

Nooks vs Crannies: Fannybrook

Laten Cecil

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1. Corners and Seams

Dollop's corner asked nothing of him, which was exactly why he loved it. A wedge of good dark behind a drainpipe, his own shape and nobody else's business; and on a morning when the whole quarter was already working itself up over something, he had folded down into it to be comprehensively unavailable.

Above him the wall climbed past all reckoning. Gray stone set on gray stone, up and up, until it made a sky of its own, and that sky had never once looked down at him, which was the best thing about it. Neither did the great slow humans who went by up there now and then, huge and unhurried, and had never noticed him in all his life. This was the City. When you are as small as a Nook, a City is not somewhere you live so much as a weather you live under, vast and stony and full of booming faraway doings, and the trick of it is to find a dry spot and stay put. There were more dry spots than anyone had ever finished counting, because the City had always had more insides than it had outsides. The Nooks kept the corners, being round, and the Crannies kept the seams, being thin. Nook or Cranny, they were all Hummits, whatever either would have told you.

Somewhere off down the seams, this morning, the quarter was making a noise. A gathering sort of noise, voices passing a thing along and getting louder with it. Dollop heard it and did with it what he did with most things that might turn into work: he noted it, decided it was not for him, and settled deeper into his crumbs. There was a good crumb saved by his foot and a loop of bright string he had no use for and had kept anyway, and his bottle-cap tipped low over one eye, and if a Hummit could not be left in peace with that much, Dollop did not know what the world was coming to.

The world came to it at once, through the drainpipe, at speed.

Two small shapes tumbled into his dark and straight across it, over the crumb, under the string, a roll of soft burbling laughter chasing a rattle of sharp little clicks, and out the far side before he could so much as sit up. Nubbins. Bare-headed both, no hat on either, because a nubbin has no hat until it has grown into a kind and got the wearing of one, and these two had grown into nothing yet. One came bouncing and one came darting, two small terrors the City had not yet made up its mind about. Nobody had asked the nubbins what they wanted to be, and nobody would; for now they were only trouble with the shape left off.

“Off you go,” said Dollop, waving them on the way they were already going. “That’s it. Go and menace someone important.”

They went. He listened to them go, the burble and the clicks getting smaller, in the general direction of the seam next door, which was somebody else’s corner of the world entirely and, Dollop felt, welcome to it. He lay back down. He had very nearly got comfortable again when the thought crept back on him, unwelcome, that the seam next door belonged to Prig.

He shut his eyes. If he was very still and very quiet, there was every chance the whole morning would decide it had better things to do than involve him.

The morning did not. From next door came a sound Dollop knew far too well and never welcomed: the sound of Prig discovering that something was out of order.

Prig had been having a perfectly correct morning until the nubbins arrived in it.

His seam ran clean and narrow up the join of two buildings, a cool gray thread of a home with a draught that walked through it end to end, and Prig kept it the way the Etiquette said a home should be kept, which is to say exactly. He was proud of the cold of it, a proper Cranny home with nothing soft about it. And if the hum of the corner next door came faint through the wall at night, and was the thing he fell asleep to, that was the wall’s

business and not his, and he would have thanked you not to mention it. His thimble sat dead upright on his head and dead center. He was standing in the middle of his own draught reciting a small procedure to himself, quietly, for the pleasure of getting it right, when the burbling one rolled in over his feet and the clicking one shot up the wall and knocked his morning's tidy row of saved buttons all across the floor.

"You are," said Prig. "That is. Those are not."

He did not, in that first moment, notice that the nubbins were frightened. He noticed that his buttons were no longer in their row. A Cranny notices what is out of order before he notices anything else about a room, and a great deal was now out of order, and Prig went at the nearest wrongness with his whole heart. He reached to gather the one that had wedged itself into the low dark corner, meaning to fold himself down and round after it the way a Nook would have done without thinking. Prig was not a Nook. He was long and thin and made for standing up straight, and he put himself into a curve he was not built for, held it a heroic instant, and sprang back skinny and stuck fast in the gap with his thimble knocked crooked and his dignity somewhere behind him.

"Morning," said Dollop, arriving. He looked the situation over with the interest of someone who has nowhere better to be, and made no move to help. "Comfy?"

“These,” said Prig, working himself loose one careful degree at a time, “are yours.”

“They’re nobody’s. They’re nubbins. That’s the whole point of them.”

“They came from your corner.”

“They passed through my corner. There’s a difference. I’m a corridor to them, same as I am to you.” Dollop reached down and, without any visible effort, plucked the wedged nubbin free, set it on its way with a pat, and watched the pair of them pour off down the seam after some fresh idea. “There. Handled. You’re welcome.”

Prig had got himself upright and was putting his thimble back to true with the care of a Hummit restoring order to the world one thing at a time. “One does not pat a stray nubbin onward,” he said. “There is a proper handling. It is established. You return it to the space it belongs to, and if the space cannot be established, you take it to the Commons and it is entered.”

“Entered where?”

“In the,” said Prig, and stopped, because the truth was that nobody living had ever seen the place where such things were entered, and the Etiquette on the matter was a thing Prig’s grandmother had passed to him from grandmothers further back than her, and the older a ruling was the truer it was held to be and the harder it

was to check. “It is entered,” he said again, and set his thimble straighter, which is what a Cranny does when the precedent has gone thin under him.

This was the thing about Prig, and Dollop knew it and needed it daily: Prig believed. He believed the Etiquette the way the City believed in being tall. Every question had a ruling, every ruling had an older ruling behind it, and if you followed the whole chain back far enough you arrived at something that made the world make sense, and Prig would follow it all the way back on his hands and knees if that was what correctness took. He just could not always find the far end of the chain. Nobody could. The Etiquette was old and it was remembered and it was never once written down, and so it grew and shrank a little in the telling, and every Cranny remembered it slightly in his own favor and was quite certain he did not.

“Anyway,” said Dollop. “No harm done. Two buttons under the wall there, look.”

“That,” said Prig, retrieving them, “is a seam-margin, as any nubbin knows. The strip of dark where your corner ends and my seam begins. It is mine to the second grain of grit, by long custom, and you have your foot on it.”

Dollop looked down at the perfectly ordinary bit of dark under his foot. “It’s a bit of dark, Prig. It’s not applying for a position.” He wiggled the foot, comfortably. “And it’s

the lip of my corner, if it's anybody's. Always has been. Ask the drainpipe."

"It cannot be the lip of your corner and the margin of my seam. It is one thing. It has one proper name."

"Can't it, though. Seems to be managing both."

"It is a margin. There is a term for it because there is a rule about it, and there is a rule about it because a great many Hummits before us agreed it was worth having a rule about, and if you would trouble to learn the term you would find you already knew the rule."

"I find I'm happier not," said Dollop, and did not move his foot.

They could have gone on like that all morning, and often did. It was an old game between them, worn smooth as the margin itself, and each of them would have said he could not stand the other and neither of them, if you had asked, would have been able to tell you the last morning he had spent without it. A corner and a seam, side by side, needling across the little strip of dark that both of them claimed and neither of them could exactly define. It was the whole long war of the Nooks and the Crannies shrunk down to two Hummits and a foot of shadow, and it was, most days, the nicest part of Dollop's morning, though wild rats would not have dragged that out of him.

“You want to mind that spot goes tended, all the same,” Prig added, gathering his last button, and for a moment he was not needling. It came out of him the way old sayings do, sideways, in a lower voice. “A space left to itself long enough goes wrong. Goes quiet the bad way. And a spot gone quiet the bad way is how the Fannybrook finds a quarter.”

The draught walked through the seam. Neither of them said anything for the length of it. Then Dollop grinned, because a grin was a door and he liked to keep one open. “Then it’s a mercy we never stop arguing over it. Nothing this well tended in the whole City.”

And that, more or less, was when the noise from down the seams arrived at the two of them at last, and stopped being other people’s.

It came up the quarter as news always came among small people, hand to hand and mouth to mouth, swelling as it came. A Cranny two seams down called it to the seam below, who called it up to Prig, and it reached Dollop a half-breath later off Prig’s own face, which had gone very still and very bright.

The Both had come due.

Now, the Both. You will want to know what the Both was, and so, to be fair, would everyone who had ever fought over it. It was a spot deep in the quarter that was, honestly and maddeningly, both a nook and a cranny at

once: a corner that was also a fall, cozy and cramped in the very same breath, so that the eye slid off it and could not hold which it was. The Nooks called it the Nook and knew it for theirs. The Crannies called it the Cranny and knew it for theirs. And the tired middle of the quarter, who only wanted to get past it to somewhere sensible, called it the Both and let the other two fight.

And now it had come due. A space cannot go un-tended forever, and the Both had gone without a tender for longer than anyone could rightly misremember, because to tend a thing you must first agree whose it is, and on that one point the whole quarter had never in its history managed to agree for the length of a single afternoon. The word ran through the seams that the reckoning had landed at last: the Both must have its keeper named, properly, at the Commons, and the old question of whose it was had woken all at once, with the whole quarter's weight behind it.

Prig lit up like foil catching the light. This was, to him, the finest thing that could possibly have happened. No one sent for Prig, most mornings; a spirit who knew the proper handling of things was a spirit left to keep his own seam and mind nobody else's. But a due space wanted a ruling, and a ruling wanted a Cranny who knew the old forms, and for once the whole quarter could not do without one. Here at last was the great question brought out into the open where the Etiquette could get its hands on it and

settle it correctly forever. He was already reciting under his breath, the old rulings coming up out of him in order, and his hand had gone to his thimble to set it exactly true for the Commons. "There is a precedent for a due space," he said, to no one, to the draught, to the world that was finally about to be put in order. "There is a procedure."

"Course there is," said Dollop.

But he said it flat, and he heard himself say it flat, and that was new. He knew this shape. He had spent a whole comfortable life learning the shape of trouble so he could be somewhere else before it arrived, and this had the shape of the real thing, the kind a joke would not make smaller. He looked back once at the good dark of his corner, and at the whole snug morning he had meant to spend doing nothing at all.

Then he went along, because everyone was going along, and down all the seams and corners of the quarter the two peoples were already on the move, all in the same direction for once, and every last one of them for the opposite reason.

2. The Both Comes Due

The Great Commons was the one place in all the quarter the Nooks and the Crannies had agreed to share, for the single reason that it was the one place they had ever agreed was neither. Not nook-kind, not cranny-kind: no-kind, belonging to nobody and so to everybody. It was the only argument the two peoples had ever managed to finish, and they had finished it chiefly so as to have somewhere to hold all the others.

It lay deep under everything, where four great buildings leaned their undersides together and left a hollow between them, roofed over by beams and floor-joists so far overhead they belonged more to rumor than to the room. It was a cold place and a vast one, and it stayed cold and vast for exactly as long as it took the quarter to arrive. Then every Hummit for streets around came pouring down the seams and up through the gaps and out into it, small and loud and packing in close, until the cold gave up. When you are as small as all that, a hall is not a room. It is a country. And this was the only country the two peoples owned at once, which was probably why they could never leave it alone.

You could tell a Nook from a Cranny by the hat, if you could tell by nothing else, and mostly you could not. The Nooks came in low and round, bent tin and bottle-tops and flattened jar-lids worn at every angle but the straight one. The Crannies came in tall and thin, their hats spiring up off their heads like the buildings outside, the higher the prouder. Somewhere in the thick of it Dollop had found a pillar to stand behind, which was the most he ever asked of an evening, and Prig had found the exact middle of the floor and squared his thimble to it, which was the most Prig ever asked of anything.

The recitation-duel opened, as it had to, with somebody remembering something.

“By the Second Settlement,” announced a Cranny near the front, rising onto the tips of himself, “the Both is cranny-kind, on the plain fact of the seam.”

“The Second,” said a Nook, as though he had been stepped on. “You’d stand up in company and cite the Second? The Fourth Settlement gave that ground to the corners, and the Fourth’s older.”

“The Fourth is not older than the Second.”

“It’s older than the Second in my family,” said the Nook, and there was no arguing with that, because there was no book to fetch it out of and no wall to check it against. There never had been. The whole Great Etiquette lived in the heads of the elders and nowhere else at all, and the

heads of the elders were, taken all together, not quite what they had once been. This was held to be its great strength. An older memory was a truer memory, everyone agreed, and a memory old enough would settle the matter for good, if only they could get it to wake up.

That was why, when the Nooks wanted the ruling that would end it, they sent for Grommet.

He came forward slowly, under a drooping scrap of gray felt worn low over the whole idea of his face, the oldest Nook anyone could name and the keeper, by title, of every precedent the Nooks had ever misremembered. The hall hushed for him. It hushed for no one else all evening. He drew himself up. He looked out over the crowd with the great dim fondness of an elder about to hand down the law of the ages.

“The precedent,” said Grommet, “is perfectly clear. It was laid down in the spring of the great, the very great——”

And he slept.

He slept standing up, gently, under his felt, the way a wall settles, and the ruling of the ages settled with him. A sigh went round the Nooks. It was not even a surprised sigh. It was the sigh of a people who had gone all the way down the seam for a crumb they were sure they had saved, and found the spot bare.

Into the gap Grommet left, which was a wide one and getting wider, stepped Nettle.

She wore the tallest hat in the quarter, a spike of stolen foil and beaded wire that went up and up like a threat, and she wore it the way a lesser Cranny might wear a crown. “One does hate,” she said, to the hall in general and the Nooks in particular, “to press a point while the other side’s memory is having its rest. But someone must keep things moving, and it does so often fall to me.”

“The First Settlement governs,” said Prig at once, before she could get properly airborne. He stood very straight and spoke very carefully, every word chosen and set down in its place. “The older ruling holds, and the oldest ruling on this ground is the First Settlement, which names the space cranny-kind by the plain fact of the seam that runs through it. One does not cite the Fourth Settlement over the First. It is not done.”

“One does not cite at all, dear, in that hat,” said Nettle.

A few Crannies laughed. Prig’s thimble was perfectly straight already, and he straightened it anyway. “The hat,” he said, “is not the argument.”

“No,” Nettle allowed. “The argument is that you have muddled the Settlements, as you generally do, and that the space is plainly cranny-kind, as I have said, and as anyone of the correct standing would remember without needing it spelled.” She turned a slow, gracious quarter-

circle, gathering the room, opening out into the one thing in all the world she had a real appetite for, which was the sound of herself being agreed with.

Prig opened his mouth to correct the standing, and the Settlement, and the whole shape of her error, and got no further, because by then the entire hall had remembered something.

The rulings came from everywhere at once, Nook and Cranny both, each one older and grander and more certainly right than the last.

“The Ninth Settlement is perfectly plain on the point——”

“There is no Ninth Settlement,” said Dob.

He was near the front, under a little tin funnel worn point-up and backwards, and he said it plain and flat and only the once. The hall took the words and went on with them and never once looked to see who had put them there.

“There was when my grandmother sat where you’re standing.”

“By the ruling of the Long Cold, the corners hold any space a Nook can fold himself properly round inside——”

“And the seams hold any space a Cranny can get thin through, which is every space there is, which is exactly why that ruling was struck out——”

“It was never struck out. You’re thinking of the other one.”

It climbed like that, precedent stacked on precedent, the whole hall getting louder and louder.

Somewhere in the thick of it Nettle was still talking, grandly, to a room that had stopped listening. “One would think,” she was saying, to no one in particular, “that someone of standing might be —” but the someones of standing were all shouting about the Ninth Settlement, and for a breath the tallest hat in the quarter stood over a face gone oddly bare, with not one soul in the hall looking up at her. She had put that hat up a notch for every slight she had ever been dealt, and now not one of them troubled to look. Then she drew the height back into herself and gazed down at the lot of them as though being ignored had been her intention all along.

And into a lull in it, old Sedge spoke.

He spoke, as he always did, in the old tongue. He stood under his brittle twist of dried reed and said one soft round word, “aveen,” and looked round the whole hall as he said it, both peoples at once, as though he had just handed them the answer to everything they were shouting about. Nobody had the first idea what it meant. A Cranny near him studied the floor. Another patted Sedge’s arm, meaning well, meaning stop. The word hung there a moment, strange and entirely unheard, and then the duel rolled over the top of it and moved on, and Sedge closed his mouth and kept the rest of the old words behind it.

Because there was, under all the noise, one question, and the hall was getting louder precisely so as not to arrive at it. There was a precedent for a nook-kind space. There was a precedent for a cranny-kind space. There was no precedent, none, anywhere in any elder's head, for a space that was honestly and at the same time both.

And that was the wall the whole grand machine of memory ran into, and this time it could not back off and go round.

The Both was both. That was the entire trouble with it and always had been. For every ruling a Nook remembered, a Cranny remembered its opposite, older and truer and pointing the other way, and when two memories cancel each other out exactly, what is left is not a ruling. It is a silence with a lot of shouting on top. Grommet was prodded awake to break the tie and managed "the great, the great," before going down again like the dark coming back into a corner. The Crannies said the seam made it theirs. The Nooks said the corner made it theirs. Both were right, which is the most maddening thing two sides can be, and the hall climbed and climbed toward the one thing none of them could say, which was that the law simply did not know.

It was into this, the sour, stuck, argued-empty middle of it, that Bouba and Kiki arrived, at speed, and from what seemed like three directions though there were only two of them.

They came bare-headed, because they had no kind yet and so no hat, two small unfinished shapes tearing through the most solemn deadlock the quarter had managed in years. Bouba came in low, rolling, a wet burble with no words in it that anyone but Kiki could catch, and went clean under Nettle's hat-spire and very nearly out the other side with it. Kiki came in high and quick, all bright taps and shrieks, and ran straight up a precedent-reciter's back to sit on his head and click at the ceiling. Between the two of them ran a whole private language no one else had ever been let into.

The hall came apart in the usual way.

"Someone get hold of them before they have the roof down," a Nook called, grabbing and missing.

"Whose are they? They must be somebody's," a Cranny said, grabbing and missing too.

But they were nobody's, and nobody could hold them, and nobody thought to ask them a single thing. Bouba and Kiki went on being exactly and only themselves, which was loud, and quick, and entirely their own.

And they would not be shooed far. Bouba kept trying to burrow into the nearest lap, which tonight belonged to an elder who did not care to be burrowed into, and Kiki kept going up things, the taller and thinner the better, until she found a crack high in the far wall and hung there clicking down at the lot of them. But for all the usual racket, there

was something off in it. Twice Bouba started toward the deep end of the hall, where the seams ran down and away, and twice he thought better of it and bolted back, and Kiki stayed close at his side each time, quick and quiet. In all the fuss not one grown Hummit stopped to wonder what a nubbin might have found down there that it did not care to find again.

The tempers that the deadlock had wound up tight began to come loose the wrong way. Two elders near the front squared off over the last precedent standing, and the squaring-off had that low careful sound that comes just before something stops being an argument. Dollop, from behind his pillar, felt the room tip toward it. He knew the feel of a room about to go over. It was the one thing he could not help noticing even when he was working very hard at noticing nothing.

So he did what he did. He stepped half out from his pillar and pitched his voice into the gap.

“Well, there’s our answer,” said Dollop. “We’ve all argued over the spot so long it’s gone off. Has anyone actually been down to check it? Only it’s probably grown a beard by now, and I don’t fancy arguing with a beard.”

It got a laugh. Not a big one, but a real one, and a laugh is a door, and the two elders let go of whatever they had been about to pick up and stood back, half-shamed, half-relieved. The room breathed. It was a small thing and

Dollop had done it a thousand times and it had never once failed him, and for the length of one breath the evening was going to be all right.

Then Dob spoke.

He had been near the front the whole evening, the one who had said there was no Ninth Settlement and had not been looked at for saying it, and he had listened to all the rest of it with his whole slow face, and into the breath Dollop had just bought, Dob said the thing he had been turning over.

“It’s not gone off,” said Dob. “It’s not empty either.” He said it plainly, small true words set side by side.

“Something’s down there keeping the cold out of it.”

For a moment nobody took it up, because it did not sound like anything. And then it did.

The first wrong thing was the nubbins. Bouba and Kiki had gone still. They had never in their short loud lives been still, and now they were, pressed together low against the floor, small, not making a sound, both of them looking the same way down the deep end of the hall.

The second wrong thing was the draught. A draught came up out of the deep seams that ran toward the Both, up where no draught had any business climbing, and it carried nothing. No stir of dust, no far-off boom of the human world, no smell of stone or crumb or anything at

all. Just cold, and the flat, waiting emptiness of a place that had gone quiet in the bad way, reaching all the way up into the one crowded country the two peoples owned. Under it, felt in the floor before it was heard, there was a sound too low to be a sound, that stopped when you tried to listen to it and started again when you gave up.

Then a Hummit came stumbling in from the deep end, from the seams that led down toward the Both, and he could not hold his shape. He was a Cranny, or he had been a Cranny a moment ago, and now he was only a thin smear of himself, snapping thin and rounder and thin again, unable to settle, and what he could not get his mouth to say the whole hall understood without it.

The Fannybrook had come into the quarter. It had come to the Both, to the un-tended spot that everyone had been too busy winning to tend, exactly the way the old rule said it would. Leave a space alone too long and it goes wrong, and a space gone wrong draws the Fannybrook. They had all known the rule. They had all said it lightly, a trouble that only ever landed on other quarters, never this one. They had squabbled over that spot for longer than any of them could rightly misremember, and now it belonged to a monster. And the Great Etiquette, which had a ruling for everything, or was meant to, had nothing at all to say about this.

The Great Commons, which had never once in its life been quiet, went quiet. Every hat in the hall turned the same

way at once, the round and the tall, the bottle-cap and the spire, all of them toward the dark mouth of the seams that led down to the Both. Only Grommet, in the middle of them, went on gently snoring under his felt.

3. No Ruling for This

By the next morning the quarter had quietly agreed, without a word passing on it, that the thing to do about a monster was to tidy very hard all around it and never once look its way.

Nooks swept corners that did not need sweeping. Crannies straightened seams that were straight already. Nobody went down the way that led to it, and nobody said why, and the not-saying was the one thing in the quarter that nobody swept. When you are very small, and something very large has moved in below you, there is a great deal of honest comfort to be had in a clean skirting board.

Even Bouba and Kiki had caught it. They had made a game of the dark, and the game was to run at it and stop. Bouba rolled himself down as far as the place where the floor tipped away, lost his nerve, and came burbling back up. Kiki shot past him to the very lip and pulled up short there, clicking. Then they did it again. The sweeping went on all round them, and nobody with a broom in his hand thought to ask the two of them what was down at the bottom of the dark, a broom being a very absorbing thing to hold.

Dollop stood at the mouth of the seams because he could not think where else to be, which was a new feeling and not one he cared for. Any other morning he would have been folded deep in his corner with the day's best argument to look forward to, Prig on the far side of the seam getting himself worked up about whose the dark little margin between them really was, and Dollop making it worse for the joy of watching him go. That was a good argument. It went nowhere and it never had to. This one had gone somewhere. It had gone down the seams in the night, and it was sitting at the bottom now being enormous and quiet, and every time Dollop's eyes slid toward the dark his stomach did a thing he would rather it didn't, so he kept putting them elsewhere. On Prig's thimble. On the swept floor. On the ways out. There were three ways out from here, and he could have told you the order he would take them in.

Prig could not let the quiet alone. A quiet like this one was a gap, and a gap was where the wrong thing got in, and the thing to put in a gap was the proper procedure in the proper order. So he reached for one.

"It is a cranny," he said, and stood a little straighter for having said it. "It has always been a cranny, and a Cranny will see to it, properly and in order. There is a form for the recovery of a due space. One begins with—"

He reached for how one began. His mind went to the place on the shelf where that rule was kept, the way a

hand goes to a latch in the dark, sure of it, and the shelf was bare. There was a form for a flooded seam. There was a form for a rat in the meal-store. There was, he was almost certain, a form for a neighbor who built out over your light and would not take it down. For a monster in a spot that was owed to be named, there was nothing. No one had ever needed it, so no one had ever made it, and the place where it should have been was the loudest thing in the quarter.

Prig had to put his eyes somewhere that was not the gap. He put them on Dollop's feet.

"You are standing," he said, "exactly where one does not stand. At the very lip of a due space. Move your left foot."

"Prig."

"It is improper, and it is on the wrong side of the margin besides, which is mine, and—"

"Prig. You want me to go down there."

"I want nothing of the kind." He drew himself up, thin and straight. "I intend to go down there myself, properly, as is correct and as is owed. It is a cranny. It is mine to see to."

And there it was, the out, set down in front of Dollop by Prig's own hand and as neat as you please. Prig wanted to go. More than that, Prig wanted to be the one trusted with it, and it was all over him, in the way he had come up

tall on the word mine. Dollop looked at that. He looked at the dark. Then he took the out.

“Course you do,” he said. “Course it’s yours. You keep saying so, don’t you, so it must be. Off you go and have it, then. I’ll mind the exit up here. Somebody’s got to.”

Prig did not argue.

Not ten minutes since, Prig had corrected Dollop’s grammar and Dollop’s posture and Dollop’s way of standing. Now he took the worst job in the quarter as though it were a present somebody had wrapped for him, and said only, “Then I shall do it properly,” and set his thimble square, and went down into the dark.

Dollop watched him go until the dark closed over where he had been. Then he turned the other way, toward the light, and told himself he had been useful.

Prig went down the narrow way. The narrow way was the correct way, being the way a Cranny went, and he told himself so on the way down, and told himself the telling was to steady his nerve and not at all a way of not thinking about what waited below. Down and down. The seams drew in close around him, tall and tight and cold and comforting for it, the old-rain smell of the stone breathing up at him, and far under everything the water was letting go of the stone a drop at a time, and every drop came back up the seam as a boom. He recited as he went. He did not truly know the rulings, only their grand

first words with the sense long worn off them, but the shape of them in his mouth went down ahead of him into the dark, and that was better than going down with nothing in his mouth at all.

And then the spot opened in front of him, and it was a cranny.

Of course it was. A seam, a deep clean seam running down between two leaning walls, snug and shadowed and exactly and only itself, and Prig's heart went up like a thing slipped off its string. There. He had said so. He had said so in the hall with everyone shouting him down, and here it was, being a cranny in the dark with nobody watching it be one. It was theirs. It had always been theirs. He was so full up with being right that he had taken a step down into it before he remembered he had come here to meet a monster.

Then the cranny stopped being a cranny.

Nothing moved, and everything changed. The drip did not fall. The air that had been climbing past him was simply not there any more, and the cold that stood in its place had nothing in it at all, no smell, no far mutter of the human world, none of the small furniture a place carries, only cold and the flat fact of itself. Prig's skin understood before he would let the rest of him understand. Down where the seam ran thinnest, thinner than he would have sworn a seam could run, something turned and put its

attention on him. It reached him through the stone, a sound too low to be a sound, felt in the back of his skull more than heard, and it would not hold still to be listened to. And far down in a dark his eyes would not stay on, two points of yellow came open, and were looking at him, and had perhaps been looking a long while.

It was too big for where it was. Prig knew seams. He knew to a hair what a gap that wide would take, and the thing lying in this one was many times too big for the space. It was not squeezed. It lay in the stone the way cold lies in stone. It did not come nearer. It could wait, and it was waiting, and what it was waiting for was him.

“That is,” Prig said, out loud, to the dark, because his mouth still believed there was a rule to be had. “That is not a regulation draught. That is not — one does not—”

But there was no rule to reach for. That was what the bare shelf had meant. There was no proper way to stand in front of a thing like that, and nothing correct to do, and no order to do it in, and not knowing what to do was worse than the eyes. Prig turned and ran.

He did not decide to run. His body settled it and told him after. He went up that seam faster than dignity could keep pace with, and his shape went loose with his fear, stretching thin and thinner and too thin, so that he had to keep gathering himself back into a Cranny as he climbed, pulling in his own edges the way you pull in a dropped

armful of things. And under all the running, some small locked-up part of him went on saying the only thing it had left to say. It is a cranny. It is ours. It is ours. It is ours.

Dollop had gone the other way, and Dollop, as it happened, had not minded any exit at all.

He had meant to. He had stood at the top being the one who minds the exit for the length of about four breaths, and it was dull, and dullness left far too much room to think about Prig going down there on his own. So Dollop, rather than sit with a thought he did not care for, went off to be busy somewhere else. There was a way down that was not the narrow way, a soft round roll of a route down the back of the seams that he was fairly sure was his and nobody else's, and it came to him, standing there, that the genuinely helpful thing, the brave thing even, would be to slip down it and have a quick look from the easy side and spare everyone the fuss.

He went down humming. A hum fills your ears from the inside, if you keep it going, and Dollop kept it going. The round way let him down soft and easy, and set him out somewhere. Well. The nicest little spot he had ever laid eyes on.

It was a nook. Plainly a nook, and he would have said as much to Prig's face. Snug dark, tucked in behind a lean of stone and made to the exact size and shape of Dollop, the very place he would have picked to fold down into and let

the silly business blow over without him. He had got one step in, and was most of the way to sitting down, already half putting together the thing he would say to Prig about whose spot it really was, when the dark at the back of the nook opened two eyes.

The heat went out of the place all at once, the way it goes out of a room the moment the one person you liked has left it, and the cold that took its turn had nothing in it for anybody, no sound, nothing to smell, not the least sign the place had ever been glad of company. The thing was folded into the snuggest fold of the snuggest corner, the very spot Dollop would have picked to hide in, and it had two yellow eyes, and it had been there the entire time he stood admiring the furniture.

“Nice spot,” said Dollop, in a voice that came out light and pleasant. “Lovely spot. Room for one. Room for one and a bit at a squeeze, you’d want something soft to sit on, a bit of—”

The joke went out the way the heat had. He stood there holding an empty mouth open at a monster, and there was nothing in him to close it with.

“No,” he said. “No. I’m not.”

And he went, fast, past caring which way was dignified, minding only which way was up.

He came up out of the round way into the gray light and nearly went straight through Prig.

Prig was there. Prig was up and out and alive, thin and wrong-shaped and shaking where he stood, and the sight of him was so much better than the thing in the dark that Dollop nearly laughed, and then did not, because the look on Prig's face said Prig had been shown the same thing.

For a moment neither of them could do a thing but breathe.

Then Prig, with one thing left in his hands, said it. "It is a cranny. I saw it. A flawless seam. It is ours."

"Funny," said Dollop. His voice came out with no floor under it. "I saw a nook."

They looked at each other. Somewhere in Dollop the old argument got to its feet, it's a nook, go on, say it's a nook, and then sat down again. There was a thing living at the bottom of that spot, and it had not asked either of them what the spot was called.

And then Dollop understood what he had done, and it went through him cold. It was Dollop who had sent him, and Dollop who had made it sound like a kindness.

It was not the first time he had felt this exact cold. There was a loop of bright string on his cap, carried down out of the world a long way back and kept. He put a hand up to

it, the way you check a thing is still where it ought to be, and left it alone.

He looked at Prig, thin and rattled and only just up out of the dark, and reached without thinking for the joke that turns a bad thing into a story you tell afterwards. It was not there. He reached again. Nothing. So he stood in the nothing, and worked out that it was the same nothing Prig had been standing in when the shelf went bare, which was a strange thing for a Nook to have in common with a Cranny.

“You said you would mind the exit,” Prig said. There was no bite in it. He was too wrung out for bite. His thimble had been knocked askew in the climb and his shape still would not sit true, and Dollop was standing wrong in a good half-dozen ways that on a normal morning would have earned him a lecture and a diagram, and Prig looked at every bit of it, and set none of it right, and let it all be wrong.

“Yeah,” said Dollop. “Yeah. I know.”

The thing to do now was to leave. Dollop did not leave. He sat down at the mouth of the seams beside Prig, the two of them turned to face opposite ways down the dark, because neither would sit the other’s way round. And he found that he could sit there without covering it over and making it nothing much, so he did.

4. Bouba and Kiki

When you are small, and something has moved in below you, the sensible thing is to go home and pull the dark in after you. Neither of them went home. Neither of them had said the word watch, because saying it would have meant agreeing to it, and they were not agreeing to anything tonight. They were only both still there at the mouth of the seams, Dollop and Prig, side by side, with their eyes on the same patch of dark and neither of them saying so.

The night had come all the way down into the quarter by then. Up above, the great human world had done with itself, a last few booms and shudders through the stone and then not even those, and the cold came sifting down through the seams the way it does when there is nothing left moving to hold it off. Dollop dealt with it by folding himself rounder and rounder until there was almost nothing left out in the open. Prig dealt with it by sitting up straight and declining to notice.

“You’re shivering,” said Dollop.

“I am maintaining my posture.”

“Your posture’s shivering.”

“A Cranny,” said Prig, “does not slump merely because the temperature has formed an opinion.” But he said it without much bite, and Dollop needled back without much either, and the two of them went on trading it low in the dark, more for the sound of company than for the winning of anything. It was a good deal like the mornings over the margin, if either had been fool enough to say so: the same worn track, the same nobody-wins. Only tonight there was nothing between them to win, and the arguing had gone soft and aimless and very nearly kind, a small foolish thing they held up in front of the dark to keep from looking straight into it.

“Anyway,” said Dollop. “S’not so bad down here once you —”

Something rolled over his foot.

It was solid, and it was giggling, or doing the low burbling thing that came to much the same. He lifted the foot to look. It was already across the gap and up the other side, and a moment behind it came the other one, quick and clicking and light as a dropped pin, up the wall and along a ledge and down again with a chirrup of pure delight at being chased, though nothing was chasing it yet.

Bouba and Kiki. Up past their bedtime, if nubbins kept such a thing, and headed straight into the one place in all the quarter they had spent two days refusing to go.

For two days now the pair of them had kept well clear of the way down, and not one grown Hummit had thought to wonder why. But a nubbin is a small bundle of wants with the lid off, and down at the bottom of that dark, whatever else was the matter with it, lay the two things in all the world these two wanted most. One way the dark ran soft and close, a deep tucked-away breath of it coming up out of the stone, the very sort a small cold thing would cross anything to curl into. The other way the seams pinched to a high thin slot with a long lovely drop beneath it, the very sort a small quick thing would climb anything to perch on the lip of. The wrongness that had frightened them off before was still down there. It was only that tonight the wanting was louder than the wrongness, and there was nobody minding them, and so they went.

Dollop felt the old easy machinery start up in him, and he did not stop it. Not our lookout. They'll get bored. They always find their own way back.

"Leave 'em," he said. "They'll get bored and roll off home. They always do." He settled back the crucial half-inch. "Not our night for minding nubbins, is it."

Prig had already risen. He had not risen to go after them. He had risen to do it correctly.

"One does not simply seize a stray nubbin," he said, turning, casting about the dark for the proper footing to begin from. "There is a form for the recovery of an

unplaced juvenile. One establishes the space it belongs to, and one returns it, and if the space cannot be established one conveys it to the—" His hands were shaping the procedure in the air, tidying a thing that would not be tidied. "There is a form. One does not merely grab."

"Course there's a form," said Dollop, and did not move.

"Where are they." Prig had stopped casting about. His voice had gone flat. "Dollop. Where are they."

It ran so smooth and so quiet, that machinery, Dollop would think later, when there was room in him to think anything. You could not hear it working. You could not hear it take the very thing you would have gone down into the dark to keep. The gap in front of them was empty. The burble and the click had gone somewhere down and in, and the somewhere had gone quiet, and it was the wrong quiet, the flat waiting quiet that had come climbing up the seams two nights ago and emptied a hall of shouting Hummits in a breath.

Between the one of them who would not move and the one of them who could not move improperly, the dark had reached up and taken the nubbins, and neither had lifted a hand.

They went down after them the way you go down after a thing like that, which is to say without deciding to. One breath they stood frozen at the mouth. The next they were both scrambling down into the dark faster than

either had ever had cause to move, pouring themselves down the seams together and not once thinking it strange to be doing anything together at all.

Down past where the light gave out. Down where the seams drew so close and so cold that even Prig, who loved a close cold seam, felt them go tight as a throat. A breath came up to meet them, and it was worse than the cold, because it was the very thing Bouba had gone down after, and it meant he had gone all the way. Far below, a drop fell and hit, and what came back up the seam was far too big a sound to have come from a drop. And under it, when they stilled to listen, there was the other sound. The one from the hall. A sound too low to be a sound, that slipped out from under their listening and was only there when no one reached for it.

They found the nubbins by not being able to reach them.

At the bottom the seams opened out into a low uneven floor of stone, blacker than the black around it, and the two nubbins had done the thing small frightened creatures do: they had come apart. Away down where the floor bottomed out, where the dark breathed up thickest, Bouba had pushed himself into a deep crack and stopped making any sound at all. High up the far wall, where the stone pinched to its thin slot above the drop, Kiki had wedged herself into the gap and stopped moving. Between the two of them lay the open floor. They had never in their short loud lives been more than a hand's

reach apart. They talked to each other in a weather of clicks and burbles no one else had ever been let into, and now they sent that talk out across the stone, thin and fast and frightened. And it did not carry. The dark in the middle drank it. Two small voices calling and calling across a little stretch of stone, and not one word of it reaching the other side.

Because there was, of course, something in the middle of the floor.

You did not see it so much as notice the places it would not let you see. A stretch of the dark down there did not behave the way dark behaves. It sat where the eye wanted to slide and would not let the eye slide off it, a great low still shape made out of the stone's own blackness, far too big for the mean little fault it lay folded into and lying in it anyway, easily, the way water lies in a crack in a wall. Two points of yellow came open in the middle of it. They were in no hurry. They did not need to be. It had Bouba wedged down one end and Kiki jammed up the other, and all the patient dark down there to take them in, and there was no gap in that floor it could not pour itself into.

This was the Fannybrook. The quarter had a hundred cozy sayings about the Fannybrook, the way you keep a silly name for a thing you would rather not look at straight, and not one of the sayings had ever mentioned the eyes.

The sum came to them both in the same moment, and it was a simple one with an answer neither could stand. Dollop could reach the low crack. Prig could reach the high gap. But the thing lay between each of them and the child that was farther off, and the instant either of them broke into the open to cross that floor it would have all the time in the world to choose, and the two of them there watching while it did. Go for Bouba, and Kiki was the dark's. Go for Kiki, and Bouba was. Go together and be caught together in the open, and it had only to wait.

“Right,” said Dollop. “Big fellow. Very big fellow. That’s a —”

Nothing came.

“That’s a big fellow.”

It went out flat into the cold and lay there. He stood with his mouth open and nothing left to put in it. Twice in two days, and this time two small lives were waiting on the other side of it.

“There is a procedure for the recovery of an imperilled party,” said Prig, beside him. “One secures the nearer first, one—” His hand went up to set his thimble straight, and his thimble was already straight, and he set it straighter. “One secures— there is an order to it, there is a correct order, there is—” And that stopped too, because there was no procedure, there had never been a

procedure, and Prig stood at the lip of the dark with the correct order of the world coming apart in his hands.

Two of them, then, at the edge of the dark, each holding the snapped end of the one tool he had.

And then Dollop stopped hunting for the way out.

He looked at it the way he looked at a room: for the half-breath before a scuffle, for the small settling of weight before a thing goes over.

And the beast, it turned out, was only a room. A great cold room with a want in it. He watched the huge dark shape and let it teach him its rhythm the way his corner had taught him its drip. The yellow eyes drifted, down to the low crack, holding there, up to the high gap, holding there, back again, a slow certain swing, and at the far end of each swing all its attention was on the one child and clean off the other.

“Prig,” said Dollop, not taking his eyes off it. “When I say. Not before. You’re going up for the high one.”

“I— that is not a recognized—”

“There’s no recognized anything. There’s just me telling you when, and you being faster than you’ve ever been in your life. Can you do that.”

A pause, in the cold. Prig had been two days without one solid thing to stand on, and here was one: somebody

telling him exactly what to do, and needing him to do it exactly right. His back went straight again.

“...Tell me when,” said Prig.

What followed was the least dignified rescue those seams had ever seen, and it worked.

Dollop watched the swing of the eyes and Dollop called it, and when the great attention went sliding down to the low crack he sent Prig up, and Prig went up the far wall like a thread pulled tight, thin as he had ever willed himself, in through the high slot and around the little frozen shape jammed there and out again with her gathered against him before the eyes came back. Kiki did not click. She only held on.

Prig was breathless, his starched front gone entirely.

“Dollop. The one that went down. He is right down at the bottom of it, and he will not come up, he will not—”

“I know. I’ve got him. When the eyes come to you next—hold her, hold her, don’t you let her go— right— now—”

And round Dollop, who could not have threaded that high gap in a hundred years, did the one thing round is good for. When the yellow eyes swung up to Kiki and Prig, Dollop poured himself down into the mouth of the crack, filling it, stopping it, a plug of Nook in the one gap the cold wanted most, and he got a hand round the small burrowed shape at the bottom and it was shaking so hard

it scarcely felt like a nubbin at all, and he said the only true thing he had left in him, which was, “Come on, little one. Come on. Not tonight,” and he drew Bouba up out of the dark and into his arms.

They came up too fast and never fast enough. The beast did not chase them. It did not need to hurry, and perhaps that was the only reason the four of them lived. But it rose behind them in the stone all the same, the low sound coming up after them, taking its time, and they did not stop until they were up at the mouth of the seams with the gray nightlight on them, the beast below and the four of them above, and alive.

Kiki had her small face pushed into the join of Prig’s neck and would not lift it. Bouba had gone limp and heavy against Dollop and was making a faint wrung-out little hum. For a while that was the only sound any of the four of them made. And Prig, now that the thing was done and there was nothing left in the world to be exact about, began quietly to come apart.

Not weeping. Prig would not have known the form for it. It was his shape that went. All the holding he had been holding let go at once, and a Cranny who lets go runs thin, thinner than he means to, thin and then too thin, his edges spilling off into the cold. His thimble had been knocked crooked somewhere in the climb, and his hands, when he tried to lift them to it, were shaking far too hard to set it right. He tried twice. The second time he gave it

up and only held the nubbin and shook, with his thimble askew and no way to mend it, which for Prig was a small nakedness.

Dollop watched him shake. It was, he thought, none of his business. He shifted Bouba into the crook of one arm anyway, and reached over with the other, and took hold of Prig's thimble, and set it dead upright. Centered. Correct. The way Prig would have set it himself, if only his hands had been his own just then.

Prig went very still.

Dollop took his hand back and looked at the dark instead of at Prig.

"There," he said. "Can't have you facing a monster crooked, can we. Bad form."

It came out small, and it came out late, and there was no getting away in it at all.

For a moment Prig said nothing whatever. On any other night there would have been corrections, and a row of them: that one does not lay hands on another Hummit's hat, that the line was his and not Dollop's to be saying, that "bad form" was a slovenly little scrap of a much finer principle. Not one of them came. He looked at Dollop looking at the dark. By slow degrees Prig stopped running thin, and his shape began, carefully, to gather itself back toward the shape of a Cranny.

“...That is my line,” he said. His voice was not steady. “That is my line, and you have said it wrong.” A breath. “...Thank you.”

They sat a while longer, because none of them could yet face moving, and the nubbins would not be set down in any case. And because they were the two they were, the old thing tried, once, to start itself up.

The Both was right there. Just down the near seam, no distance at all, the spot they had shouted themselves hoarse over in the hall and bled pride over for as long as either could remember, the most fought-for foot of dark in the quarter. Some worn old part of Prig got as far as it is, when all is said, a cranny, and now that we are down here, and there it stopped. Because down the far seam, patient in the dark, lay the thing that did not care in the least whose the spot was, that would take a Nook and a Cranny with the same unhurried appetite, and there was no way of winning the Both that was worth a single grain of grit while that was true.

“Dollop.” Prig was quiet a moment. “We cannot do that again.”

“No,” said Dollop.

“The two of us. Alone. It will come again, it will surely come again, and it has all the deep to choose its ground, and there will not always be a high gap and a low crack and a—” He stopped, and began again, plainer than

Dollop had ever heard him speak. “The two of us is not enough.”

Dollop looked down the near seam at the Both, the little contested nothing of a place, and found he could not any longer remember why it had ever seemed worth a morning’s quarrel, let alone a war. “Take the whole lot, though. Both peoples. Every Nook and every Cranny, all in the one place, pointed the one way for once instead of at each other.”

“Both peoples. As one.” Prig said it like the opening of an old ruling, tasting a thing far too large for the words it came in. “There is no precedent for it. None. In all the Etiquette there is no precedent for the two peoples acting as one. Not once. Not ever.”

“Course there isn’t.” Dollop got, slowly, to his feet, with Bouba held secure against him. “And we’re going to have to make them do it anyway, aren’t we. You and me.”

Prig looked up at him. Then he got up too, upright and careful, Kiki still clinging on at his neck, and he did not disagree, and from Prig a thing left undisagreed with was as settled as any ruling ever got.

And so the two of them turned their backs on the Both.

They did it without ceremony, and without quite noticing they were doing it. The spot that a week before neither of them would have given up for anything, they left behind

them in the dark, un-won and un-lost and gone suddenly small, and they began the long climb up out of the seams toward the sleeping quarter, where two whole peoples lay curled in their corners and their crannies, each and every one of them dead certain that the other lot were the enemy. Dollop went first. Prig came behind, to be sure the round fool did not miss a turning. Bouba rode against the one of them and Kiki against the other, and neither nubbin was any kind of anything yet, and both of them, for the first time in two days, had stopped being afraid.

5. Act as One

It was full morning up in the world by the time the quarter had been got up out of its nooks and its crannies and coaxed down into the Great Commons. You would never have known it down there. Morning in the deep places is only a paler dark, and the Commons had been standing since before anybody's grandmother and had never once troubled itself about what hour it was.

It had not been this full since the night the shouting stopped. Every Nook for streets around came rolling in low and settled close for the heat of company, and every Cranny came drawn up thin and stood apart, and the two lots arranged themselves without a soul deciding it onto their two old sides. Down the middle lay a bare strip of floor nobody would stand in, and the cold sat in it and had it to itself. Word had run ahead of them in the night, passed hand to hand down the seams: that the two who went down after the nubbins had come back up alive. It had brought the quarter out of bed. It had not, Dollop saw the moment he came in, brought them out brave.

He stood at the mouth of the hall with Bouba gone heavy and asleep against his chest, and the room came to him all at once and without his asking, the way rooms did. It

was frightened. It was loud with it, and the noise was going nowhere, and not one Hummit in it was going to move.

He drew the breath. The nearest faces came round to him and got ready to laugh.

And they would have laughed, and the fear would have gone small, and they would all have gone home, and the thing in the deep would still be sitting where it sat.

“It’s down there,” he said instead, and pitched it just loud enough to carry, and did not dress it up. “You’ve all heard by now. It’s down there, and it’s big, and it’s cold, and it doesn’t care one grain of grit whose spot it’s sitting in. Yours. Ours. Makes no odds to it.” He shifted Boubas higher against him. “I’d give a lot to tell you it was somebody else’s to see to. It isn’t. It’s ours. The whole quarter’s. Rotten luck all round.”

The hall did not like it. The noise dropped and thickened and turned back in on itself, and a great many small folk looked at the floor and at each other and not at Dollop. And into the middle of that, up off the Cranny benches, rose the tallest hat in the quarter.

“One hardly,” said Nettle, “settles a monster by holding a public meeting about it.” She let the height of herself come up slow, and the hat came up over the heads around her, and she gathered the room in one long cool sweep that took in the Nooks and found them wanting,

and took in her own frightened Crannies and found them wanting too. "And whatever it is the two of you imagine you are proposing, I will save you the breath. There is no ruling for two peoples acting as one. There has never been one. It is not done, and it will not begin to be done because a fat Nook has frightened himself down a seam. I shall not dignify it further."

She knew it was a good stroke, and she stood in it and waited for the answer that was owed her. And every soul in the Commons turned at once, and by long habit, to Prig. This was his. Nettle had cited, and Prig would cite better, and the hall settled itself to watch it happen.

Prig drew the breath to do it. His hand went up on its own and set his thimble a shade straighter. The first grand word of a Settlement got as far as his teeth.

He let it go back down.

"No," he said. "There is not." He stood as straight as he could make himself stand, with Kiki clinging small and sharp at his collar. "There is no ruling for it. Nettle is right. And I will tell you something worse, which is that I have recited rulings the whole of my life, and I could not now swear to a single one of you that I have ever had one of them remembered right." A small sound went round the Cranny benches, the sound of a people feeling the wall they leaned on lean back. "There is a ruling I have carried since I was a nubbin that nobody had much use for. It is

the one that first made an elder look at me and be glad I was in the room. I have never once taken it back out to see if it was true.” He was quiet a moment. “I am not going to pretend, down here, with that waiting below us, that being right was ever worth what it cost me. Let me be wrong. I would rather be wrong, and have all of you, than be correct by myself.”

Nobody corrected him. There was nothing left to correct. He stayed where he was, on his feet, thin and straight, and let the quiet go on happening to him.

The hall looked at Dollop and Prig, standing where the bare aisle had been. Nobody had yet said how. There was only the dark, and the thing in it, and nothing at all in that for a frightened Hummit to take hold of.

Then Dob spoke.

He was near the front, small and unhurried under the tin funnel, and he had been turning the argument over while the clever ones talked, and he had got to the end of it.

“It’s not hungry,” he said. “It’s empty. Same as the spot.” He looked round at them, patient, in no hurry to be believed. “You can’t fight a cold. There’s nothing there to hit. You fill it.” He said the next part as though it were the plainest thing in the world. “The Both’s a nook. And it’s a cranny. So it wants filling both ways at once. Round where it’s round. Thin where it’s thin. Both. So it’s all of us. Not turns.”

The hall went quiet in a different key. Near the back a Nook said, “Fill it,” slow, trying the word in his mouth. And over in the Cranny benches somebody called for the ruling, and then, since a ruling has to come from somewhere, somebody called for Grommet.

Grommet was got awake under his gray felt, and gathered himself with the great dim fondness of an elder about to hand down the law of the ages.

“The ruling,” he said, “is perfectly plain. It’s the old one. It goes back to the spring of the great, the very great, before ever we were two of anything, back when a corner and a seam were only, were only—” His head sank by soft degrees. “—only the once,” he finished, to nobody, and slept.

Somebody laughed, kindly. Somebody else said that was Grommet all over. And the sentence he had not finished lay on the floor of the Commons where he had dropped it, with the whole quarter standing round it, and not one of them bent down to look.

But the hall was moving. It moved the way real crowds move, which is not one bit like a cheer. A Nook near the front got up because he could not go on sitting there while a fat neighbor and a starched stranger were being braver than he was in front of everybody. Two Crannies got up because their own great stickler had put his book down in the dark and gone on without it. Then an untidy

shuffling handful of both, and then more, and the fear had not gone out of a single one of them. Only the sitting still had got worse than the fear.

Nettle held on to the last, up on the high tips of herself, her hat swaying over a hall that had stopped waiting for her leave. She watched it happen. She watched the two sides come up off their benches and mix in the aisle nobody stood in, and she saw exactly where it was going to leave her, which was up here on her own with nobody to be right at. Something went bare and quick across her face. She got it back, but not fast enough. Then she drew her height down into herself and came off the bench like a Cranny at the head of a procession, and led, from the back of it, a great many people who had set off without her.

So the quarter, both its peoples, went down into the dark together, frightened, mixed, and already arguing about how.

They came down the seams the way the two of them had come down alone the day before, into the cold and the old-rain smell of the stone and the far-off drip that fell and struck and made, in all that stone, a noise entirely out of proportion to a drip. Only now it was a whole people going down, and the sound of that many small feet on the wet was its own comfort and its own new dread, both at once. You could not be brave for yourself in a crowd like that. You could only be brave because stopping would

have shamed you in front of the neighbor at your shoulder, which, when you are very small and the dark is very large, turns out to be nearly as good.

The Both was where it had always been, down the near seam, no distance at all, the little contested foot of dark the quarter had shouted itself hoarse over for longer than any of them could remember. Dollop had handed Bouba off at the top to a steady old Nook who would mind both nubbins, and had done it slower than he meant to, and Prig had unpicked Kiki from his collar and given her over the same way, and neither of them had said anything about it.

Then they stood at the mouth of the spot with the quarter pressing up behind them, and looked at the thing they had come down to fill.

The Both was a bad place to look at for long. Come at it one way it was a snug corner, round and dark and kind, the sort of fold a Nook would sigh and settle into. Come at it the other and it was a deep clean seam a Cranny would call home and be proud of how cold it was. It was the same small dark both times, and you could never catch both at once. The eye slid off the trying. And under the coziness, threaded right through it, was the drop, the sense that the snug corner had no back to it and the tidy seam had no bottom, that this was somewhere you could curl up in and go on falling out of forever.

“Right,” said Dollop, low. He turned his back on it and faced the crowd instead, because looking at it was no help and looking at them might be. Then he began putting Nooks into the Both. “You lot,” to the Nooks, “the round’s ours. In you go, close as you can pack, snuggest first, and leave no cold behind you. You there, you’re a good plug, you take the deep fold. You two, up under the lip. Go on.”

“That is not how one fills a seam,” said Prig at Dollop’s shoulder, to a great many Nooks who were not filling a seam and had no intention of ever filling one, and who were at that moment stuffing themselves cheerfully into round corners with no method whatever. “There is a correct way to hold a seam. There is an order to it. One does not simply wedge oneself in wherever there is a—will you tell them there is a proper order, they will do it all wrong—”

“Prig. Mate.” Dollop did not stop moving Nooks. “Shove up, get in close, leave no cold. That’s the ruling. Start to finish.” He caught sight of Prig’s face and softened his voice, half a needle and half a kindness. “You can write it up afterward, I promise. Every seam by name. Footnotes and all.”

And Prig turned to his own people. There was nothing in any Etiquette to tell him how this went. He had said so out loud, in front of every soul he had ever wanted to impress, and he had lived through it, and now he set about it

anyway. Crannies went into the seam in good order, tall and thin and tight, this one above that one, each fitted to his own length, drawn up every crack the way the Nooks were packing down every fold. And with the two of them working it from the middle, the place began to come together. Round and packed where the place was a corner. Thin and tight where it was a seam. Both at once, and by both peoples, which nobody alive had ever let it be.

But the Both was stranger than a clean sorting, the way the deep places always are, with more insides than they have any right to. There were angles left over that belonged to neither kind, wrong-fitted corners no round shape would go into and thin dead-ends no skinny one could reach. And the two worst of them lay together at the heart of the place: a high corner that wanted rounding, and a low seam that wanted a thin thing drawn down into it, and no Nook could do the one and no Cranny the other.

So Dollop and Prig took them. There was nobody else.

Prig looked up at the high corner he was meant to round himself into. He had been here before. The day the nubbins first tumbled into his seam he had gone down after the one wedged in the low dark corner and folded himself into a curve he was not built for, and got about two breaths out of it before it threw him out again, skinny, with Dollop standing there enjoying it. He did not

mention any of that now. He fitted himself up into the corner, thin body bending where thin things would rather not, and he began, badly, to round.

And Dollop looked at the low seam, and drew his soft round self out long and fine, thinner than he had ever willingly made himself, every part of him wanting to spring back to its comfortable heap, and poured himself down into the crack until there was no cold left in it. He had three ways out of that place, quick and soft and near, and he knew every turn of all three. He did not take any of them. He held the seam.

Then the thing in the deep looked up.

It arrived in the stone. A low sound with no bottom to it, felt in the soles of them and in the roots of their teeth, and then the air had it too. A sound too low to be a sound. One spirit on his own can tell himself he imagined a thing like that. A hundred of them, packed shape to shape, felt it arrive in the same instant and felt each other feel it, and after that there was no telling anybody anything.

Then the seam began to go plain. The heat went out of the stone under their hands. The old-rain smell thinned away to nothing. Overhead the great human world was still shifting and grinding away at its own affairs, and then it was not, and what stood in the gap it left was a cold that had brought nothing with it at all. It did not blow. It did not smell of anything. It was only there, and

coming nearer, and there was nothing in it to be told apart.

And far down where the dark ran thinnest, it came up to meet them.

It came on four soft feet. A paw the size of a door came down on the wet stone and made no sound whatever, and then the second one, and a body poured up after them through a gap that could not possibly have held it, black laid over black, more shadow than fur. Long stiff hairs stood out from the dark where its face should have been and combed the air ahead of it, feeling for anything alive. Somewhere behind, in no hurry, a tail went on moving. And high up in all that black two points of yellow opened, and narrowed to a pair of standing slits, and came down along the packed seam looking, and taking their time about it.

When you are the size of a Nook, this is not an animal. It is a piece of the night that has got hungry and come out.

And this time it did not find one frightened spirit on his own. It came up into a wall of quarter, both peoples wedged shape to shape into every fold and every crack the place had, and there was no thin cold seam left to pour down, and no forgotten little dark left forgotten. The Both was held. There was nowhere in it for a cold to be.

It was not a battle. Nobody struck at it. There was nothing there to strike. It was only holding on, which from

close up is a small shaking business: a hundred little folk clenched into shapes half of them were never made for, trembling, some of them weeping without any fuss. Prig's rounded corner burned to snap straight and he held it past the burning. Dollop's drawn-out seam ached to heap itself soft and he held it past the aching.

"Hold on, Prig," he said. "Just hold on."

"I am holding." Prig's voice shook and his shape shook and his full careful words did not. They were the last thing of his to give way. "I am. Holding."

And somewhere down the packed seam old Sedge, who had no breath left to spend on anything and nothing left to hold to, fell back on his one old word and said it over and over into the cold. "Aveen. Aveen. Aveen." A round Nook and a thin Cranny pressed shape to shape in the same small dark, and the whole quarter gathered into one held thing, and the old word for it going up over their heads as plain as plain. Nobody had the breath to hear that it fitted. It sat there in the cold, exactly true, and nobody came to claim it.

The great shape looked for a long patient while. It was in no hurry. It felt its way along the held length of the Both for the gap that is always there somewhere, the forgotten fold, the little unheld dark, the way in.

Halfway along, it very nearly had one. Nettle's arms had been shaking since the eyes came up, and she had not

mentioned it, and where the seam ran narrowest her grip went. The shape she had been holding came undone. Cold got into the space where she had been, one thin finger, feeling.

It got that far. The Nook packed in under her put his back into the gap and took her weight without being asked and without a word about it afterwards, and held her there until she had her hold again. She was slow getting it, and she said nothing at all, and neither did he.

And that was the nearest it came. Every fold it felt into had a small frightened Hummit in it already, holding on.

It went back down.

It made no roar and no rush. The yellow eyes were there, and then they were lower, and then they were not there. It took itself back down the thin dark into the deep without hurrying, promising nothing, telling them nothing at all about what it had been. The cold went out of the seam behind it. The old-rain smell came creeping back in. Far overhead a door in the human world boomed shut, and the ordinary weight of things was where it belonged again, and the drip fell and struck and was only a drip.

For a while the quarter did not dare come apart. It held on long past the needing to, clenched round and thin and shaking in the dark, nobody willing to be the first one to believe it.

Then a grip let go somewhere down the seam, and the rest went with it, and the held shape came apart all at once.

They came apart the graceless way they had gone together. Crannies sprang thin and twanged upright all up the seam, snapping back to true so fast their thimbles rattled. Nooks let go of shapes they had no business holding and flumped down into their own soft heaps with small glad grunts, round again, themselves again, Dollop springing back roundest of the lot with a wheeze of pure relief. And the packed quarter, both its peoples, stood loose and blinking in the little foot of dark they had come all this way down to save, jammed shoulder to shoulder in it, round against thin with the cold gone clean out, alive, and with not the first idea in the world what to do about any of it.

The two nubbins came pouring down the seam then, having wriggled loose of the steady old Nook the moment the fright was off, and they tumbled straight through the middle of that solemn crowd, bare-headed, no kind of anything yet, entirely unimpressed. Bouba rolled across three sets of feet. Kiki shot up a Cranny and clicked at the ceiling. Nobody shooed them.

Dollop was somewhere in the thick of it, not off in any private corner, only one round Nook among the many, with Prig gone thin and upright at Dollop's shoulder. The quarter stood in the Both and breathed. Nobody had

begun to fight. Nobody had yet remembered to. Both peoples stood pressed into the one small dark they had spent their long feud unable to share, and looked at one another, and looked at the place they were standing in, and not one of them, not one, said whose it was.

6. Back to It

Nobody said whose it was.

They stood in it a while longer instead, both peoples wedged into the spot they had just saved, and the cold stayed gone, and far overhead the human world went on about its enormous business and meant nothing at all by it. Then somebody's legs gave out and sat him down, and that appeared to be the signal. The quarter went back up out of the deep the way it had come down, in a long straggling line, except that the line had got itself thoroughly mixed up somewhere below and not one of them troubled to sort it out.

They came up into the last of the daylight leaking down through the joists, and the quarter took them back without remarking on it. The nooks were still nooks and the crannies were still crannies, and the tucked-away warren of the place sat exactly where they had left it, unbothered, faintly dusty, smelling of old rain in stone. When you have spent a day being certain you are about to lose everything, the sight of your own doorway doing nothing in particular is very nearly too much.

Dollop sat down on the lip of his own nook and did not go into it.

That was strange enough that he noticed himself doing it. The good dark was right there behind him, his own shape and nobody's business, and everything in him that knew exactly where to be at a moment like this was pointing over his shoulder and saying in you go. He stayed on the lip. Out where the quarter could see him, with his legs hanging, and his bottle-cap shoved back off his eye for once, and a great deal of noise going on that had nothing to do with him.

Only the noise was wrong. He kept listening to it and it kept coming out wrong.

He knew the pitch of a border argument two turns away, and the particular hush that means somebody has just said a thing they will be apologizing for by supper. This was neither. This was the sound of a great many small proud folk who had run clean out of things to be cross about and had not yet worked out what to put there instead.

It went on all that evening and into the next morning, and there has never been anything like it in that quarter before or since.

A Cranny came up the seam-way carrying a Nook's hat, a fine dented bottle-top somebody had lost in the dark, and gave it back. Just gave it back, and did not make a point

of the giving, and went away again. Two old rivals who had been circling one another over the same doorstep since before anyone could remember stood shoulder to shoulder outside it, saying nothing whatever, and discovered they were quite content. Crumbs went across lines that had never once been crossed on purpose. A Nook got a good way into explaining to a Cranny, at length and with feeling, how you keep the damp out of a fold in winter, before it occurred to her who she was explaining it to. She carried on. The Cranny listened, and asked a question, and meant it.

Nobody was any good at it. They had the manners for a feud, worn smooth by generations of use, and no manners at all for this, so the whole quarter went about being kind to one another with the stiff careful courtesy of folk handling something they have been told is valuable and suspect they are about to drop.

“Here,” said a Nook, holding out a hat to the Cranny it belonged to. “Your — that’s yours. Come off you in the crush. And I.” He stopped. He was not going to get to the end of that sentence and both of them knew it.

The Cranny took the hat and turned it round in her hands and did not put it on. “Thank you,” she said. “Yes. Quite.” And then, because the pause had gone on rather, “Drier up here.”

“It is,” said the Nook, who had been handed something to agree with and would have agreed with anything at all. “It’s much drier up here.”

Dollop watched it from the lip of his nook and felt something go through him that he had no word for and did not want one.

He could have rescued the pair of them in a breath. Two words about the hat, delivered just so, and the Cranny would have laughed and the Nook would have gone red and grateful, and the awkward tender business would have been tidied away where nobody had to stand in it. And he would have been off the lip and gone in before either of them thought to look round for him.

He let it go by, and stayed where he was, and had his morning.

It could not last, and it did not, and honestly it lasted longer than anyone had a right to expect.

What broke it was not a challenge, or a slight, or one of the great grinding old grievances that had kept the quarter in business for generations. It was a mild young Cranny of no particular standing. He had been staring down at the seam-mouth for some time with his head on one side, thinking. And he said, into the pleasantest lull of the pleasantest morning the quarter had ever had:

“So whose is it, then?”

The lull went on for one more breath.

“The spot,” he said, in case anyone had missed his meaning. “The one we saved. Whose is it?”

You could hear the whole quarter arrive at the question together, the way you hear a floor take weight.

And then the place went up like dry reed in a hot summer, because that question had exactly one answer for every single Hummit standing there and no two of them were the same. A Nook and a Cranny can go without food, without sleep and without dignity, but not for very long without this.

“Well, it is plainly a seam,” said somebody.

“It’s plainly a nook, you great thin streak of nothing——”

Nettle got up onto the rim of the seam-mouth where everybody could see her, and the shouting made room. She was, and it should be said plainly, magnificent. She had spent a day and a night being frightened and useless and packed into a crack with people she despised, and now the world had handed her back the one floor she knew how to stand on, and she stood on it.

“One need hardly debate it,” she said, in the voice that came down on you from a height. “One has only to observe. Every seam of that place was held by Crannies. We drew ourselves up every crack of it, at considerable personal cost, and a space held by Crannies is by the

plainest reading a cranny. I should think that settles the matter, and I should think we might all be spared——”

“Held by us and all, weren’t it?” This from a broad Nook near the front, arms folded, thoroughly enjoying himself. “Every fold and every angle of it, round as you like, packed out solid. So by your reading it’s a nook. Ta very much. Very good of you to settle it.”

“I shall not be quibbled at,” said Nettle, going up another notch, “by somebody who wears his hat on his eyebrow. I said the seams. If the corners cannot follow so plain a reading as that, one hardly wonders that they are forever mislaying their own doorsteps.”

“There she goes.”

And so it went for the rest of that day, and it was, if anything, worse than anything that had gone before, because now both sides had something entirely new to be right about.

They began citing their own bodies at one another.

“I had my whole self round that top angle for the best part of an afternoon, and I’ve the ache in me yet, and I say that makes it a nook.”

“You were only up there because a Cranny could not fit, which proves the place is seam-natured throughout——”

“By the ruling of the Long Cold, any space a Nook has filled is a nook——”

“That ruling was struck out.”

“It was never struck out, you’re thinking of the other one ——”

Somebody thought to ask Dob, on the grounds that he had been right last time.

“It’s not whose it is,” said Dob. “It’s kept now. Same as the spot.”

Which was true, and no use to anybody whatever, because whose it was had been the entire point since breakfast. Nobody took it up. There was no arguing to be had with it, and arguing was what they had come for, and Dob let them get on without him.

“Prig! Somebody fetch Prig, he’ll have it by name and number——”

“Prig’s not in it.”

“What d’you mean he’s not in it? He’s always in it.”

He was not in it. Out beyond the shouting he heard his own name go past him and stay past him, and he stood where he was.

The crowd had remembered Grommet instead. There is always somebody who remembers the oldest Nook in the

quarter at exactly the moment he is least likely to be of use, and that is very nearly what elders are for.

“Grommet! Grommet. Settle it. What’s the ruling?”

Grommet came up out of his nap by degrees, and his drooping gray brim went back off his eyes.

“Ah,” said Grommet. “Now. The ruling upon it’s perfectly clear, and it’s the old ruling, from the spring of the great. The great.”

He thought about it.

He went back to sleep.

Nobody minded in the least. Nobody had been going to listen. The argument rolled straight across him and went on up the seams, and Grommet slept on under his brim with the noise of his own people going by overhead like weather.

And through the middle of the grand reconvened business came Bouba and Kiki, at speed, having discovered that the world was no longer frightening and was therefore theirs.

They were bored. They had been bored since roughly the moment the danger stopped. Kiki went up the wall of the seam-mouth in three quick jabs and got to the very top of Nettle’s hat, and sat there clicking, and set the tallest hat in the quarter swaying. Bouba went the other way

entirely, low and burbling, straight through the forest of everyone's feet, and burrowed into the first soft lap available, which belonged to a Nook in the middle of shouting about the Long Cold and who scooped him up one-handed without breaking off.

"Get down from there. Down." A Cranny reached up and unhooked Kiki off the swaying hat by the middle, and set her on the floor, and told her off in the way you tell off your own. "You do not climb a hat of standing. It is not done."

"That's mine, that is," said the Nook comfortably, hoisting Bouba onto his hip, still arguing over the top of his head. "No, you stop there, you're all right."

Neither of the two grown Hummits noticed. Not one soul in that packed roaring quarter noticed that a people who could not agree on the ownership of one small dark place had just settled, without a word or a thought or a second's hesitation, whose nubbin was whose.

Bouba and Kiki were bare-headed still. Bare-headed as the day they turned up, no hat on either of them, and by any reckoning anybody had, no kind of anything.

Kiki got loose and went straight back up the wall.

Nettle felt the hat go again and did not look up. Her hand went to the brim and steadied it and stopped there. Every slight she had ever been dealt was up in that hat, a notch

apiece, and a day ago this one would have been in it by supper. She left it at the height it was, and went back to being right about the seams.

Out past the edge of the crowd, where the noise was no longer worth shouting over, two Hummits stood who were not arguing.

They had come away without discussing it, which was itself a sort of discussion. Dollop was round again, comfortably and completely round, back in his own true shape and in no hurry to be anything else. Prig stood beside him, thin and upright, his thimble knocked crooked in the crush and left crooked, which for Prig was practically lying down.

Below them the quarter roared happily on.

“Listen to that,” said Dollop.

“I would rather not.”

“No. Nor me.” He did listen, though, for a bit. “Your lot are losing.”

“My lot are not losing. My lot are being quibbled at.”

Then Dollop said, “That word.”

Prig turned his head.

“The old fellow’s word. That he kept on with, down in it, when we were.” Dollop stopped. “When we were holding,”

he said. "It's been in my head all morning and I couldn't tell you a single thing it means."

Prig did not say that the meaning was a matter for those who had studied the old tongue. He did not say that the word was improper, or unrecorded, or that there was no ruling upon it. All four had come up in good order. He could have had any one of them out in a breath.

"No," he said.

And then, because it was true:

"No. But it was the right word, I think. For whatever that was."

Neither of them filled in what.

They stood there. Somewhere down in the crowd Sedge was still going, patient and entirely unheard, saying his one old word over the top of a shouting match about the Long Cold. "Aveen," he said, to all of them, to any of them. "Aveen." Two Crannies went past him and one of them patted his arm, meaning well, meaning stop.

Dollop and Prig turned their heads toward the sound at the same moment, and looked at the old fellow saying it, and did not understand a bit of it.

Then Dollop reached over and straightened the crooked thimble where it sat, and Prig let him do it.

The argument went on into the evening, and got louder when the light went, and by dark there were rulings coming out that nobody had ever heard before and everybody's grandmother had sworn by. Down below all the noise, the Both sat where it had always sat, in its own small dark, being a corner and being a fall and being a nook and being a cranny, all at once, and apologizing for none of it. It was tended and held and thoroughly lived-in, and it was asked whose it was over and over and never once said, and both peoples were prepared to go on asking at the tops of their voices for as long as it took.

And in the middle of all that, in the one spot the whole quarter was shouting about, Bouba and Kiki had crawled off and gone to sleep with their bare heads tucked in, curled up together in the only place in the world that was shaped like both of them.

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