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# The Wind in the Willows

KENNETH GRAHAME



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the Willows*

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# Contents

	<i>Introduction</i>	7
ONE	<i>The River Bank</i>	11
TWO	<i>The Open Road</i>	25
THREE	<i>The Wild Wood</i>	39
FOUR	<i>Mr Badger</i>	53
FIVE	<i>Dulce Domum</i>	67
SIX	<i>Mr Toad</i>	83
SEVEN	<i>The Piper at the Gates of Dawn</i>	97
EIGHT	<i>Toad's Adventures</i>	109
NINE	<i>Wayfarers All</i>	124
TEN	<i>The Further Adventures of Toad</i>	142
ELEVEN	<i>'Like Summer Tempests Came his Tears'</i>	160
TWELVE	<i>The Return of Ulysses</i>	178



## *Introduction*

To the moderately well-read person Kenneth Grahame is known as the author of two books written in the 1890s: *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days*. In his spare time he was Secretary of the Bank of England. Reading these delicately lovely visions of childhood, you might have wondered that he could be mixed up with anything so unlovely as a bank; and it may be presumed that at the bank an equal surprise was felt that such a responsible official could be mixed up with beauty.

In 1908 he wrote *The Wind in the Willows*. The first two books had been about children such as only the grown-up could understand; this one was about animals such as could be loved equally by young and old. It was natural that those critics who had saluted the earlier books as masterpieces should be upset by the author's temerity in writing a different sort of book; natural that they should resent their inability to place the new book as more or less of a 'children's book' than those which had actually had children in them. For this reason (or some other) *The Wind in the Willows* was not immediately the success which it should have been. Two people, however, became almost offensively its champions. One of them was no less important a person than the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote:



*The White House, Washington,*

*January 17, 1909*

*Personal*

MY DEAR MR GRAHAME – My mind moves in ruts, as I suppose most minds do, and at first I could not reconcile myself to the change from the ever-delightful Harold and his associates, and so for some time I could not accept the toad, the mole, the water-rat and the badger as substitutes. But after a while Mrs Roosevelt and two of the boys, Kermit and Ted, all quite independently, got hold of *The Wind Among the Willows* and took such a delight in it that I began to feel that I might have to revise my judgment. Then Mrs Roosevelt read it aloud to the younger children, and I listened now and then. Now I have read it and reread it, and have come to accept the characters as old friends; and I am almost more fond of it than of your previous books. Indeed, I feel about going to Africa very much as the seafaring rat did when he almost made the water rat wish to forsake everything and start wandering!

I felt I must give myself the pleasure of telling you how much we had all enjoyed your book.

With all good wishes,

Sincerely yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

The other was no more important than the writer of this essay.

For years I have been talking about this book, quoting it, recommending it. In one of my early panegyrics I said: 'I feel sometimes that it was I who wrote it and recommended it to Kenneth Grahame.' This is even truer now than it seemed to be at the time. A few years ago I turned it into a play called *Toad of Toad Hall*, which ran for many Christmas seasons in London; and constant attendance at rehearsals

made me so familiar with the spoken dialogue that I became more and more uncertain as to which lines of it were taken direct from the book, which lines were adapted, and which lines were entirely my own invention. It has been a great disappointment at times to see some pleasant quotation after the words: 'As Kenneth Grahame so delightfully said,' and to realise that he actually did say it . . . and an equal disappointment at times to realise that he didn't.

When he and Mrs Grahame first came to see the play, they were charming enough to ask me to share their box. I was terrified, for had I been the writer of the book, and he the dramatist, I should have resented every altered word of mine and every interpolated word of his.

He was not like that. He sat there, an old man now, as eager as any child in the audience, and on the occasions (fortunately not too rare) when he could recognise his own words, his eye caught his wife's, and they smiled at each other, and seemed to be saying: 'I wrote that' - 'Yes, dear, you wrote that,' and they nodded happily at each other, and turned their eyes again to the stage. It was almost as if he were thanking me in his royally courteous manner for letting him into the play at all, whereas, of course, it was his play entirely, and all I had hoped to do was not to spoil it. For, when characters have been created as solidly as those of Rat and Mole, Toad and Badger, they speak ever after in their own voices, and the dramatist has merely to listen and record.

One can argue over the merits of most books, and in arguing understand the point of view of one's opponent. One may even come to the conclusion that possibly he is right after all. One does not argue about *The Wind in the Willows*. The young man gives it to the girl with whom he is in love, and if she does not like it, asks her to return his letters. The older man tries it on his nephew, and alters his will accordingly. The book is a test of character. We can't

criticise it, because it is criticising us. It is a Household Book; a book which everybody in the household loves, and quotes continually; a book which is read aloud to every new guest and is regarded as the touchstone of his worth. But I must give you one word of warning. When you sit down to it, don't be so ridiculous as to suppose that you are sitting in judgement on my taste, or on the art of Kenneth Grahame. You are merely sitting in judgement on yourself. You may be worthy: I don't know. But it is you who are on trial.

A. A. MILNE



## CHAPTER ONE

### *The River Bank*

The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his little home. First with brooms, then with dusters; then on ladders and steps and chairs, with a brush and a pail of whitewash; till he had dust in his throat and eyes, and splashes of whitewash all over his black fur, and an aching back and weary arms. Spring was moving in the air above and in the earth below and around him, penetrating even his dark and lowly little house with its spirit of divine discontent and longing. It was small wonder, then, that he suddenly flung down his brush on the floor, said 'Bother!' and 'Oh blow!' and also 'Hang spring-cleaning!' and bolted out of the house without even waiting to put on his coat. Something up above was calling him

imperiously, and he made for the steep little tunnel which answered in his case to the gravelled carriage-drive owned by animals whose residences are nearer to the sun and air. So he scraped and scratched and scabbled and scrooged, and then he scrooged again and scabbled and scratched and scraped, working busily with his little paws and muttering to himself, 'Up we go! Up we go!' till at last, pop! his snout came out into the sunlight, and he found himself rolling in the warm grass of a great meadow.

'This is fine!' he said to himself. 'This is better than whitewashing!' The sunshine struck hot on his fur, soft breezes caressed his heated brow, and after the seclusion of the cellarage he had lived in so long the carol of happy birds fell on his dulled hearing almost like a shout. Jumping off all his four legs at once, in the joy of living, and the delight of spring without its cleaning, he pursued his way across the meadow till he reached the hedge on the further side.

'Hold up!' said an elderly rabbit at the gap. 'Sixpence for the privilege of passing by the private road!' He was bowled over in an instant by the impatient and contemptuous Mole, who trotted along the side of the hedge chaffing the other rabbits as they peeped hurriedly from their holes to see what the row was about. 'Onion-sauce! Onion-sauce!' he remarked jeeringly, and was gone before they could think of a thoroughly satisfactory reply. Then they all started grumbling at each other. 'How *stupid* you are! Why didn't you tell him - ' 'Well, why didn't *you* say - ' 'You might have reminded him - ' and so on, in the usual way, but, of course, it was then much too late, as is always the case.

It all seemed too good to be true. Hither and thither through the meadows he rambled busily, along the hedgerows, across the copses, finding everywhere birds building, flowers budding, leaves thrusting - everything happy, and progressive, and occupied. And instead of having an uneasy conscience pricking him and whispering 'Whitewash!' he

somehow could only feel how jolly it was to be the only idle dog among all these busy citizens. After all, the best part of a holiday is perhaps not so much to be resting yourself, as to see all the other fellows busy working.

He thought his happiness was complete when, as he meandered aimlessly along, suddenly he stood by the edge of a full-fed river. Never in his life had he seen a river before – this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh, to fling itself on fresh playmates that shook themselves free, and were caught and held again. All was a-shake and a-shiver – glints and gleams and sparkles, rustle and swirl, chatter and bubble. The Mole was bewitched, entranced, fascinated. By the side of the river he trotted as one trots, when very small, by the side of a man who holds one spellbound by exciting stories; and when tired at last, he sat on the bank, while the river still chattered on to him, a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea.

As he sat on the grass and looked across the river, a dark hole in the bank opposite, just above the water's edge, caught his eye, and dreamily he fell to considering what a nice snug dwelling-place it would make for an animal with few wants and fond of a bijou riverside residence, above flood-level and remote from noise and dust. As he gazed, something bright and small seemed to twinkle down in the heart of it, vanished, then twinkled once more like a tiny star. But it could hardly be a star in such an unlikely situation; and it was too glittering and small for a glow-worm. Then, as he looked, it winked at him, and so declared itself to be an eye; and a small face began gradually to grow up round it, like a frame round a picture.

A little brown face, with whiskers.

A grave round face, with the same twinkle in its eye that

had first attracted his notice.

Small neat ears and thick silky hair.

It was the Water Rat!

Then the two animals stood and regarded each other cautiously.

'Hullo, Mole!' said the Water Rat.

'Hullo, Rat!' said the Mole.

'Would you like to come over?' enquired the Rat presently.

'Oh, it's all very well to *talk*,' said the Mole, rather pettishly, he being new to a river and riverside life and its ways.

The Rat said nothing, but stooped and unfastened a rope and hauled on it; then lightly stepped into a little boat which the Mole had not observed. It was painted blue outside and white within, and was just the size for two animals; and the Mole's whole heart went out to it at once, even though he did not yet fully understand its uses.

The Rat sculled smartly across and made fast. Then he held up his fore-paw as the Mole stepped gingerly down. 'Lean on that!' he said. 'Now then, step lively!' and the Mole to his surprise and rapture found himself actually seated in the stern of a real boat.

'This has been a wonderful day!' said he, as the Rat shoved off and took to the sculls again. 'Do you know, I've never been in a boat before in all my life.'

'What?' cried the Rat, open-mouthed. 'Never been in a – you never – well, I – what have you been doing, then?'

'Is it so nice as all that?' asked the Mole shyly, though he was quite prepared to believe it as he leant back in his seat and surveyed the cushions, the oars, the rowlocks, and all the fascinating fittings, and felt the boat sway lightly under him.

'Nice? It's the *only* thing,' said the Water Rat solemnly, as he leant forward for his stroke. 'Believe me, my young friend, there is *nothing* – absolutely nothing – half so much

worth doing as simply messing about in boats. Simply messing,' he went on dreamily: 'messing – about – in – boats; messing –'

'Look ahead, Rat!' cried the Mole suddenly.

It was too late. The boat struck the bank full tilt. The dreamer, the joyous oarsman, lay on his back at the bottom of the boat, his heels in the air.

' – about in boats – or *with* boats,' the Rat went on composedly, picking himself up with a pleasant laugh. 'In or out of 'em, it doesn't matter. Nothing seems really to matter, that's the charm of it. Whether you get away, or whether you don't; whether you arrive at your destination or whether you reach somewhere else, or whether you never get anywhere at all, you're always busy, and you never do anything in particular; and when you've done it there's always something else to do, and you can do it if you like, but you'd much better not. Look here! If you've really nothing else on hand this morning, supposing we drop down the river together and have a long day of it?'

The Mole waggled his toes from sheer happiness, spread his chest with a sigh of full contentment, and leaned back blissfully into the soft cushions. '*What* a day I'm having!' he said. 'Let us start at once!'

'Hold hard a minute, then!' said the Rat. He looped the painter through a ring in his landing-stage, climbed up into his hole above, and after a short interval reappeared staggering under a fat, wicker luncheon-basket.

'Shove that under your feet,' he observed to the Mole, as he passed it down into the boat. Then he untied the painter and took the sculls again.

'What's inside it?' asked the Mole, wriggling with curiosity.

'There's cold chicken inside it,' replied the Rat briefly; 'coldtonguecoldhamcoldbeefpickledgherkinssaladfrench rollscresssandwidgespottedmeatgingerbeerlemonadesoda water –'



‘Oh stop, stop,’ cried the Mole in ecstasies: ‘This is too much!’

‘Do you really think so?’ enquired the Rat seriously. ‘It’s only what I always take on these little excursions; and the other animals are always telling me that I’m a mean beast and cut it *very* fine!’

The Mole never heard a word he was saying. Absorbed in the new life he was entering upon, intoxicated with the sparkle, the ripple, the scents and the sounds and the sunlight, he trailed a paw in the water and dreamed long waking dreams. The Water Rat, like the good little fellow he was, sculled steadily on and forbore to disturb him.

‘I like your clothes awfully, old chap,’ he remarked after some half an hour or so had passed. ‘I’m going to get a black velvet smoking-suit myself some day, as soon as I can afford it.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said the Mole, pulling himself together with an effort. ‘You must think me very rude; but all this is so new to me. So – this – is – a – River!’

‘*The* River,’ corrected the Rat.

‘And you really live by the river? What a jolly life!’

‘By it and with it and on it and in it,’ said the Rat. ‘It’s brother and sister to me, and aunts, and company, and food and drink, and (naturally) washing. It’s my world, and I don’t want any other. What it hasn’t got is not worth having, and what it doesn’t know is not worth knowing. Lord! the times we’ve had together! Whether in winter or summer, spring or autumn, it’s always got its fun and its excitements. When the floods are on in February, and my cellars and basement are brimming with drink that’s no good to me, and the brown water runs by my best bedroom window; or again when it all drops away and shows patches of mud that smells like plum-cake, and the rushes and weed clog the channels, and I can potter about dry-shod over most of the bed of it and find fresh food to eat, and things