

The full moon shone silvery beams through the trees of the wood. Molan the mole bustled in and out of the moon shadows, seeking out juicy worms and crunchy beetles to eat. It was a warm spring night, and food was everywhere. Life was good! Molan felt so happy that he made up a little dance on the spot.

Suddenly, a dazzling light shone full in his face. The mole froze in fright.

“Molan! What on earth are you doing?” said a familiar voice.

It sounded like Hodgepodge the hedgehog.

“Hodgepodge! Is that you?”

“Of course it’s me.”

“Could you turn the light off?”

Hodgepodge switched off the torch and put it back into his detective bag. He could see perfectly well without it, especially on a bright moonlit night. But it was the sort of thing a professional detective like himself should be seen with.

“Why are *you* out tonight, Hodgepodge?” the mole asked. Unlike most hedgehogs, Hodgepodge was usually most active in daylight hours.

“Because there’s a mystery!” Hodgepodge replied in an important voice. “Marigold Mouse just came to tell me about it. You’re going to have to help me, Molan.”

Molan looked longingly at a pile of leaves. There were bound to be lots of tasty insects under there.

“Are you coming then, Molan?” Hodgepodge said impatiently, “When there’s a mystery to be solved, it’s important not to waste time!”

Molan gave up any idea of continuing his meal, and the two animals made their way through the wood.

“Are we going very far, Hodgepodge?” said the mole.

“Wait until you’ve heard the whole story, Molan. Then you’ll see where we’re going. By the way, you’re not afraid of water, are you?”

Molan shook his head. He could swim strongly when it was necessary. But, on the other hand, he wasn’t especially fond of water. He hoped Hodgepodge’s plans didn’t involve getting wet.

Their first stop was the grassy bank where most of the wood’s mice lived. Hodgepodge knocked at a small round door, and Marigold Mouse called out from inside.

“Is that you, detective?”

“Yes, it’s me,” said Hodgepodge.

The mouse opened her door timidly and peeped out at the two animals.

“Marigold, please tell Molan what you told me,” said Hodgepodge.

Marigold looked anxiously into the trees, and then spoke in a whisper.

“Well Molan – I hope you won’t think I’ve gone crazy, but I’ve seen a ghost in the wood!”

“A ghost!” Molan gasped. A little shiver ran all the way up his spine, like a centipede with icy feet.

“Yes, a white ghost! I saw it just an hour ago. It floated into the tunnel by Buttercup Hill.”

“What, the tunnel that the canal goes through?” said Molan.

“Yes. So I ran straight away to tell Hodgepodge. I knew he’d get to the bottom of this. I don’t feel safe to come out of my house, with a ghost wandering about the wood!”

She shuddered, and leaned forward.

“And, Molan, do you know what was the most frightening thing of all?”

Molan shook his head and glanced nervously at the shadowy trees around them. He thought perhaps he’d rather not know.

“Well – it made a hissing noise. A horrible scary hissing, like a snake!”

The little mouse opened her eyes wide, to convey the full horror of the sound.

“Well, thanks for letting us know about this, Marigold,” said Hodgepodge. “Molan and I will go to the tunnel to investigate.”

Marigold nodded and shut her door. Molan could hear several locks and bolts being shut. He wished he was on the other side of that door too.

Trembling, he accompanied the bold detective to the edge of the wood, where the canal flowed by. On its far bank, in the daytime, cows wandered about on the grassy slopes of Buttercup Hill. But at night, it was a quiet, eerie place.

Molan looked at the scene fearfully.

“Hodgepodge...” he said.

“Yes?”

“Is this really detective work? I mean, shouldn’t ghosts just be left alone?”

The hedgehog snorted. “*Ghosts!* Molan, there are no such things as ghosts! Some mysterious intruder has come into the wood, and Marigold has *mistaken* it for a ghost. I thought you would have seen that straight away.”

Molan fell quiet for a moment. He wished he was as confident as Hodgepodge that ghosts didn’t exist.

The hedgehog detective led the way along the bank of the canal to where it flowed out of the stone tunnel. The moonlit water looked like rippling, swirling silver. But the mouth of the tunnel gaped like the open jaws of a monster, black and mysterious. Hodgepodge swung his ‘detective bag’ – a human purse on a length of string – off his shoulders and took out his torch again. He shone the beam of light into the tunnel. They could see nothing but dark water and the slimy stones of the side walls. The water slapped against the stones, filling the tunnel with sinister echoes.

“Well, there’s no way we can get into the tunnel!” said Molan, trying not to sound pleased.

“Rubbish! With a little ingenuity we’ll soon be in there. Help me to drag this fallen tree branch down to the water.”

“What... why...?” the mole stuttered.

“Look at it Molan - a nice, wide branch! That’ll make a perfect raft for us to paddle into the tunnel!”

Hodgepodge gave instructions while Molan pushed and pulled the tree branch to the water’s edge.

“There! A little to your left! That’s it Molan!”

The anxious mole tried desperately to think of an alternative plan that would distract Hodgepodge.

“Why don’t we try shouting into the tunnel, Hodgepodge?” he suggested. “If there’s a ghost – sorry, I mean if there’s *someone* – hiding in there, then they might answer.”

“Or they might not!” Hodgepodge snorted. “Molan, this could be some criminal animal on the run. They’re not going to call out, and give themselves away. No, we must go into the tunnel to see for ourselves!”

The tree branch floated rather low in the water.

“All aboard now, Molan,” Hodgepodge said. “You first!”

The mole reluctantly scrambled onto the branch. It wobbled. Then Hodgepodge jumped on himself, rather clumsily. The branch rolled violently in the water.

“Whoah!” Molan gasped. “Careful, Hodgepodge!”

“Don’t make such a fuss!” said Hodgepodge, hanging on hard to a bit of the branch. “Now – let’s steer our boat into the tunnel.”

They paddled in the water with their paws until they were inside the tunnel mouth. Soon they were completely surrounded by darkness.

“It... it... it’s *cold* in here, Hodgepodge!” the mole said, shivering. “That can be a sign of ghosts, can’t it? Don’t they make places go cold?”

“Molan, we are *not* dealing with a ghost! I’ve told you that already! I’m going to take out my torch again.”

There was the sound of Hodgepodge fumbling in his bag, then a 'click'. Up ahead, a little rocky ledge was illuminated by the beam of light. Suddenly, something big and white flapped up into the air and hurtled towards them with a terrifying hissing noise!

Molan stared at the white shape. Surely - it was a goose? But then the light went out as Hodgepodge dropped his torch and lurched sideways.

"The ghost! Help!" yelled the Hedgehog in a terrified voice.

The branch tipped over to one side. Molan held on tight, and heard a gasp of dismay, then a loud splash. He called out.

"Hodgepodge! Have you fallen in?"

There was the sound of more splashing, and some spluttering, then a panicky voice replied.

"Molan! I've fallen in! I'm going to swim for my life!"

"Hodgepodge..." Molan said.

"There are dark forces at work, Molan! Save yourself!"

"Hodgepodge, I think it's a ..."

But already the hedgehog's voice was receding, as he swam furiously towards the tunnel entrance.

*"Swim for your life, Molan!"*

As the hedgehog's splashing faded into the distance behind him, Molan called out into the darkness in front.

"Hello? Is there anyone there?"

After a pause, another voice answered.

"Yes. *I'm* here."

“Ah – hello there. Are you a goose?”

“Yes. Are you a mole?”

“Yes.”

“What about the spiny fellow that dived into the water?”

“That’s Hodgepodge, he’s a detective. Why are you hiding in this tunnel, Goose? You haven’t committed a crime, have you?”

“A crime! No way! But I’ve escaped from the farm, and the farmer will come looking for me.”

“Why did you leave the farm?” Molan enquired. “I thought you were all fed like kings down there.”

“Oh yes, the farmer feeds us all right,” the goose replied. “But *why* does he feed us, that’s the big question.”

“What do you mean?”

“One of the ducks said to me that he’d heard the farmer and his wife discussing whether to have turkey or goose for their next Sunday dinner! So I thought I wouldn’t stay around to find out what they decided.”

“I see,” Molan said sympathetically. “You fled for your life.”

“Exactly!”

Molan shuddered. Thank goodness nobody liked to eat moles for their Sunday dinner!

“This can’t be a very nice place to hide,” he suggested. “Do you want to see if we can find a better spot?”

“That’d be brilliant!” the goose replied. “It’s very safe here, but it’s not what you’d call a comfort zone. Too cold for one thing - but not as cold as the inside of the farmer’s fridge!”

Molan shuddered. He thought for a moment. “I know – under Hodgepodge’s hedge would be perfect! It’s on the opposite side of the wood to the farm, and quite hard to find. Let’s go and ask Hodgepodge now if he thinks it’s a good idea. Will you follow me out?”

“All right!”

Molan let the current of the water in the canal carry him back out into the moonlit world outside. He paddled to the bank, where he found Hodgepodge lurking behind a bush. The hedgehog was dripping with water.

“Thank goodness you’re safe, Molan! I was just going to get another branch and come in to rescue you!”

“It’s all fine, Hodgepodge. It’s only a goose. He’s coming out now.”

As he spoke, the white goose drifted out of the tunnel and swam towards them.

Hodgepodge stared, and cleared his throat.

“Ah..hem. A goose. Yes. Marigold needs to get her eyes checked. Anybody can see this is a goose, and not a ghost.”

“I thought you said ‘*the ghost!*’ in the tunnel, just before you fell in,” Molan said.

“Not at all. I said ‘goose’ and it just *sounded* like ‘ghost’. There was an echo in the tunnel that must have confused you.”

Goose arrived at the bank and Molan got him to tell his story to Hodgepodge, who made notes in his special notebook, although it had got rather wet and his pencil dug into the paper. Hodgepodge agreed that Goose would be safe under his hedge. The three of them set off through the wood. On the way, they called in to see Marigold Mouse and introduce her to Goose.

“I can’t believe what a ridiculous mistake I made!” Marigold said, looking at the goose. “But you *are* very white. And I’d just been watching ‘The Curse of the Kitten’ on TV. Those cat horror films really put me on edge.”

They said goodbye to Marigold and carried on. Olive Owl swooped down onto a branch as they passed near her tree. She liked to know everything that was going on in the wood.

“Hey, Hodge! Molan, my man! You got a suspect there? What’s he done? Bag-snatcher? Bigamist? Burglar?”

“Not at all, Olive,” Hodgepodge replied. “Goose has escaped from the farm in fear of his life.”

“Wow! No kidding? Well, that’s cooked the farmer’s goose then!”

“What do you mean?” Goose said.

“Hey! No offence, dude! It’s just an expression! There’s a whole heap of expressions and wise sayings about geese. Er... let me think... *Always kill the goose that lays the golden eggs* for example!”

“Are these sayings all to do with killing and cooking geese?” Goose said, looking offended.

“Well, nope. There’s *What’s good for the goose is bad for the gander*. That’s a good one.”

“What does that mean, Olive?” Molan asked. But Olive just flapped away into the air with a hoot. Perhaps she didn’t know the answer, Molan thought. He could never understand her wise sayings.

“That owl could get on my nerves!” Goose said.

“She’s from America,” Hodgepodge said. “She just takes a little getting used to. Would you like something to eat?”

“Oh, yes please. I’m a bit peckish.”

Hodgepodge and Molan were peckish too. So they led the way to a nice moist corner of a field beside the wood, just near the detective’s hedge. There, the mole and the hedgehog searched for juicy worms, and Goose wandered about on his big webbed orange feet pulling up little clumps of grass. When the goose was a little distance away, Hodgepodge spoke quietly to Molan.

“He seems an intelligent fellow, this goose. I’m thinking I could train him up as an assistant detective.”

Molan was taken aback, and couldn’t think of a reply. *He* had always been Hodgepodge’s only assistant. When he’d had enough to eat, he said goodbye to Hodgepodge and Goose, who were now deep in conversation. Heading towards his tunnel, he felt a mixture of emotions. He would enjoy not being woken up by Hodgepodge in the daytime. But wouldn’t he *miss* being the great detective’s reliable partner?