

A Way of Life

Apart from occasional rapid movements it was almost impossible to see the orange brown fur of the dormouse among the autumn leaves. Russet brown and yellow leaves had blown from the beech-wood, across the common to mound up in hedge bottoms. In the late afternoon twilight, colours and shapes merged into a lightly pattern carpet. The dormouse was about early this evening. Already he could feel the winter curl-up calling him. Time was getting short. He had to gain weight before his long sleep – and there was plenty to eat.



Seeing blackberries higher in the hedge, he scampered quickly through the leaves, to climb the slender honeysuckle branches with easy acrobatic movements, his long tail flickering between the dying leaves. Soon he was tucking into the blackberries, staining his fur to match his dark eyes and blackened whiskers. He was so engrossed in this luxurious delicacy he had not noticed a young rabbit approaching. The grey rabbit had wandered from his home patch, tempted by fresh grass shoots close to the hedge bottom.

The dormouse was startled when the rabbit said, *I don't know how you eat those squashy things. They make such a mess!*

They're a lot more interesting than grass, replied the dormouse, tearing a strip of honeysuckle bark to help the blackberries go down. *You should try this honeysuckle! There's so much food about. I've found acorns and chestnuts and hazel nuts on the common, and best of all I climbed right to the top of the cherry tree. The cherries were fabulous!*

The rabbit was not greatly impressed. Climbing trees was not a sport which attracted him. He happily left things like that to squirrels and birds.

If you like any of those things you're welcome to share them, said the dormouse. *I have far more than I can ever eat here. It will go to waste otherwise.*

We don't like coming out here much, the rabbit explained. *There's the fox.*

Nonsense, scoffed the dormouse. *I've been out here every night through the summer and not seen a fox - nor smelt one come to that. Madam Fox will be busy looking for you in the woods.*

The rabbit shuddered to the tip of his white scut and scampered away back to the safety of the family burrow among the trees. Once there he soon spread the word that there was a banquet for all out on the common and he had it on good authority, the place was safe.

A few weeks later, the common and its hedges was alive with rabbits, mice, squirrels, sparrows, crows and even humans picking berries from the hedge. The dormouse felt good that they had accepted his invitation to share his store. However, a weariness soon caught up with him, brought on by the waning autumn light and a very satisfied feeling. Full and fat, he re-lined his nest, hidden in the lower reaches of the hedge, curled himself in and soon fell into that deep slumber which knows nothing of the frost and wet snow of winter.

Meanwhile, his guests were sharing a rather different way of life across the common. In the milder spells of winter squirrels woke and were soon squabbling with rats and mice, accusing them of stealing winter stores. Sparrows, robins and hordes of starlings waged war with hedgehogs as they cleaned the land of slugs and snails. Crows and magpies swooped with shadowed wings to snatch grains and grass seeds from under the noses of terrified field-mice. And the fox! The fox had re-discovered a long neglected hunting ground in these fields of bitter conflict.

All the while the dormouse slept peacefully in his hedgerow nest with its hidden door, oblivious of the turmoil, caused by his generous invitation to share the goodness of the land. Even in his dreams he was deaf to voices raised all around him:

Get away! That's mine!

I was here first!

My needs are greater than yours!

That's not fair!

I worked harder than you. You don't deserve ..!

I've been around these parts much longer than you!

What will you give ME, if I give you ...?

And all accompanied by growls and grunts, enough to terrorise the whole neighbourhood.

In Spring the sleeper woke to a peaceful world where thin evening sunshine promised another year of plenty. Stillness lay like a mist across the common.

*In the human world we know the best way to live
is like the dormouse – the way of generous sharing,
restful content, trusting for another summer and another harvest.*