

AYLCEE TARHA

**ADVENTURES
OF
NICK AND TOCK**

COLLECTION OF STORIES



ÉDITIONS AYLCÉE-TARHA@AYLCÉE-TARHA ÉDITIONS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Children: (under parental supervision)

- Advent Calendar
- Clara, a Witch's Love, Vol. 1, fantasy tale
- Clara and the Stone Circle, Vol. 2, fantasy tale
- Winning Square, The LMJ2, fantasy tale
- The Feudal Trio, The LMJ1, fantasy tale
- The Christmas Book
- The Elemental Peoples, collection of tales

Teenagers: (under parental supervision)

- Dualities, romance novel
- Halloween, collection of unpublished stories
- The Elemental Peoples, collection of tales

Adults:

- Dualities, romance novel
- Epidamos, science fiction/fantasy novel
- Feudalities, Vol. 1, heroic fantasy novel
- Freedoms, Vol. 2, heroic fantasy novel
- Fears in Troubled Waters, novel Police officer
- Forbidden Territory, a modern novel

Free

- Everyday Alphabet Book
- Christmas Alphabet Book
- Animal Alphabet Book
- Flower Alphabet Book
- Advent Calendar
- Tales of Yesteryear, collection of Tales 1 and 2
- Stray Short Stories, text collection 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5

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Aylcée Tarha

La Roucoule

1, Chemin de la Bichoune

-F-15400 Menet

or by email:

aylcee.livres@gmail.com

SUMMARY

Preface

Adventure 1

Adventure 2

Adventure 3

Preface

Once upon a time, there was a majestic tree in an enchanted forest that was home to a colony of animals, each more different than the next. It was a hundred-year-old oak tree with large roots that dug deep into the earth. It was the gateway to dreams! At every festival, a people of tiny elves would emerge and gather in the shade of its heavy foliage.

In every gap and crack in the trunk, under every root and hole in the earth, on every floor of this formidable plant building, a family of several generations nestled. It was in this cosy but teeming universe that Nick, a cunning field rat, and Tock, a gentle little squirrel, were born on the same day, at almost the same hour. Each was cute in their own way!

One in the depths of his burrow, well hidden in one of the many underground passages that his relatives tirelessly dug, and the other at the top of this ornamental tree of justice, at the height of the last hollow in this leafy tower. His parents had carefully constructed their three-room nest, one inside, hidden away for a harsh winter, and two outside, among leaves and food for a beautiful, warm summer.

One crawling, the other flying, they belonged to the same race or species, that of rodents. Normally, however, they were not supposed to ally themselves or play together. It was not done, according to their gossip on the one hand and their law on the other. Nick, who lived mainly at night, and Tock, who lived mainly during the day, were not meant to meet. Yet one beautiful autumn morning, they did...

This oak tree offered many advantages for all kinds of small animals, harmful or not: through its various passages, many rodents had made their permanent home there. It protected them not only from the cold but also from large animals, predators of the fields, woods and forest: moles, skunks, beavers, foxes, wolves, diurnal birds of prey such as crows, buzzards and falcons....

It had become a paradise for mice and field rats, rodents

that were unloved and hunted by both humans and a whole host of animals hoping for a feast, especially during the harsh winter months. Between two large rootlets, a family of rabbits had taken refuge, fleeing from hunters and their dogs, logically seeking a more peaceful life.

In its enormous heart of living, vibrant wood and sapwood, nocturnal creatures such as owls, eagle owls, tawny owls and long-eared owls gathered, nesting in such a way that they did not disturb each other. On the strong branches, different species of birds such as sparrows, tits, goldfinches, finches and robins had taken possession of the place and built their nests at the dawn of each spring.

Then, at the end of the grape harvest, they would leave for tropical countries and exotic places, travelling long distances.

Nick was not even two months old when he was already trying to set off on an adventure! His parents were constantly searching for him far and wide. They would get angry and punish him, but nothing worked. He was a funny little rat, looking like a mini stuffed animal with tousled fur: his soft, silky hair gave him the appearance of a shaggy coat, always in motion, stuck together or covered in greenery.

His pink muzzle was mischievous and rebellious, his small eyes narrow and clever, his ears pointed forward, ready to record and identify every sound. He had a very assertive and curious nature, which did not help matters for his parents. His paws further accentuated his large bone structure, and he possessed truly spectacular strength. He also had a practical mind and a keen intelligence.

He was part of a lovely litter of five brothers and sisters, of whom he was the centre, fortunately more docile and well-behaved than he was!

He lived in the underground passages well laid out by his original family: parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins. This beautiful and very prolific world formed a compact and united block against any external aggression. They gradually built supply dens, anarchic burrows and immense galleries,

long and low, on several floors.

They stored their daily food supplies for the bad days ahead, as well as materials and to improve their comfort. They all had a sense of family brotherhood and community organisation: each room had its own purpose! Multiple grasses, herbs, fruit and vegetable storage, wood reserves, cotton, grasses, branches, carpets of pine needles... and much more!

Tock found himself trapped inside a hole at the top of this sturdy, slender giant. He had a fantastic view of the sky and the earth, and could believe himself to be between two worlds, two spaces very different from each other. He was surrounded by his family, gathered in several gaps of greenery and bark from the hollow trunk. His siblings consisted of three lively beings, including two sisters and himself!

Each household was home to part of the family: on the left were his grandparents, on the right his uncles and aunts, and one level below were his cousins. His parents, who loved comfort above all else, had done things well: everything was tidy and organised. The reserves of acorns, hazelnuts and other foodstuffs essential to their survival were stored side by side. The babies' nest was in the shade, a ball of fresh grass.

Every day, they would quietly go out to gather supplies from the immediate surroundings so that winter would not be too harsh.

For their offspring, the clan had even created a warm and fragrant place with an abundance of leaves, grasses and flowers. This soft, red squirrel was full of humour and curiosity about everything and everyone: lively and happy to be alive, he wanted to set out to conquer his living space and discover possible playmates. He was fearless and remained unaware of the dangers that could have hindered his destiny.

His fur provided him with good protection from the snowy

cold but was a real handicap in the summer sun! His clawed paws helped him climb and hold on to his nuts. His body was built for his daily gymnastics routine of mad dashes, jumps, leaps and bounces, swinging from branch to branch, and rapid ascents and descents of the exaggeratedly straight forest trunks.

His mother loved to tell them adventurous and uplifting stories: the trio would gather around her and listen for hours on rainy days or during siestas. His young sisters, sensitive and concerned about even a single blade of grass being trampled, urged him to be patient and cautious in his misbehaviour, whether deliberate or unintentional, and in his desire to brave real or purely imaginary dangers.

His keen eyesight was a particular asset in seeing and escaping his winged and terrestrial predators, whether crawling or on legs. His ears were constantly on the alert to ensure he lived better and longer. His father gave him various balancing exercises, forcing him to look down to overcome any vertigo and perceive what was happening below, anticipating it so he could feel free, liberated from any unnecessary weight!

Ah! What a success this young Tock was, always so alert and ready for anything, never or rarely caught out!

Nick was happy that morning: he had found a gap wide enough to let him slip out of his hole during his next escape. He knew full well that his parents would scold him harshly, but he didn't care: it was stronger than him. He needed to discover the vast outside world. He persevered, step by step, towards what his future life would be, full of projects to accomplish.

'I'll be a good journalist and write amazing articles in our weekly newspaper,' he said to himself, full of joy.

He waited patiently for his parents to go to their agricultural waste factory as they did every day, slipping away nimbly.

'I mustn't get too big if I want to come back here in the

future because it's very narrow,' he thought as he passed through without difficulty.

He breathed in small doses of the much-coveted outside air!

'What if I enlarged it? Would that put me and my family in danger? It's up to me to find other alternatives to make the surroundings safer. There's also the emergency exit, but that must remain a secret, otherwise anyone could rush in and wreak havoc. Obviously, I don't want that for my family. I didn't think running away would raise all these questions!'

He felt physically and mentally fit, here and there, ready to take on the whole world, foreshadowing more trouble for his parents, who were on high alert as soon as they got home, faced with this terrible brat. 'Oh no, not this, Nick! Set an example, give us a break! Calm down, for heaven's sake!' he heard over and over again throughout the day...

He sat down, discouraged and slightly dejected, half-hidden by the hairy root carpet. He could see without being seen, perceived, or noticed!

This strategic spying position was brilliant!

He fidgeted with excitement and became a certified observer!

In any case, Tock had been asking himself the same question over and over again for several days: 'Why did his relatives strictly forbid him from going onto dry land? They went there without any worries.' Noticeably agitated, he scratched his forehead, searching for an idea that suited him. Unable to find one, he stopped climbing down from his perch, remaining cautious.

He was still hesitating when... suddenly...

He felt a sharp gaze lingering on him... from below...

And then there was the accident... such an unexpected incident...

One that would change his whole life... and that of two strangers...

A simple baby bird, a keen stuntman, wanted to fly from his nest for the first time and... fell heavily to the ground!

He tried to catch himself at the last minute, but from branch to branch, leaf to leaf, floor to floor, step by step, he tumbled to the bottom of the residential building, landing very awkwardly. After such a fall, he should have died, if not from the shock, then at least from fright! But fortunately, this was not the case: proof that he was strong, brave in the face of adversity, and a bit of a troublemaker!

Tock saw him try several times to get up without much success; he clearly had a damaged wing.

'If a wild animal came along unexpectedly, it would grab him and quickly carry him off to its lair to tear him to pieces!

Tock then listened only to his courage and, in a few jumps, was by his side, reassuring him and calming his anxieties and fears!

He didn't know exactly what to do at that moment, but he had to protect this other creature that was much smaller than him. It was so tiny and defenceless. Then he had another scare: he came face to face with... a field rat! He had heard about them but had never seen one before! Stunned by its dishevelled appearance, he eyed it suspiciously and cautiously, curious as to why it had come to them, looking so uninhibited.

Nick, for that was his name, scrutinised this strange fellow, this cousin with a long, bushy tail who looked very much like him.

'Is it a mutant?'...

First Story

The animal trio was on the reserve, disparate and scattered. They watched each other in turn: fearful , combative for the baby bird, dumbfounded and intrigued for the vole, perplexed and acrobatic for the squirrel. They went round in circles, unsure of the right solution, of how to act for the good of all. The decision was not so easy to implement! If they continued in this vein, they would solve nothing, quite the contrary!

-Hello, you with the big bushy tail. Who are you? What are you doing here? Where are you from? Why are you staying at the foot of this tree?

-Hello there, old brother. I came to rescue this poor little bird that fell from its nest at the top of our green tree.

-So you're from around here? From this tree? And him too, are you sure? I'm your neighbour, the one on the ground floor.

-So we're neighbours, living right next to each other!

-Well, I'm Nick the rodent, and you two?

-Yes, and my name is Tock, wise guardian squirrel rodent.

-Right, now that we've introduced ourselves, let's find a good solution for our new friend who is injured, in bad shape and traumatised: should we hospitalise him?

-Yes, you're right: but what can we do? We're too small to choose such an alternative! Right?

-If he doesn't move, I can carry him back up to his nest. I'm strong enough to do that. Which one did he fall from exactly?

-What if you fall? He could get even more hurt... And so could you! You can't take that risk, it's too hard.

-By the way, little one? What do your winged friends call you?

-I'm Piou-Piou Junior, from the titmouse family! Oh, I'm in so much pain... I'm all stiff, I fell flat on the ground.

-First, let's call for help. How?

-I know how! I heard my mum say that you have to ring the Tétrás' doorbell so that he shouts for help and rallies all the

residents to the potential casualty! Just like all firemen!
-Ah, and where is this Tétrás hurleur? I've never heard of him! Where does this safety horn live? Not far?
-If you stay with Piou-Piou, I'll go to his branch. That way, the operation will be carried out quickly and in time!
Okay, I'll keep watch with Piou-Piou Junior, but hurry up, mate! I don't want us to get caught here!
-I'll jump right in! Goodbye, see you both soon!
-Oh dear, what a turbulent adventure for you, Piou-Piou!
-Yes, indeed! I spun around too much in the nest and now look what happened!
-Just goes to show, staying calm is the best solution!

Tock jumped and clung to the branches, swinging with the agility of his kind, as he scaled the oak tree. He quickly climbed up to the grouse's lair. He knocked on the door and a deep voice replied, 'Come in and tell me what's going on.' The little squirrel told him in detail about the unfortunate incident, and the bird of the shadows decided to help him, as the urgency of the situation required his intervention.

This strange bird, a wild gallinaceous bird known as a grouse, had a red fleshy growth on its strong beak, like a turkey. This excess flesh hangs down over its eyes. Its spurs help it climb tree trunks, and its wings assist it in moving from branch to branch to its wooded dwelling, decorated with grasses, flowers and herbs.

It has a fairly broad breast of a beautiful blue-green colour, which it puffs out to sing its love during mating season or to trumpet during attacks between males or fires. It has a black back and a white spot on its brown wings: it is the colourful marquis of the woods, where darkness reigns supreme. It generally inhabits fir forests, playing hide-and-seek with hunters, both human and animal.

Tête-en-sons, the nickname of this grouse, headed to the back, opened a window, climbed onto a small board that served as the edge of the terrace, and let out his shrill cry for help. Tock thanked him warmly and climbed back down to lend a hand to Nick and Piou-Piou, just in case. He was

eager to see his new friends again: they were bound together by this unfortunate dispute and had to stick together.

Elves came to their rescue from all sides, especially the one who was in bad shape: the frail, wounded bird!

Elves and goblins were involved in medical, health and social care and assistance. They held first-aid and emergency response qualifications: fire and multiple poisonings, water and drowning, air and epidemics, earth and unusual operations. The chief of the Glassworks tribe, the glass workers, who belonged to the glassblowers' guild, walked ahead and assessed the critical situation:

-Hey, kid, do you trust us? Piou-Piou, come on, be brave and bear your pain. Swallow this, it will ease it. Let us take you to our cave clinic to treat you. All right? You won't be going straight back to your nest, guarded by your family. We'll treat you and you'll have a long convalescence, alone. They'll be migrating very soon and will leave you here. You'll live with us all for a whole year before returning to your family. Do you feel up to it? You don't really have a choice either!

-It makes me sad, but I want to live and fly again. I trust you and hope that I will recover. To do so, I will brighten up your lives by singing... if that's okay with you, of course... Yes?

-All right, son. You two, take the stretcher so we can transport him quickly. Ah, you're ready? Very good, let's not waste any time! Come on, lift him up.

-Don't move and I'll put you inside. There you go, good. Can you bear the pain? Yes, you're a good lad, and thank you both for protecting him by shouting for help!

-It's only natural! And we're his mates! Till death do us part! Yes, boss, we're heading back to base. Right, boss! We'll do as you say! It's as good as done!

Nick wrote in his logbook and put it back in his pocket, giving Tock a big wave, who responded by giving him a thumbs up before climbing back up the protective oak tree. He felt light-hearted: he had just done a good deed, his first good deed, having rescued two playmates and shown that he was self-

sufficient, independent and full of hidden resources.

For Tock, it was the same: proud and clever!

For Piou-Piou, the ordeal would prove beneficial!

Among the squirrels, from whom Tock came, sovereignty and self-management prevailed in all things, for the of each of its members, active or passive. But when his parents heard from the neighbours that he had disobeyed them, they immediately locked him in his room until further notice, calling him reckless! He raged at his parents, who restricted him more than they rewarded him!

'It's always the same! Nobody understands me! They're afraid of everything for their baby, but I did the right thing and I'm growing up!'

As for his friend Nick, at the same moment, he was locked in his grassy room for reasons identical to his, cursing his despicable parents! The accomplices, guilty of breaking the rules, would make amends until further notice! Punished for notorious disobedience, such was their verdict! Their respective families refused to listen to anything but the evidence that suited them!

Piou-Piou Junior's parents pleaded Nick and Tock's case: without their double involvement, their son would have perished!

Before flying off on a very long journey where many dangers awaited them, leaving their cherub in the agile and expert hands of the elves, they firmly stated the facts and directed the debate straight to the central event: without this positive duo, they would all be mourning a son, a brother, a cousin. This specific case demonstrated the fragility of existence and the importance of being partners.

'What a beautiful lesson in mutual aid these two have shown us!' was their final plea, supported by the leader of the elves, who had come to their rescue. The Green Oak Council played a major role in lifting the parental restrictions. It was decided to award them the red and gold barrette for services

rendered to the brotherhood, followed by a large country meal with drinks, music and dancing guaranteed.

The parents of the two heroes, disarming but not disarmed, opened the doors of their homes to the community gathered around the stakeholders, each defending their point of view. Justice was restored and the two simpletons finally tasted freedom... under supervision. Every young person applauded: the judgement took them as an example to follow.

Nick and Tock were mobbed by photographers.

Their mothers held them tightly in their arms and their formidable fathers' eyes showed their pride.

Slogans such as 'There are times in life when you have to know how to disobey' and 'To save a child, let's surpass ourselves' were chanted and sung by security advocates. Several businesses offered gifts or vouchers, and the government joined in with free youth and culture passports for a year of reading, theatre, dance and sports.

Nick and Tock, for the first time in their young and crazy lives, were in the spotlight of society, and they thoroughly enjoyed it. They weighed up the pros and cons of this welcome gift for a generally beneficial daily life. They hugged each other, laughing and whimsical, knowing with delightful impertinence that other adventures and exploits would follow. A lull before the storm or pure pleasure?

Their primal instincts and subtle intuition would guide them from that moment on. Which path would they take? They would undoubtedly choose the path of valiant knights, advocating justice and peace. And this would be the case throughout their wandering existence. They would not be ordinary, oh no! Ratineau would certainly become a good writer, posting socially engaged stories or travelogues on social media.

His adventure companion is already thinking of becoming a great reporter! Piou-Piou will be his assistant and source of information!

Their enthusiasm for work, their understanding of things and people, their selflessness in the face of adversity and their maturity will make them first-rate observers! Their eyes sparkled with mischief, a real need for action, a desire to be recognised, and an ability to adapt to any situation: Nick and Tock will be brothers for life!

They smiled at each other and, paw to paw, they found themselves thinking that this was only the beginning and that very soon, the forest colony would need their services. To keep up the momentum, a promising project would have to emerge to embark on a unique and breathtaking reportage and . With Professor Owl, they studied the history, geography, economy and ecology of their green corner of the world.

The weather revolutionised a so-called scientific subject, with its sea currents, tsunamis and contrasting atmospheres, bizarre rainfall patterns, glacial irregularities, mountainous terrain and proven uncertainties. Both practical and pragmatic, they enjoyed training: mental and physical exercises, relaxation, reasoning and memorisation, continuous adaptation...

Their two rodent clans met quite often and exchanged ideas and desires. While the adults whispered, the children played: Nick and Tock refined their studies and projects. They had a fantastic professional plan that they hoped would succeed, a win-win situation, by combining their talents. They had iron wills! Stubborn and tenacious, they set out to find suitable premises!

Second Story

The very next day, Nick and Tock opened their first consulting firm for rescue investigators and had numerous requests to handle. They were able to count on Nick's two brothers to go on a mission to advertise and train a group of municipal agents, as well as Tock's two sisters to take care of the secretarial work, telephone calls and accounting.

The Town Hall, located at Carrefour des Deux Souches, needed to expand its social reach: they were the architects of this expansion, thanks to the moles, who held the archives. The field mice, distant cousins of Nick, carried out population censuses, triggering ecological files and then special aid. The Forest Government contacted them repeatedly with urgent requests!

They created their first sign with a design combining the emblem of the pharmacy, the caduceus and the snake, as a symbol of assistance to the population, beneath which everyone could read the letters S.O.S. In the minds of the community, this was a direct call for help in case of danger. A red number could be seen from far away, flashing day and night, connected to a specialised station, between the fire brigade, police and nurses.

Nick, a quick light grey vole, always carried a notebook and pen with him for taking notes, which he used as the basis for editorials or serialised novels: between scathing writing and investigations to be carried out. Tock was at the helm of the Gazette de la Clairière, juggling journalism , and social justice. They also opened a second office of special agents, trained in self-defence and training snipers.

Their founding idea was to serve others, to protect them, but above all to find solutions for them by divulging the facts of what had happened so that the event could serve as a reference point to prevent it from happening again. They had informants in every corner, even the most remote: information circulated only for their benefit, with the advantage of being settled more quickly.

Step by step, their civil society grew, a healthy expansion that benefited everyone, becoming better organised and redistributing resources fairly, without any real economic profit. They warned people and offered educational guides and leaflets to keep at home and read in case of danger. Asking for help was good, but trying to anticipate was better! They embodied the progress dictated by their generation.

Since the publication of the latest domestic risk prevention booklet, the calls had dried up. Everyone took themselves more seriously and preferred to fend for themselves, especially young people who, setting an example for their elders, were ahead of the curve. They were changing citizenship, being responsible and supportive of one another. The days passed in a bland, predictable routine.

That afternoon, Nick and Tock were finishing a campaign for schools on respect for others and mutual aid when the doorbell rang. They looked up from their papers as an administrative messenger approached! " " It was a weasel dressed in a black suit, handing them a letter with an air of importance. The envelope was official, stamped and sealed. Nick took it, turned it over and opened it quietly.

He was seasoned in diplomacy, rarely showing his emotions, and only Tock had learned to understand him. The latter was suddenly concerned: he had a keen intuition and thought that this letter brought troubles that needed to be dealt with quickly. They would be going back into the field! He clearly missed it... but he kept these feelings to himself. The well-oiled routine was definitely not for him and his strong-willed character!

He was busy in his corner, sharpening his weapons in anticipation of adventure with a capital A. He had this strange look of treading water.

Nick, sitting comfortably, read the letter first quietly, then aloud, after thanking and dismissing the bearer:

'Dear Sirs, We would be very grateful if you could come to our private hearing room as soon as possible to shed some

light on this matter. Here is a summary of the situation: The Mayor and his wife have just received several letters, posted from different locations at random times, sometimes even delivered directly to their own letterbox, indicating that their children have been kidnapped by several heavily armed individuals and imprisoned in a secret location unknown to anyone. They were abducted on their way to school early in the morning. The kidnapers are now demanding a substantial ransom for their safe return. The victims are two eight-year-old girls and an eleven-year-old boy who disappeared several hours ago: time is of the essence and could prove to be a real obstacle to a positive outcome. We await you today at 4 p.m. at our office located at Champignonnière des Trois Bleuets at Carrefour des Quatre-Saisons. See you soon. It goes without saying that this must remain strictly confidential. Best regards. The signature comes from the High Magistrate of the Court with a seal stamped by the Bailiff.'

-Dear partner, what do you think of this setback for their clan?

-I agree with you, but this is a very serious matter!

-It's dramatic, harmless children and lawless thieves.

-We must act quickly: this could prove to be more than dangerous.

-Let's take the weapons and equipment we need for this investigation.

-Will you take care of it? While you load them into the jeep, I'll notify our families and close the agency. I'll go to our loft to get a bag and some comfortable clothes to change into.

-Okay, I'll go. Let's not forget our outfits in the changing room.

-Yes, you're right, we'll be more comfortable if we have to fight these thugs hand-to-hand. Luckily, we trained well despite the truce.

-OK, see you at the garage. I'll check the jeep's brakes and headlights!

-You're brilliant. You think of every little detail. Come on, mate!

Nick and Tock, two very busy chaps, found themselves in front of their off-road vehicle, ready to take them to their destination.

The vehicle was equipped with a highly sophisticated on-board computer that responded to their commands and saved them precious time. After entering the relevant information, the jeep drove them safely to their secret meeting place. The Mayor and his wife, moles wearing special magnifying glasses so they could stay outside their underground home, were waiting for them, praying.

They were no exception to the rule of parents of abducted children, oscillating between worry and hope. The first deputy, a busy ferret, accompanied them in their efforts, taking on the role of witness-clerk. The couple involved stood on either side of a wooden table: two other people sat beside them, one crying, the other looking nervous.

The poor rabbits, the children's nanny and her husband, a private driver, both of a certain age and long in their service, had been severely mistreated by the kidnapers. The handkerchief soaked with tears, held nervously in her stiff paws, stood straight, Madame Mother, fearing the of having lost her dear children forever. Father clenched his fists in contained rage, his knuckles turning white.

The household staff had been treated on site by a team of emergency doctors, as evidenced by the bruises and bandages on their heads, arms, hands and legs. When Nick and Tock arrived, they looked around at the gathering and felt a strange sensation. The atmosphere was tinged with hypocrisy, sadness and... more or less honourable calculations.

They said nothing, waiting for someone to speak officially. The Mayor gave a nod of approval and let his deputy brief them. He added some important notes and ended his report with, 'Gentlemen, what do you propose? We are listening attentively.' The detectives asked several practical questions, discussing a gentle plan of attack.

Do not endanger the community's offspring, even unconsciously: words to be circulated in this delicate case.

'Ladies and gentlemen, here are the main points of our plan, with your agreement: first, investigate the place of detention; second, negotiate with the mafia; third, discreetly locate the place; fourth, finally, rescue them. We expressly request carte blanche from this point on. To do this, we require a code word with a trusted person who will relay our progress to the distraught parents.'

They nodded their heads, took a step back from the proposal, and agreed to meet again at 7 p.m. to make a decision.

-Did you have the same premonition as me? Or am I imagining things?

-This stinks. An intruder who's in cahoots with the criminals.

-I'm thinking about the deputy. That guy's fake! He stinks of a scam!

-I don't know why he set this up, but I'll catch him.

-Who do you think these bandits are? Foxes? Hares? Wolves?

-I'd say hares. They had a run-in with the authorities over an important project dealing with territorial rights. They were dismissed, so from there to thinking that... But I'm not ruling out other leads or possibilities...

-Don't you think that's a bit too hasty? I think we should look elsewhere, broaden the scope. Think more.

-Yes, definitely, which is why we need to investigate seriously ourselves. We need to have a basis for our findings!

-Probably yes, you're right. Time will tell, we'll see if they agree with us. It's not a done deal!

-Took, you're thoughtful and cautious, much to my chagrin. They may just as well refuse... You're not really considering that.

-I'm taking one step at a time towards the concrete, I don't want an assessment, that's all. I prefer evolution, that's all.

-Okay, it's true that I'm too speculative. Let's wait for their signal or not to start the business.

A little before the appointed time, the Deputy Mayor agreed

to become their privileged intermediary, to which they responded negatively, designating themselves alone. This individual would be between them, discreet and unknown to all, unofficially. They sensed that he was not very happy about this, but after a moment, he gave in, frustrated and malicious. Nick and Tock won the first battle through sheer willpower.

They took the side road leading to the troglodyte village of the long-tailed lizards, a hideout for notorious bandits and professional thieves. They occasionally assisted the authorities in exchange for some tangible information. This group lived inside caves, in damp areas near streams or torrents, in the company of salamanders, grass snakes, slow worms, newts, chameleons and large-headed dragons.

Nick had dealt with these gallows birds before, noting that they had a code of honour among themselves. He knew that by entering their stronghold, he was paying homage to their talent as forgers and bad boys. The information he would extract would be first-hand, a detail not to be overlooked. Tock was curious, but cautious: he was content to be a spectator, apprehensive about a difficult stage in the ongoing investigation.

Nick stopped the jeep in the middle of the square from which a whole labyrinth of tunnels led off. In the centre sat their leader, Camelho.

No one but them had access to these places of multiple trafficking, the sole keepers of secrets leading to guarded entrances. Legends roamed the plains of these unexplored lands. While Tock remained in the cab, ready to step on the gas at the slightest sign of trouble, Nick jumped out without showing any speed or desire to fight. He was humble in front of them all.

He walked towards a group of individuals with shifty eyes and thick lips, who watched him approach. One of them called out to him:

-Where do you think you're going without an escort?

-To talk to your leader, Camelho, alone. We're here on business. I can see him right behind you.

-Oh! Is that so? Do you take me for a rookie or something?

-When he finds out how you're treating me, you'll be in big trouble.

-You think I'm going to fall for that? You're bluffing. I'm one of his own.

-If I were you, I'd be wary of his reactions. Don't force me to smash you. My patience has limits, but your stupidity does not.

-You don't scare me at all, you little runt! Come on then!

-Mate, give it up or you'll have me to deal with! (said a familiar voice from behind him). He's MY guest, we need to talk! Get lost! Excuse him, brother! (said the same voice to Nick). Come out onto the terrace, it'll be better there.

-You're being guarded, aren't you? No one else has as many people around them as you do!

-I have to be, with these young people undermining my livelihood!

-Really? That bad? You won't let them get away with it!

-No, but I'm getting old and it bothers me at times.

-You're clear-headed, that's your strength. You're a leader, it's a shame you're on the wrong side. Not your best choice, unfortunately!

-Life decided for me. I just went with the flow.

-Well, do you know why I'm here tonight? Am I going too far?

-Yes, it's about the Mayor's children. You want to know where and who.

-Yes. You have the best in the district to keep you informed...

-What will I get in return for who and where? An equivalent exchange?

-Well done for summarising. But you want a trade for commercial purposes. What are you offering me, for when and what?

-We're on the same wavelength. Yes, here's the deal: I have what you're looking for, I want free movement of my goods on the roads without any checks for one month starting tomorrow. I commit to the contents: advertising items,

counterfeits, fraudulent luxury goods, perfumes, caviar, foie gras, jewellery, clothing, and no drugs, weapons, alcohol or cigarettes: you have my word! That way I can rest on my laurels and sleep soundly!

-Come on. It's business. You're not risking anything, my friend!

-Yes, fines that I won't pay. I'd rather redistribute.

-I have carte blanche, I'm your man! Here's the official letter, let's specify the transaction, sign it together, give me a photocopy, and the deal is done! Are you in or out?

-Okay, it's a deal! Let's shake on it, shall we? I like good deals between honest and straightforward men! Thank you for that!

-You're lucky. I respect you, you're worth your weight in gold.

Nick returned with the verbal agreement and Tock started the jeep's engine calmly and smoothly. He had kept his distance, remaining very vigilant during the meeting between the two men. The off-road vehicle turned around to head home and had only been driving for five minutes when a burst of machine-gun fire rained down on them, without stopping!

The shots came from the old chalk quarry on their left. Luckily, the ruffians weren't very good shots! Tock swerved and managed to accelerate away from the untimely whistles.

'We need to find out who's shooting at us like this. I don't like being taken for a potential target,' whispered Nick. 'I'll go around them through those bushes over there.'

A few metres further on, they stopped their vehicle and took cover behind the dense thickets of brambles surrounding them. They drew their weapons, ready to fire, and silently signalled to each other to surround their adversary. It was a little trick combining self-defence exercises and terrain adaptation. They were used to such circumstances.

They reached the entrance to the mine and quietly took refuge inside. Step by step, they crawled towards the attacking , who were feverishly reloading their automatic

weapons. The two partners spotted the retreat to a room with two entrances and exits, offering a panoramic view of the outside and inside. Surreptitiously, they finally got within a few steps of them and fired in their direction without warning.

The desired surprise effect was immediate, throwing their rivals off balance. Several escaped through the tunnels, discarding their weapons at the risk of getting lost: one lay lifeless on the ground, another dropped his submachine gun at his feet and surrendered with his arms in the air, and another held his bleeding left arm. The latter called for a ceasefire and stepped into the light. A stunned Oohhh! was heard!

Its echo reverberated from the vaulted ceiling of the mine and then throughout the quarry as they recognised the ferret, the Deputy Mayor!

They had been right from the start of this mystery, and it was a balm to their hearts. They were right!

They brought him and his accomplices, cousins of this worthless gang leader, bound hand and foot, to the authorities for obstruction of justice and complicity in kidnapping! Despite a long period in custody, he refused to reveal the exact location where the children were being held. Nick showed him his photocopy and the name that was written on it, and the traitor's furious face was enough for him, as he fell apart.

He turned to his colleague and friend, winking at him and giving him a thumbs up as a sign of victory!

Tock responded in kind, satisfied, and escorted him to the final stretch. The place was located upstream of the Silver River, a few kilometres from the Town Hall, near the foxes' lair! He had the presence of mind to bring, along with the spy equipment, a megaphone for outdoor negotiations, which proved to be extremely effective! Nick took charge and got involved in the discussion, creating a diversion.

Tock infiltrated the chief's lair, which had been converted into a prison: Darius didn't notice him, as he was busy with the demanding mediator.

After locating him, Tock approached silently, then signalled to the little ones to be quiet and urged them with his paws to be ready to follow him quickly. Meanwhile, he attacked the sentry, springing from the shadows behind him and knocking him out with a backfist to the skull. He had no trouble removing a few rocks, and the children escaped through the gaping hole.

When Nick saw them all coming in single file, he relished his talent as an orator. He asked Tock to stay near the car and keep the molehills under a tarpaulin, hidden in the back. Meanwhile, he finished his engagement with Darius and his presumed acolytes. Without really waiting for his answer, he sprinted through the tall grass in their direction. He rounded a huge rock that left him exposed.

Too late, they saw him and opened fire.

He only survived thanks to his own initiative, pressing himself against the side of a rusty helicopter that had ended its flying career many glorious years ago. He grabbed his handgun and fired back at his attackers until the police intervened. Tock had contacted them by radio so that they could arrive quickly and catch the madmen.

All's well that ends well!

And that was the main thing for the duo!

The children were returned safely to their parents and the bad guys were sent to prison, where they will remain for years to come!

The gang of foxes, safely locked up in prison, will have plenty of time to reflect on their misdeeds. The deputy mayor was brought before a judge for high treason and locked up in a dungeon in the water tower for eternity. That was animal justice: no mercy for vermin! The children had been starved and were given light gastric treatment and

heard about their detention, which had left them so fragile.

Soon all these bad memories were banished and the little ones rested fully, between the beach and the palm grove, between surfing, slides and water games. Finally, a well-deserved holiday for Nick and Tock! Naps and cocktails galore! Sports and massages as a bonus! Nick and Tock lounged in their deckchairs by the water during a beautiful river cruise, a gift for services rendered.

After their exploit of rescuing the mole crickets and their captors, they were somewhat tired and worn out, between reports to write and journalistic work to continue. It was on this occasion that the Mayor and the Council granted them these days of real holiday. 'Idyllic, really!' Piou-Piou was there and their reunion was joyful.

The little bird had now recovered thanks to the kind elves and was hoping for the return of his family soon.

Third Story

After settling in, the trio went out on deck, chatting and sipping fresh fruit juice, nibbling on biscuits.

-Did you see the little mouse watching us? She's so cute!

-Yes, of course! I don't know who she's eyeing up more!

-I bet it's you! I'm attracted to the pretty dormouse!

-Amazing: making, breaking and renewing friendships, it's so active.

-It's good for us, a break from routine. We need a change.

-You're right. Where has our Piou-Piou gone? He's disappeared!

-No, he's having fun with his female counterpart, the little one is growing up.

The tourist barge planned stops at several picturesque locations with buffets on the fresh grass or guided tours, all in a joyful and cheerful atmosphere. The first stop was scheduled in an hour, enough time to get ready in the cosy cabin. It was a double cabin, comfortable and well appointed, with everything in its place without any fuss.

Without being ostentatious, it was pleasant and practical, inviting Piou-Piou to accompany them on their travels, leaving everyone free to move around and pursue their aspirations. The two fellows sometimes felt things differently, but always positively, and they happily maintained their excellent physical and mental health. A desired state of well-being, achieved and bearing fruit in the form of beautiful harmony.

Hard-won, they shared it with their newspaper readers. They explored different options for workshops and conferences in their area. They were brimming with projects, drowning in their work. This interlude was welcome before resuming their daily routine. They weren't looking for adventure, but it was about to knock on their door again, unannounced.

The Captain and his teams welcomed them with baskets of food and tablecloths, showing them to the landing stage,

ready to receive them in front of a flower-filled meadow for a country garden party. The day was epic and very relaxed, with everyone trying their hand at fishing, making flutes, laughing and singing, tasting the carefully prepared surprise dishes, and rolling around in the soft grass.

After a refreshing nap, they repeated other leisure activities: reciting poems, playing skittles, croquet or boules, taking a few steps on dry land to get to know each other, having fun splashing around and getting wet: the sun was warm, and the end of the day was cheerful. Nick, after changing for dinner, lingered at the bar, waiting for his two friends to start a game of bowling.

The early evening was entertaining, and they headed to the packed restaurant as soon as the bell rang. The evening continued with relaxing activities: board games, cards, dice. The atmosphere was cosy and intimate, with music floating in the cool air on a terrace set up for the occasion. Cardigans, shawls and blankets were everywhere, illuminated by the moonlight.

Piou-Piou had settled down in his basket bed. Tock went to his own cabin, followed closely by Nick, who was tired from dancing.

The next day, after a sumptuous breakfast, there was talk of landing on an unusual, historic and romantic shore. The passengers all applauded in unison, admiringly. The loudspeaker crackled softly to indicate that they would be disembarking that afternoon for several hours on dry land to visit a place like no other: the Castle of the Cursed Lovers! Quite a programme!

According to the cultural catalogue provided by the stewards, it was haunted. 'A busy schedule ahead, between sightseeing and personal impressions!' They would wait at a guinguette, eating in the gardens of this bucolic castle, then stroll through the aromatic and vegetable greenhouses, ending up in the estate's rose garden and orange grove before returning to the riverboat.

-What a mission for us! I'm always up for this kind of thing. What about you, do you believe in this stuff? I'm very interested, but I remain sceptical and cautious.

-You mean the paranormal, entities, ghosts? Yes, I believe in them.

-Yes, spells, enchantments. Things that are off the beaten track.

-I'm convinced that there's some truth in each case...

-Then let's head to that haunted castle! That's undeniable, yes.

Piou-Piou fluttered around them, sometimes whistling on a branch ahead of them. They walked calmly along the riverbank, joking and teasing each other, until they reached the small wooden bridge connecting to the castle grounds. Two pretty young ladies, one dressed in pink and the other in orange, simply asked them to offer them their arms so they wouldn't fall into the river.

They were proud to have been chosen by them. The affair seemed set for some sweet and cuddly feelings between them.

-Welcome, young ladies! We enjoy your company!

-Thank you, gentlemen, for your gallantry! We will be protected in case of attacks by ghosts. You are brave.

-How do you know we are brave? Are you fortune tellers or clever? Tell us a little...

-Please escort us on our visit to the Haunted Castle, thank you.

-We'll be delighted to! Rest assured.

-Oh, that's very kind of you! You're true gentlemen!

-We are as good as our word in the forest clearing!

-Thank you for your chivalrous spirit so far!

-You ignored my question earlier. Can I have an answer?

-Yes, sir. We knew who you were as soon as you arrived.

-Are you spies? Or journalists? Tell us.

-We are readers of the newspaper: we dreamed of meeting Nick.

The building in front of them stood on the heights of a

medieval village between sky, earth and water. They set off to explore the splendid fortress, happy with their day of freedom. They stopped at souvenir shops along the way and bought regional specialities to take home and enjoy later, prolonging their culinary pleasure.

The park, shaded by gigantic chestnut trees, offered green spaces. The guardhouse, sheltered by colossal ramparts, stood in the paved courtyard. Drawing on their experience as investigators, Nick and Tock scrutinised the moat, arrow slits, parapet walk, machicolations, drawbridge left raised, and high walls, trying to visualise the battles it had endured since the Middle Ages.

The guide called out to the visitors using loudspeakers, more or less hidden by the lush, fragrant vegetation of the outdoor courtyard where the valiant knights stopped their horses, leading to the entrance hall. This room was large and long, with spiral staircases leading to the upper floor. From this hall, narrow corridors criss-crossed the castle.

The quartet emerged in front of a monumental staircase leading directly to the castle's entrance hall. A hostess took their bags and directed them to a group of people listening to historical stories. The guided tour began with a portrait of a beautiful but very sad young woman. Her story moved everyone, and some were moved to tears upon hearing it:

'Mademoiselle de Montbalmain, whose first name was Hortense, was the eldest daughter of a knight ennobled for his legendary military exploits during the first two crusades. At the age of fourteen, she was married to the lord of this castle, Sir Archambauld de Silenciagar, who was over forty years old. He appeared to her as an old man on their wedding day, at the foot of the altar, and she was terrified of giving herself to him at night.'

'She knew nothing of life, nor what to do or imagine to avoid this marriage, when she saw for the first and, sadly for her, the last time, the face of, the love of her life. He was part of the personal guard of the Lord of the manor and his name

was Henri de Percival. He was sixteen years old and had eyes that sparkled like a thousand stars. With a valiant heart in a body trained in tournaments, he looked like an angel.'

'Their eyes locked during the vows in the church, their hands soon touched during the dances at the banquet, and their hearts followed the path to the bridal bed. While everyone else got drunk, including the groom, they gave themselves to each other in the madness of their love, which they were both experiencing for the first time. The banquet celebrations continued until dawn.'

'In the early hours of the morning, Archambault arrived in his room and collapsed on the four-poster bed, dead drunk. The two lovers met several times until the day the young lady became pregnant with her young lover's child. The husband became suspicious: he had only done the deed once and did not remember it the day after the wedding, and for good reason! 'Had she lied to him?'

'After that, his wife no longer wanted him in her bed.'

'One fine morning, he set off for the hovel of the Lemon Grass Witch, who was also a poisoner. He went in and paid her a handsome sum to read his future. She had the gift of second sight and knew immediately what was going on. She decided to make good use of it. She instilled doubt and jealousy in him , revealing only that his wife preferred another man younger than him.'

'Another purse was placed on the table. And that the child she was expecting was not his. A third purse changed hands. But she did not reveal the name of the lover. It was far too risky. The knight returned home devastated and frustrated. He hatched a plan to unmask the culprits and, as soon as night fell, put it into action with his damned soul, Mirepoix, who was involved in shady dealings and dirty work.'

'Of course, the lovers were exposed: one was sent back to his lands, escorted by soldiers loyal to the local lord, with a reprimand, depriving him of any prospect of future ennoblement and threatening him with death if he were

caught on this territory; the other, his wife, was locked up in a tower where only the master, her furious husband, was allowed to enter.'

'Heart-rending cries could be heard every night until the final delivery. Rumours spread that the child survived and that the young Henry recovered him in exchange for a large sum of money that jeopardised his inheritance and raised him with love. For the unfortunate Hortense, the torment only ended with the death of her scorned and vengeful husband from a sudden stroke.'

'She had gone mad from the abuse he had inflicted on her over all those years. One day, she climbed to the top of the ramparts and threw herself off, screaming with all her remaining strength: 'Henry!' Her body was laid to rest in the traditional manner and buried in the park, under a slab marked with a simple H , which blooms naturally on every sunny day outside the seigneurial cemetery. '

'The beautiful Hortense still haunts the cold corridors of this fierce castle, witness to her painful fate!'

-My God, what a story! Both magnificent and deeply saddening! Love has been defeated! This is so unfair!

-What an era they lived in! It's heartbreaking, dramatic!

-I won't go into those corridors! I can't run into her!

-Don't worry! We're together, united.

-Are you sure? This isn't real, it's unreal.

-Yes. There's nothing to fear! Just an apparition that will disappear.

-I'm hesitant. I'm not as brave as you are.

-If we see her, what should we say or do? We're helpless.

-Close our eyes, let her pass and pray for her soul!

-Pass by me, by us? Close our eyes? Why?

-So as not to be taken with her! She's a magnetic force.

-Don't look her in the eyes: she'll see her lover there!

-And what would she do to me? Kiss me? Bite me?

The cultural narrative shocked people who were stunned by the practices of those times, as did the additional

information, and silence fell when there was a real rush of fresh air. Everyone struggled to breathe normally again. It was at that precise moment that they were confronted with a bewildering sight! The group instinctively huddled together, trying to pull themselves together.

Some fainted or opened their mouths without uttering a sound in panic, while others had their hair standing on end or turned pale. Why were such visible traces on all the visitors present here? She, Hortense, was there, in front of them, carried by an icy draught! She represented a world of fairy tales...

The apparition was clearly visible at the top of the internal staircase.

The silhouette stood out against the rough stone walls and quietly descended the steps one by one. She seemed absorbed in her thoughts as she looked towards the group of tourists. There she suddenly stopped and began to stare intently at one person: Nick! He was captivated by the solitary, vibrant fire that she still held within her. How she must have loved that person!

He forced himself to look away, but the feeling that he was missing something indescribable gnawed at him, despite . He remained under her spell, despite all his efforts. He felt her stealthily approaching him and made no attempt to keep her away from him, quite the contrary. She and he observed each other, acting as if nothing was happening. They felt the same attraction towards each other: it was crazy!

'Good heavens! What am I supposed to do or say here and now? She is so beautiful and fragile! But am I rambling or what? I need to pull myself together, and quickly. I really must. Otherwise, I risk my downfall. I've let myself get carried away by this romantic story. No, that can't happen to me, the best investigator there is! Think carefully about a reliable strategy that affirms your scholarly value. You've read about many strange and unusual events, what have you learned from them? Try to remember similar or similar

events, what were the results and why? Were they negative, criminal or favourable in their testimonies? Look back at science fiction films and UFO reports. They will help you in this transition between two overlapping universes.'

Tock stood alert at his side, ready to intervene at the slightest sign of hostility from this entity, this ghost. He was no longer alone; the team was forming, standing together. Nick finally breathed a sigh of relief. A transparent white light caressed him as it passed over him, like an eternal farewell. The evanescent smoke brushed against him and entered the portrait of his beloved Henri!

The painting had finally been restored, which had taken several years, and was returned to its original place. Hortense had thus joined him... All this mystery had been solved without anyone having to do anything. The rationality demonstrated by this young ghostly woman was proof that parallel worlds existed elsewhere and that unreality was concrete for them.

The group remained speechless, mute, voiceless. Having witnessed a paranormal phenomenon in all its splendour, no one would forget it anytime soon. The beautiful Hortense never returned to this castle, which was now haunted only by the memories of certain individuals: the Lord, his bodyguard and the Witch. The lovers had finally found each other again to love each other outside of time.

The guide and the hostess grew old peacefully together, mourning the loss of this romantic, economical and promising venture. Love triumphed over money in this tragic love story. The quartet continued their enjoyable cruise between water, sky, land and fleeting romances. The two young and pretty ladies accompanied them to the end of their journey.

They flirted politely: Nick and Tock had not taken kindly to this approach towards them for their fame. They enjoyed the friendly atmosphere without overdoing it. There were many delightful stops along the way: boat trips on the lake, wishes

at the fairy cave, climbing Devil's Peak, folk evenings and karaoke.

On the last night, the friendly quartet parted ways delicately but definitively, without tears or verbal clashes: each returned home, resuming their own routines. The two icons of their clearing had chosen celibacy in the face of so much female abuse, guided only by their interests and not their hearts. Nick used a bad cold as an excuse not to give in any further, and Tock followed his example.

Making two unhappy victims... for a while, the time of a... last stop, the penultimate one before reaching the terminus. They gathered their luggage, waved a forced farewell, then turned resolutely towards the gangway where... two charming young men were waiting to take them back to their respective homes without incident.

A little later that morning, they arrived at their landing stage. After thanking the entire crew and the Captain, the trio took the gangway and jumped nimbly onto the firm, grassy ground. They were delighted to be back in their community. They walked briskly despite the bulk of their suitcases and bags. Piou-Piou hummed a tune, encouraging them to keep going.

Tock thought about flirting to really connect with someone, but who should he turn to? He had no idea who would be right for him at the moment. Except that he hoped for a faithful, reliable, loving and honest partner. Nick was more cautious: his instincts would guide him, without overthinking it, perhaps love at first sight? A bit like Piou-Piou. He still had time to think about it!

The day began auspiciously, neither too cool nor too hot, just temperate, leaving nothing to regret.

-What a beautiful cruise we've had!

-Yes, what an adventure with Hortense and Henri, those crazy lovers!

-I hope our little minxes had fun with us! They got the wrong idea about us, those girls.

-But of course, my friend, otherwise they wouldn't have tried to extort our mobile numbers! You didn't give them to them, did you? I didn't give them anything. Disappointed!?

-Not at all. I'm so happy here in the tranquillity of our childhood home. The female soul? Yes, I'm afraid so, if you want my humble opinion. They embarrassed me, to be honest.

-Time to set off on a new adventure! Maybe we're not that romantic after all.

-It will be love at first sight or not, passion above all else.

-So full steam ahead towards a stable and exciting future!

Their state of mind increasingly balanced between their different occupations and their desire for a loving couple with children. But when adventure came along, nothing else mattered to them. In this case, it was better to remain single : without emotional or sentimental ties rather than making people unhappy. The reason was one thing, but desire was another: who would win this emotional duel?

Being a father required a lot of time and energy, and being in a relationship required just as much investment. Peace surrounded them, they had a real balance and a harmonious lifestyle: what more could they ask for? Nothing, or almost nothing. Why complicate their lives? They were already seeking the adrenaline rush of heroism. They loved to innovate, discover and create a better and more wonderful world for their loved ones.

-Our article on loneliness caught the attention of our readers, judging by the letters we received. It's up to us to respond!

-You're not wrong: look who's coming! Those darn polite young ladies! When will they leave us alone?

-Oh no, it's not going to start all over again, is it? They're very persistent! I bet they're the ones who founded the association for lost hearts!

-It'll take both of us to gently remove these clingy creatures. We'll combine firmness with verbal support.

-Oh, this is going to be funny, here comes the Mayor himself: what does this notable figure want from us? Solutions?

-This time we're asking for all-expenses-paid holidays in the mountains! Fresh air guaranteed on the ski slopes or hiking trails, snowshoeing, sledging, depending on the season.

Tock held his sides from laughing too hard at his humour thrown into the summer breeze. Nick regained his seriousness the moment he took hold of the unofficial letter handed to him by the dignitary, sceptical of the likely negative reception. This nervous posture made him seem even stranger and more suspicious. He turned the envelope over, shrugged his shoulders, and decided to give it to his friend, relieving himself of a burden that was too heavy. He was fed up with opening letters. 'Your turn, mate!'

The smiling female duo tried unsuccessfully to intercept him. The councillor pursed his lips, urging them to leave, which they did without asking for anything in return. Phew! One less thing to worry about! They won't dare come back anytime soon! Outside, the sun was at its zenith, racing across the sky, its rays shining down on their naturally protected and sheltered corner.

-Why don't you read it? The Mayor is waiting!

-I'll let you speak, if you're willing to take it back, Nick!

-Well, are you going to open it or not? The girls left empty-handed.

-Now you're in a hurry! When it's not you, you get stressed!

-Go on, read it, so we know what's going on, for heaven's sake!

-Hi Hi, there's no rush! It comes from Switzerland, in Valais!

-What's this quiz? Are you sure about this? Yippee!

The birds that had been away for so long were returning, repopulating the branches of the oak tree, singing their joy at being back.

Water flowed between the grass and flowers along the meadow, ending up in the pond where frogs and goldfish frolicked. Insects swarmed around and above it, near the protective tree that watched this spectacle unfold, becoming magical. The inhabitants of this corner of the earth got along wonderfully, and their heroes felt remarkably at ease in this

loyal company.

When would this well-deserved retirement come?

In any case, certainly not today!