

“Molan? Are you there?”

Molan the mole sighed. The voice outside his tunnel belonged to his friend Hodgepodge, the hedgehog. Hodgepodge had a habit of visiting Molan in the mornings, just when the mole was enjoying a little sleep.

“What is it Hodgepodge? I’m having a snooze.”

“No time for that, Molan! Marigold Mouse has gone missing!”

“Missing? Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure! I just went to visit her, and she wasn’t there. You’ve got to help me solve the mystery!”

Hodgepodge loved mysteries! Molan emerged reluctantly from his tunnel. It was a chilly, foggy morning, and the mole shivered.

“Right, Molan. Let’s begin our investigation at Marigold’s house.”

Molan followed the eager hedgehog through the grey mist. As usual, Hodgepodge had his ‘detective bag’ with him - an old leather purse lost by a human, which he had slung across his shoulders with a piece of string. It was filled with odds and ends, which the hedgehog said could be useful in solving crimes.

“What makes you think Marigold’s gone missing, Hodgepodge?”

“Because she’s *a/ways* there in the mornings. Sometimes, when you’re too selfish to wake up, I call on Marigold.”

Molan was surprised. He had thought Hodgepodge always kept shouting until he woke up. In future, it might be a good idea to keep pretending to be asleep until he went away.

“We’ll just stop for a minute by this old tree trunk, Molan. There are always lots of beetles here.”

Molan waited while the hedgehog rooted about and ate as many beetles as he could find. Even when solving a mystery, Hodgepodge could always fit in time for eating.

“Ahh... that’s better!” said the hedgehog, licking his lips.

They carried on through the wood until they came to the grassy bank where Marigold lived. A number of mice had their homes there.

“We’ll make some door-to-door enquiries, Molan,” said Hodgepodge. “Someone might have seen something suspicious.”

The first mouse they called on was very timid, and wouldn’t come to the door. He called out in a tiny voice from behind it.

“How do I know you’re a hedgehog and a mole?” he said. “You might be two cats from the farm, for all I know!”

“Don’t be stupid!” said Hodgepodge angrily. “Don’t I *sound* like a hedgehog?”

There was a pause. Then the voice came again from inside the mouse hole.

“You sound like a cat *pretending* to be a hedgehog.”

Hodgepodge snorted impatiently. “Oh, this is ridiculous! Come on Molan, let’s try somewhere else.”

At the next mouse hole they found someone who was a friend of Marigold, a very old lady mouse who came to her door and cleaned her whiskers while she talked... and talked... and talked.

“Oh...you’ll be that hedgehog friend that Marigold has told me about! Mr Hedgepidge, isn’t it? So pleased to meet you! And your mole friend? How delightful! I’ve heard so much. Deary me! What a foggy day it is! Marigold? Well, bless me, I haven’t seen her since yesterday. Perhaps she’s got lost in the fog? Oh dear. I do hope she’s all right. Will you stop for a cup of something?”

“No thank you” said Hodgepodge firmly. “We’ve got to get along. So you think she might have got lost?”

“Yes. Or else...”

The old lady mouse looked up.

“Or else what?” Hodgepodge asked.

“Well - there’s the owl of course. The owl is always watching. The owl could have been hungry and taken Marigold to eat!”

“Hmm. Thank you for your help,” said Hodgepodge

As they moved away from the grassy bank where the mice lived, Molan said, “Olive Owl only goes hunting in *other* woods, doesn’t she?”

“So she says,” replied Hodgepodge, thoughtfully.

“She always says *Don’t eat your neighbours and they won’t eat you,*” said the mole.

“Let’s call on her, and ask her some questions. If she’s hiding anything, I’ll soon know.”

Olive Owl was on her usual branch of the big chestnut tree in the middle of the wood. The fog was so thick up there that Molan and Hodgepodge could only see her big yellow eyes staring down, like lamps.

“Hello Olive!” Hodgepodge called.

“Hodgepodge my man? Molan, that you, my mole?”

Olive Owl was an American owl that had escaped from a zoo, and she had an unusual way of talking.

“You out crime-busting?” she went on, flapping down onto a lower branch.

“We’re investigating a missing animal,” said Hodgepodge.

“Okay. What kind of missing animal we talking here?”

“A small animal,” said Hodgepodge, mysteriously.

“*A small animal is worth its weight in gold,* I always say,” said Olive Owl, “are we talkin’ *frog?*”

“No,” Hodgepodge replied.

“We talkin’ *toad?*”

“No.”

“Oh, I sure love a riddle!” Olive said, hopping up and down on her branch excitedly. “Gimme a clue, my man! What kinda small critter we got missing?”

“The sort that owls sometimes like to eat,” said Hodgepodge, watching Olive for her reaction. Her big yellow eyes blinked innocently.

“You don’t say!” she exclaimed. “You think there’s maybe a strange owl been in the wood, pickin’ off our little critters?”

“Not as far as we know,” replied Hodgepodge.

“Do I surmise it’s maybe a *mouse* that’s gone missing, Hodgepodge?”

“Yes, Olive. A mouse.”

The detective poked at the litter of small bones that was always to be found under Olive Owl’s tree.

“There are lots of mouse bones *here*, Olive,” he said.

“Hodgepodge!” said Olive Owl, sounding quite shocked. “You don’t think I would eat a mouse from our own wood? *Don’t go eating your neighbours...*”

“... *or you won’t have no neighbours to eat,*” said Hodgepodge, completing Olive’s sentence. He knew all her wise sayings.

“You said it, brother!” said Olive Owl. “There’s a heap of strange mice in *other* woods for me to eat. Which mouse has gone missing?”

“Marigold Mouse,” said Molan.

“Oh, yeah,” said Olive Owl. “I guess I know her. She’s a plump, tasty lookin’ mouse that lives on the grassy bank, right?”

“Yes,” said Hodgepodge. “But why do you say ‘*tasty*?’”

The big yellow eyes blinked innocently again.

“Oh, I can’t help it Hodgepodge! When I see a plump mouse, I just can’t help thinking of that *sweeeeet* taste! But I do solemnly swear I have not eaten Marigold.”

“Well, we’ll be on our way then, Olive. Let us know if you see anything suspicious.”

“Sure can, law man!” said Olive Owl. “I’ll be on the look-out.”

The detective and his assistant made their way off towards another part of the wood. It was a place where a lot of worms could be found. Hodgepodge said that they might as well have a bite to eat while they continued their investigation.

The fog grew thicker and thicker. It was hard to see where they were going. Hodgepodge however was in a hurry. It was at least twenty minutes since he’d had his snack of beetles. Molan, going as fast as he could go, was following Hodgepodge by sound alone. He could hear the hedgehog’s little legs scurrying along, and occasionally a voice would float back to him saying “Come on, Molan!”

It was a surprise then, when Molan heard a splash up ahead, and an angry spluttering noise.

*“What!? Bother! Ugh!”*

Molan came through the fog to find Hodgepodge backing out of the edge of a pond. The hedgehog looked cross.

“Molan! You knew this pond was here. Why didn’t you remind me?”

“I thought you knew the pond was here too, Hodgepodge,” said Molan.

“I did. But you could have reminded me. Hello... just a minute...”

Hodgepodge looked hard at the ground. Then, excitedly, he took his detective bag from his shoulders and fished around inside it, muttering to himself.

“What is it, Hodgepodge?” said the mole, mystified.

“Just wait a moment... ah, here it is!”

The hedgehog pulled out a smooth, curved bit of glass from the bag, which he held close to his eye. It was the lens from an old pair of human spectacles. He peered at Molan through the lens, which magnified his eye and made him look like a one-eyed monster to the startled mole. Then he bent close to the ground, examining it eagerly through the glass.

“Look at these footprints in the mud here, Molan!”

Molan looked. The mud on the edge of the pond was full of little holes and marks. They might have been footprints. Or they might have just been little holes and marks.

“These are a mouse’s footprints!” Hodgepodge announced confidently.

“Are they?” said Molan, doubtfully.

“Of course they are. What has happened here is that Marigold Mouse, hurrying through the wood in the fog, must have plunged into the water. Molan, she may have drowned right here in this pond!”

“But...”

“We’ll get the frogs to dive down and search for her.”

“But...”

“*Hello! Hello!*” called Hodgepodge. “*Fosbury? Flop? Are you here? Hello?*”

“But field mice can swim, Hodgepodge,” said Molan.

Hodgepodge looked at Molan sternly. Once he had a theory, he preferred Molan not to question it.

“Not *all* field mice, Molan. Some can’t. *Fosbury! Flop!*”

There was the sound of engines roaring towards them. Then two frogs on jet skis burst out of the fog and skidded to a halt in the mud beside the detective and his assistant. Molan jumped back, but Hodgepodge was sprayed with muddy water.

“Hey! What’s cooking?” said one of the frogs, raising his goggles onto his forehead. “Hodgepodge! Molan! Have you come to try some water sports?”

“We’ve got a new water slide set up at the other end,” the other frog said enthusiastically. “Badger nearly tried it out yesterday, but she changed her mind. You could be the first customers!”

“I’m afraid we’re here on more serious business,” Hodgepodge said, shaking off water. “Have you heard any splashing noises in the pond recently?”

“There are always splashing noises. *We* make splashing noises!” Fosbury said.

“Unless there’s crows about,” Flop remarked. “*Then* we stay very quiet.”

“No, no, no!” said Hodgepodge, getting impatient. “I mean splashing noises made by someone else. An animal in distress. A mouse, perhaps, in the pond?”

The frogs looked at each other with puzzled expressions.

“We haven’t had any mice swimming in the pond since they had their swimming gala here in the summer.”

Hodgepodge explained all about Marigold Mouse’s disappearance, and how she might have run into the pond by accident. Then he asked if the frogs would dive to the bottom of the pond to see if Marigold was lying down there.

“Well, all right then,” they agreed, although they looked doubtful.

Whatever they privately thought of the great detective’s idea, the frogs began to dive, as he had asked them. Actually, they enjoyed diving anyway. Hodgepodge stood on the edge, writing important notes in his notebook and shouting directions.

Eventually, both frogs swam to the edge of the pond.

“Well?” said Hodgepodge.

“Nothing in my section,” said Flop.

“Nor in mine,” said Fosbury. “Except for the old bicycle that’s been there ever since I was a tadpole.”

“No mouse belongings of any kind?” Hodgepodge said. Molan thought he almost seemed disappointed.

“No.”

“Well, that’s very strange,” said Hodgepodge, scratching his nose. “Never mind. Thank you for your help.”

“Let us know if you find Marigold safe and sound,” said Fosbury.

“We will.”

“And come back to try the water slide!” added Flop. “First user gets a free ride!”

“Thank you, we’ll consider it,” said Hodgepodge with a shudder.

The detective and his assistant made their way past the pond to where the tasty worms were. Hodgepodge said the case was making him very tired, and he needed quite a big snack.

While he was chomping on a particularly long worm he suddenly stopped.

“Molan!” he said. “This long worm has given me an idea!”

“Oh?” said Molan. He had been daydreaming about how nice it would be to go back to his own little tunnel and go to sleep.

“Yes. I wonder if a *snake* could have come into the wood. Snakes eat mice.”

“Well,” said Molan, “there’s never been a snake in the wood before, as far as I know.”

“Ah, but you *wouldn’t* know. Snakes are sneaky characters. They might be coming and going about the wood all the time, without us seeing them. Let’s go back to Marigold’s home and look for signs of a snake.”

They made their way back towards the grassy bank. The mist made the familiar wood mysterious and grey, with trees and bushes looming up suddenly like ghosts. Molan didn't think Hodgepodge's idea of the snake was any more likely than his other ideas. But still, it was a bit creepy, thinking that there *could* be a snake up ahead somewhere, lurking in the fog. Did snakes eat moles, Molan wondered.

In front, Hodgepodge came to a sudden halt, and Molan crashed into the back of him.

"Ow! That pricked my nose!" he complained.

"Ssh! Be quiet Molan! Up ahead - look! The snake!"

"Where?" Molan whispered.

"Near the trunk of that tree. It's lying very still. We'll creep up on it."

"Creep up on it?" Molan whispered shakily. "Don't you mean creep *away* from it?"

"Of course not. This is very likely to be the snake that has eaten Marigold. We must arrest it."

It was all very well for Hodgepodge, Molan thought. He was protected by a coat of prickly spines.

"Come on! Follow me!" ordered the hedgehog.

Molan kept as far back from Hodgepodge as he could. The bold hedgehog crept along slowly and silently. Then, up ahead, Molan saw the

twisted shape of the snake. It was lying completely still. At that moment, Hodgepodge launched himself forward with a warlike cry.

*“Ah-ha! Got you!”* he shouted, and jumped right on top of the snake. It reared up and tipped Hodgepodge onto his back. Hodgepodge rolled into a defensive ball straight away. The snake fell back to the ground and broke in two with a ‘crack!’ Molan saw that it wasn’t a snake at all. It was just a twisted piece of rotten wood!

The mole hurried up to Hodgepodge.

“It’s all right...” he started to say.

*“Run away Molan!”* came the hedgehog’s voice from inside the prickly ball.

“It’s too strong for me!”

“No, it’s just a...”

*“Run!”* hissed Hodgepodge.

“Hodgepodge - it’s just a branch!”

“What?”

“It’s just a branch that looked a bit like a snake. It’s broken now.”

Hodgepodge uncurled himself slowly. He looked at the broken branch.

“Hmm,” was all that he said. He looked embarrassed.

“Come on,” said Molan kindly. He didn’t want to make Hodgepodge feel any more foolish than he looked. “Let’s carry on to the grassy bank. We’re nearly there.”

As they approached the grassy bank, they could hear the sound of little voices chattering. Lots of little voices. Mouse voices.

“I wonder what’s happening?” said Molan.

Outside Marigold’s house there were about a dozen mice. The ground was spread with bits of barley and corn, and everyone was busy chomping away and chattering. It was quite a party. And, sitting in the middle of it all, gnawing a grain of barley, was Marigold!

“Hi Hodgepodge! Hi Molan!” she said, smiling. “Look! I went to visit my cousins at the farm, and they’ve all come back with me for a picnic!”

“How nice,” said Hodgepodge quietly.

“Come and join us!”

Molan started to sit down, but Hodgepodge stopped him.

“That’s kind of you Marigold, but I’m afraid we’re on duty. Come on Molan, there are other mysteries to be solved.”

“Are there?” said Molan, in a regretful tone.

“Oh yes, Molan. There are *always* mysteries.”