked his friend the newt directly in the eyes.

“T-T-T-race – like – a – f-f-f-o-t-step ...” muttered Drench the newt.

Frecklecott the lock-keeper nodded in agreement, horrified himself.

“Thus there was SOMETHING here ...” began Drench fearfully.

“Not something – SOMEBODY – was here – DRINKING,” said Frecklecott the salamander, finishing his thought.

“Whaaat – DRINKING – indeed, upon my webbed fingers! The entire Cress Morass? – Whoever could be THAAAT thirsty?” squeaked Drench the newt.

“It was certainly no draught!” replied Frecklecott looking at him with his forehead lowered.

“M-M-M-OOO-N-N-N-S-S-S-T-T-T-EEE-R-R-R ...” stuttered Drench. He was so frightened that he could not come up with any newtish swearwords any more. His knees all wobbly, he collapsed into the withered cress.

Meanwhile Frecklecott managed to pull himself together a little. After all, he was the lockkeeper of the Marshland Brook. He looked around carefully:

“Hush!” he waved his paws in order to silence his friend the newt who could not utter a word out of fear anyway.

“Hurry up and fetch Rainwright the alderman from Bankside Beech to inspect this! – No, no, Rainwright is not at home!” realized Frecklecott the lock-keeper slapping his forehead. “Fetch Fitz-Frog instead from Oaken Vault, he is an expert on foreign animals, and also MacToad and Puddle-pitt and Wadewick, of course! But, mind you, silently, or you’ll give them the creeps! Let them come here as quickly as possible! I’ll investigate the thing in the meantime! And not a word to anybody else! Our heads are at stake!” commanded Frecklecott in excitement.

Drench the newt instantly felt his head with his fingers so as to check that he still got it at its place. Nodding numbly, he then ran off as fast as he could with his muddy feet.

Thirteenth Chapter

A Muddy Wake-up Call

Drench the newt was utterly out of breath when he reached Marigold Mire. He stopped in front of FitzFrog's house in Oaken Vault, panting heftily.

FitzFrieda the teacher's wife was sitting in the kitchen above the classroom. Drinking her first morning coffee in peace, she heard blunt bangs on the door.

"What's the matter?" she asked in astonishment, opening the door and spotting Drench the janitor, caked in mud all over, on the threshold.

"Where is he?" gasped Drench the newt in such alarm that FitzFrieda the frogess merely pointed towards the bedroom.

Drench leaped over the stairs, with a thick track of mud trailing behind him. As soon as he opened the bedroom door, he cried out:

"FitzFrog, FitzFrog! Hurry up, Cress Morass has disappeared!"

The sleeping teacher rolled over beneath his moss quilt, grunting discontentedly.

But Drench did not desist: he began shaking FitzFrog firmly with his paws, bespattering the bedclothes with a muddy pattern.

"What is it? – Who's there? – Drench? – Whatever's happened? – What are you saying?" uttered FitzFrog, waking up slowly and opening his eyes.

"Frecklecott is looking for it, come quickly!" panted Drench the newt, catching his breath.

"What is he looking for?" asked FitzFrog the frog, rubbing his eyes and yawning widely.

"Cress Morass!" retorted Drench the newt decisively.

"Doesn't he know by now where anything is in Marshland Mead?!" grumbled FitzFrog peevishly.

"No, you don't understand! Somebody has **STOLEN** Cress Morass!" explained Drench the newt.

"What are you saying? – Drench! – Stolen?! – Morass?! – Tell me, how much hawthorn cider have you drunk last night?" inquired FitzFrog looking at him askance.

"May I be a fish if I had drunk!" cried Drench the newt, stamping his feet in anger. "But **SOMEBODY** has **DRUNK** Cress Morass, and that's a fact!"

"What are you babbling, you miserable newt? Who? **DRUNK**? Cress Morass?" wondered FitzFrog the teacher in excitement, sitting up on the edge of the bed.

Meanwhile FitzFrieda reached the bedroom, too.

"**A MONSTER!**" uttered Drench the newt, with effort.

"Where?" croaked both the FitzFrogs in unison.

“In Cress Morass!” squealed Drench in dismay.

“But you’ve just said it’s gone!” rumbled FitzFrog rubbing his eyes once again.

“Of course it’s gone – because it has DRUNK it!” cried Drench, stamping his feet again in consternation.

Now FitzFrog stared at Drench with his eyes wide open in horror, while FitzFrieda was utterly at a loss, looking from one to the other.

“It has just guzzled it up!” repeated Drench the newt, shrugging his shoulders with a dampened spirit.

“Who? – How on earth?” uttered FitzFrog, trying hard to think.

“With a single gulp – and – and – it has SUUUCH legs like – like your bed!” cried out Drench the newt, indicating the size with his arms spread out as far as he could.

A horrified croak escaped FitzFrieda.

“It’s all a terrible secret, Frecklecott warned me, and – and not a word to anyone!” admonished Drench the newt with a raised finger.

FitzFrieda merely nodded in agreement, covering her muzzle with her paws.

“Let’s go!” commanded FitzFrog after a brief silence, “but hush so as not to wake up the children!” And he bolted downstairs with Drench hard upon his heels.

“I’ll fetch the others meanwhile, as Frecklecott ordered!” cried out Drench the newt when they reached the yard.

However, FitzFrog the frog did not hear him any more. With long leaps he sped up along the lane toward Cress Morass – or what was left of it.

Drench the newt stood in the yard, waving his arms helplessly at the departing frog. He was still panting – partly with exhaustion and partly with fear:

“Thunderstroke swamp and seventy-five storms! Nobody seems to believe me!” he flew off the handle, shaking his spotted tail. “And I’m now to repeat this bothersome persuading three more times: at Puddlepitt’s, at Wadewick’s and at MacToad’s!” he enumerated them aloud, bending a finger for each of them. “And everybody’s convinced that I have drunk! I’ll show them gaping and guzzling – they’ll be sorry for it!”

During his tantrum Drench the newt realized how dirty he was since the ooze on him began to dry into a crust that encased him uncomfortably. Diving quickly into the water from the pier, he rubbed himself thoroughly against the water grass. Appeased by the cool bath, he clambered back to the bank with fresh force and ran off towards Sedge Swamp.

In Elder Earth, Drench was more clever with his wake-up call. First waking up MacToad the farmer quietly, he only then explained the cause of alarm briefly. Nevertheless, MacToad got no less excited than FitzFrog the teacher. Almost speechless, he bolted towards Cress Morass, leaving Drench to fend for himself with the unpleasant wake-up call at Puddlepitt’s and at Wadewick’s.

Thus the newt had no other choice but to go to Elm Estate and to Poshe Pine. And no matter how hard he tried to relate the cause of his arrival calmly – there was no Marshman who was not seized by horror upon hearing the news.

When MacToad, Puddlepitt, Wadewick and Drench finally joined Frecklecott and FitzFrog by the dried up Cress Morass, all panting, they first cast a worried glance at one another.

“What’s going on here?” inquired Wadewick the salamander, attempting to put on at least some of his mayorly distinction.

“The MATTER is very serious,” began Frecklecott the lock-keeper slowly, trying to remain calm. Cautiously looking around so that they could not be overheard or overseen, he informed them:

“The coast is clear,” he declared conspiratorially, “FitzFrog, you may begin!”

“I believe that a VERY large animal came to Marshland Mead to drink,” explained FitzFrog the teacher as soberly and as tersely as he could.

“How can you know that?” objected Wadewick the mayor in disbelief.

“By the tracks!” clarified Frecklecott. “This dent in the ground is not an ordinary hollow, but a FOOTPRINT!”

Everybody looked at the indentation in the muddy ground with horror. Always inquisitive Puddlepitt the editor cautiously bent over, measuring his foot in the footprint.

“How large can such an animal be?” asked Wadewick hardly audibly.

“Very large! ONE leg was placed here and the OTHER on the opposite bank of Cress Morass!” indicated Frecklecott.

“Froglocks, what a two-legged thingumabob could that be?” mumbled MacToad the toad, scratching his head with his paw.

Ignoring him deliberately, Frecklecott the lock-keeper continued as calmly as he could:

“While the TWO hind legs were there, outside the external edge of Marshland Mead!” he pointed towards the bushes with his paw.

“For mercy’s moisture!” squealed Drench the newt.

“Well – well then,” began Puddlepitt the editor falteringly, “the MATTER is so large that it’s entirely TOO LARGE for The Marshland Gazette!” and he could hardly finish his thought.

“But it’s most certainly suitable for The Marshland Chronicles!” interposed Wadewick the mayor, intending to demonstrate some determination.

“No doubt about it!” confirmed MacToad the farmer, forgetting to scratch his head.

“Therefore I believe that in view of all the circumstances, it would be best not to discuss the MATTER here,” declared Wadewick with self-assurance. “As mayor I must take everything into consideration!”

“The mayor is right!” declared FitzFrog the teacher.

“Since Rainwright the alderman is not here, I suggest we set off to my place in Poshe Pine immediately!” continued Wadewick the mayor. “We can discuss the MATTER there undisturbed

and grab a bite on top of that! – Excitement always makes me hungry!”

Everybody agreed at once. On their way to the mayor's, they all had a quick bath in Sedge Swamp, then heading off with long leaps towards Dampmoss Downs as calmly as they could so as not to arouse any suspicion among the Marshlanders. It was high time, however, if they intended to keep the terrible secret to themselves, since Marshland Mead was waking up into one of its usual days.
