

# 1

Goofus the gopher, Mungbean the Mole, and Wanda the Worm were talking one day when all of a sudden Goofus said, "Wait...you hear something?"

They listened.

They heard a kind of muffled keening.

"Let's go!" said Mungbean.

The three sprinted through the earth toward the source of the sound.

"It's getting louder," Wanda observed.

"We're under the graveyard," noticed Goofus.

At last they arrived at a pinewood box. The keening was coming from the other side of the partition.

"Someone's been buried alive!" cried Mungbean.

"I believe you're right," gasped Goofus. "Let's get to work!"

Goofus and Mungbean began digging at the wood with their sharp claws. Wanda could only shout encouragement, being far too wiggly and soft to help.

They broke through. The screaming abruptly stopped.

It was a pale boy.

"Why, hello," said Goofus.

"Hello," sniffled the boy.

"Seems you're in a bit of a fix," commented Mungbean.

"Indeed I am!" squeaked the boy. "I went to sleep one night like I always do. And then I had some terrible dreams -- and when I woke up, I was here!"

"That's awful!" said Wanda.

"We'd like to help you," said Goofus, "but I fear it would take a week to get you to the surface. And surely you must be quite hungry and thirsty even now!"

"Oh yes, I am," said the boy wretchedly. "I guess there's no help for me now, is there?"

The odd four pondered this for a moment. Suddenly, Mungbean spoke up.

"Actually...", said the mole, "perhaps we might..."

"Yes?"

"Well, perhaps there's a way to..."

"Yes? Yes?"

Mungbean shook his head. "Oh drat, I don't see how that can be done."

"Oh, come on...if there's even the slightest chance, we should give it a try," exhorted Wanda.

"Oh, all right," said Mungbean. "Now, listen..."



## 2

"Well, I think it all went rather well," said Goofus.

"I must agree," glowed Mungbean.

"Quite fantastic, really," assented Wanda.

"But how did you do this?" stammered the flummoxed boy.

"Well," said Mungbean, "it just so happens that I'm a mermole."

"A mermole? What on earth is that?"

"Yes. You've heard of a mermaid? Well...I'm a *mermole*."

"Oh, you're pulling my leg, there is no such thing," scoffed the boy.

"As opposed to mermaids, who clearly exist," mused Mungbean.

"Of course."

"Nevertheless, my boy...here you are."

The four of them swam through the endless dirt from garden to yard to park to garden. The boy, whose name turned out to be Ted, exulted in his new clawed legs and his bewhiskered snout, and only regretted losing his visual acuity, of which he'd been quite fond. There wasn't much to see in the dark earth, however, and so a keen sense of smell was more than enough for sensing the distance, bearing, shape and size of things.

"Well, yes...I am, aren't I?" said Ted, who was, all things considered, a bright boy.

"Yes. So perhaps I am not so dim as all that?" But there was affection and indulgence in Mungbean's voice. The other two snickered.

"Did you used to be a man?" Ted asked.

"Indeed I did. I used to be a vicar in Wiltshire."

"You were a vicar? And now you're a mole!"

"Yes," Mungbean admitted ruefully.

"This is quite perplexing!" Ted said. "It is all a good bit to take in the space of an hour."

"I suppose it is. Come on. I know where there are some quite succulent tubers. While we eat, I will tell you the story."



## 3

I was walking home along the cowpath that runs beyond the meadow there, between the two copses. Suddenly, I noticed a hulking dog-like beast engaged in some activity nearby. The dog was smelly and filthy and covered with weeping sores, which gave it a shiny appearance. One ear was just a stump, having been chewed off in a fight. I hadn't seen this mongrel about before, and didn't quite know what to make of him.

As I got closer, I saw he had his tongue out and was laughing in a nasty, boorish way. And he was batting about what seemed to be a beanbag of some sort. But that was no beanbag!

I charged forth, driving off the cur. When I'd finished, I returned and bent down over the wretched carcass.

"Help me...," moaned the carcass. So it was not quite dead after all.

It was a little mole, wearing a wesket and trousers. I spotted a hank of tweed in the fork of a nearby twig -- his hat. I didn't feel it was important to retrieve it at this point, however.

"I'd like to, but I don't know what to do!" I then said to the little mole. "Is there someone I should locate for you? A veterinarian?"

"What's that?"

"It's a doc--"

"Never mind, I'm done for. Dirtnap has done it to me this time."

"Dirtnap? The dog?"

"Yes. There's very little time. Come closer."

I crouched down over him, though it required some intestinal fortitude, for the poor thing smelt terrible and was bleeding and hideously gashed.

"Listen to me, one Hasenfeffer Haggis, when I tell you this: there is an object hidden in the far gardens of Koo-Kar-Park. It is in a box of Viking metal, so it cannot be smelled. In this box is the key to destroying Dirtnap and his evil minions."

"That dog has minions?" I queried impertinently.

"Yes! He is something more than a dog -- he is something evil. Only to those smaller than him, of course, for he is at heart a coward. But to all of us who have the misfortune to be smaller than he is, he is a terror, the Antichrist, Armageddon...."

I was going to interrupt, given my religious training, to correct some impiousness on his part, but wisely held my tongue. "I," he continued, his voice becoming very weak, "am the only creature who knows of this object and of its location. With my dying breath, I will transmit the information to you, encoded in these secret words handed down through the generations...."

And with that, he began to whisper a string of syllables which made me feel quite queer. Before long, however, his voice failed him, and I saw him making words with his lips but not with his voice. I strained to hear, but could hear nothing. I hoped somehow I was getting it, but I felt no closer to understanding the location of this mysterious object than I had been before speaking with him at all.

Too late, I saw that he had passed away and that simultaneously, to my greater shock, I had now been transformed into a mole! An ugly whiskered clawed thing with a wet, grotesque pink proboscis and...well, all that you see here before you.

("I think you're quite lovely," interrupted Wanda.)

Thank you, my dear. The thing of it is, I *do* have a vague idea where that object can be found, though I have no idea what it could possibly be. I imagine that Hasenfeffer Haggis was able to transmit some of this information into me along with his beastly transformation spell...but unfortunately, I don't think he did it correctly. Not having heard some of the words he spoke, it would appear that I don't have perfect knowledge of where to go and what to do. And so I am reduced to sniffing out the path as I find it, and making such choices as I see fit.

("Well...that's life, isn't it?" broke in Ted.)

Mmmm. Yes. Bright boy.



## 4

"But what's all this got to do with you being a mermole?" Ted wanted to know.

"Why, those words are the words which turn one into a mermole," explained Mungbean. "Actually, in a sense, I could also be called a *were*-mole, but that wouldn't hardly explain it, nor would it strike fear into any hearts I suspect."

"I suspect it wouldn't. But you wouldn't want to strike fear anyway, you aren't Dirtnap."

"Quite right."

Ted shivered and looked around. "Where is Dirtnap? Will he be able to get me? Would I smell him if he came close? What does he smell like?"

"More importantly, shouldn't we be getting the boy back to his parents?" said Goofus.

This caused a general silence.

"I suppose we ought to," began Mungbean.

"Oh, but not *yet*," insisted the boy. "Surely you can use another set of hands...er...feet...on your journey. I would like to help find the Viking box!"

Mungbean chewed his whiskers. At length, he seemed to come to a decision. "Nope," he said. "No, my boy, no. It's far too dangerous. You're just a child, and your parents have had a terrible shock, thinking you dead and all. That's...." Mungbean trailed off. "That is what happened, isn't it?"

"I...*suppose* so," said the boy uncertainly.

"Certainly that must be the case," said Mungbean. "And so--"

"But really, they think I'm under the ground, and I'm still under the ground, and they won't be looking for me, after all. Just for a little longer let them think I'm dead and buried?"

"What is Dirtnap to you or you to Dirtnap?" said Mungbean rather severely. Goofus and Wanda were shocked, but held their tongues.

"I...that is..." stammered the twitterpated lad.

"That's what I thought. This is our--"

"But what's Dirtnap to YOU, *vicar*?" broke in Ted, who then added, "...sir."

Mungbean, shocked at first, then issued a high squeaky laugh, and soon they all were laughing. "Why, my boy," said Mungbean, wiping his eyes with his soiled handkerchief, "you've hoisted me on my own petard! We are two of a kind, after all, two human beings who've come down into the garden. As it were."

It was decided. Mungbean reached out his paw, and their claws clicked in a handshake to seal the bond. Their team was now four.



## 5

They nosed their way among deep ancient buried gas lines, rusting lead and copper that gave off a strong smell in the surrounding soil. They passed through a district of ant colonies, and for awhile the sound of clicking in the air was nearly deafening, as Mungbean led them this way and that, on a circuitous course, so as not to intersect any of the ant tunnels or egg galleries.

Quite unexpectedly, they burst through a largish chamber and fell to the dusty floor with a thump.

"What's this?" moaned Ted, rubbing the lump on his skull. "Have we broken through an ant chamber?"

Mungbean said, "Nnnnoo...."

Ted sneezed and looked up. A noise he'd thought was just more ant clicking turned out to be the social chittering of many thousands of beetles. Rows of curved carapaces stretched off into the dim distance like some monstrous subterranean car lot. They sat about in groups, talking, eating and laughing.

Mungbean snorted. "You'll like this," he whispered. He drew himself up at the head of the chamber and shouted very loudly, "Hey, TED!"

The chittering ceased. The beetles, to a man, whipped around in surprise.

A pebble fell from the roof.

Water dripped somewhere.

Cheering! "Hey, Mungbean!" "Mungy! Old bean!" "The Dirtside Vicar!" and so forth.

Ted turned a quizzical gaze on Mungbean, who shook his clenched fists in the air like a prizefighter, first one side, then the other. Mungbean looked down and grinned. "Bit of a coincidence, really," he explained. "It just so happens that all beetles, everywhere, are named Ted!"

"Why, just like me!"

"Indeed!"



*(Music Cue -- 1980's-era new wave band:)*

These are all the beetles named ted  
This is a song about the beetles named ted  
I wanna tell ya bout the beetles named ted  
The beetles named  
beetles named  
beetles named Ted!

Ted McCartney  
Ted Lennon  
Ted Starr  
Ted Harrison  
Ted Sutcliffe  
Ted Best!

These are all the beetles named ted  
This is a song about the beetles named ted  
I wanna tell ya bout the beetles named ted  
The beetles named  
beetles named  
beetles named  
beetles named Ted!

Ted Richard  
Ted Ray  
Ted Damone  
Ted Vincent  
Ted Holly  
Ted Berry!

These are all the beetles named ted  
This is a song about the beetles named ted  
I wanna tell ya bout the beetles named ted  
The beetles named  
beetles named  
beetles named  
beetles named  
beetles named  
beetles named  
beetles named Ted!



## 6

They found themselves in a vast underground cavern, with an average height of about a foot. Things that looked like hair hung down from the moist, dripping ceiling. Glowing blue creatures floated about like wisps of marsh gas. Now and then one could be seen grasping one of the roots and banging it carefully with a tiny hammer, turning a minuscule screwdriver, cutting off a snip with a tiny hacksaw.

"What are those things?" whispered Ted.

"The Nitrogen Fixers," Mungbean whispered back. "Don't make a sound."

"Why not?"

"If they hear us, they will flee. Back out, very quietly."

But Ted had only been a mermole for a little while, and he banged against some friable stones, which clattered to the ground. Terrified, he looked over his shoulder. Ten thousand glowing blue eyes stared at him for a split second before vanishing into the gloom.

"Well, that tore it," chuckled Mungbean.

"Can they hurt us?"

"Oh, no. It's just that these plants above us may feel a little peaked for a while, until the Fixers get over their fright and return. It is their reason for being, however, so they won't stay gone for long. But...now that they've run, we can use these caverns to shave some time off our quest. In fact, I feel the Viking box must be very near now."

"How do you know?" queried Goofus.

"The secret words have told me," said Mungbean, seemingly unaware of the strangeness of the remark.

"The words told you? How can secret words tell you?"

"Well...I wasn't going to say anything. But I guess it's not so much stranger than what you've just seen. The fact is, those words that Hasenfeffer Haggis whispered to me -- I get the distinct impression that they are *alive*."

"Alive? How can words be alive?"

"There are stranger things on heaven and earth, Horatio.... All words are alive, my boy. What, did you think they were dead?"

"I just thought...they were...air."

"Well, air is alive, 'tis true, but words are more than that. They are little bits of life hiding in the air, burrowing in our tongues, living in our brains, and we are symbiotes with them. Words are the little animals who swim through the dirt of thought that is us. That's my impression, anyway."

Mungbean chuckled. "And so in the quiet moments between thoughts, the secret words passed onto me by H.H. give me almost inaudible suggestions in an almost incomprehensible language."

They all pondered this. "Perhaps," Wanda said, "they might've been stronger had Mr. Haggis not been so hard upon his own demise."

"My thinking exactly," Mungbean mused. "Though one suspects the Words may have supplied me with that information as well!"

Suddenly, the ground shuddered. The smell of brimstone hung in the space around them.

"What's that?" said Ted. "Smells like rotten eggs!"

Mungbean shouted: "SWIM! QUICKLY! AND DON'T LOOK BACK!"



## 7

They were deeper than they'd ever been. Ted's eardrums noticeably throbbed, but they still could register a long echoing whistle that ran up and down through the registers. It was answered by another one coming from another direction. And both had sounded from somewhere below.

"Those," said Goofus, "are the aesthenosaurs."

"What in earth are they?"

"They are gigantic animals, much much larger than whales, who swim through the mantle, bumping up against the roots of mountains, nourished by secret pools of oil, frolicking and raising families there in the depths. Sometimes they crash against spurs of land, and the earth quakes. But that's not the strangest part. Every twenty thousand years or so, they all gather inside one of the earth's poles and press on it with their massive snouts. Then the entire crust of the earth shifts 30 or so degrees. There are massive disasters at this time, and terrible extinctions. Deserts become snowfields, jungles become deserts, snowfields become jungles."

"My god, why do they do such a thing?"

"No one really knows. It's been said that all inhabitable planets contain such beasts...that they're necessary to the health of the planet and all life above."

"Who says that?"

"They," grinned Goofus.

Ted felt overwarm. Swimming through the earth was a gas, to be sure, but he hadn't seen the sky for some time, and he craved it, craved sunlight, the way a scurvy victim craves citrus fruits. This was a wild goose chase! He longed to rejoin Mungbean and Wanda. How could the information leading to the whereabouts of the Viking Box be this far down? It was getting quite ridiculous.

"Goofus, I'd like to go back topside," Ted began hesitantly.

"Just a little farther now, keep swimming."

"My claws are getting tired...can't we rest for just a moment?"

"No, keep swimming, just a little farther now..." Goofus's voice sounded oddly strangled.

"Goofus? You okay? Are we too deep or something?"

No reply.

Ted made a cul-de-sac and turned to face Goofus. He found two red eyes glaring at him, embers from the dead fires of Hell. "Goofuz izzunt here right now," rumbled the black beast-shape hanging above him. It chuckled.

Ted's little muscles felt like so many wet noodles. "D...d...d..."

"Duh duh duh? I about expected this level of conversation from the likes of you," said Dirtnap, his ivory yellow fangs dripping with pink saliva. "And your interminable questions! Don't they teach you anything in those topside schools? Ugh! I've had it!"



Dirtnap punched the wall of earth behind Ted's head -- it burst open, revealing an endless black abyss below, glowing weakly with the strange reddish non-color of infrared. "Au revoir and fucqe-ay vous!" called Dirtnap as Ted, screaming, fell end over end into the depths of inner space. "Say hi to the big red dinos!"



## 8

When the aesthenosaur spoke, it was with a surprisingly close and gentle voice. "What brings you here, littlebeast?"

Ted got up on one paw, and shook his snout and whiskers. He felt like his head might cave in at any moment. "Head...hurts...," he whimpered.

"Ah," said the vast thing, and then suddenly the pressure lifted. "My apologies."

Ted floated in a kind of translucent silver globe running with rainbows, like a soap bubble -- around him in the dimness were enormous shapes, things so massive he could only interact with a portion of their whiskered mouths. A tiny hole opened in the nearest lips (though it was still big enough that you could've driven a lorry into it): "How is it you've come here, little thing?"

"Please don't hurt me," babbled the terrorized boymole.

"No," said the thing, and in that one syllable it transmitted love and affection and indulgence. "No," it repeated.

"D-d-dirtnap busted the...dirt and then I...and...I was falling..."

"Dirtnap? Cor, is he at it again?"

"You know Dirtnap?"

"Oho yes," chuckled the thing. "Yes, we do."

Ted's questions tripped over their own feet and fell sprawling on his tongue -- what was the thing named? How far down were they? Was Dirtnap coming after him? Did they know how to defeat Dirtnap? Where was the Viking Box? Could they smell it or locate it with radar or anything?

The things chuckled indulgent at one another. "You," said the main thing, "can call me Spinor. This is Tensor, this is Flexor, and this is Vector."

"Pleased to meet you all," said Ted politely. "I'm sure I shan't be able to recognize any of you in future. I can't even see your faces properly."

"That's probably best," said Spinor. "We are not terribly attractive."

"Well, you seem like nice people."

"Thanks, old man."

"Old man? Why, I'm just a boy! How old are you?"

"Not sure, really. None of us remember a time when we were not."

"Well, nobody does...right?"

Ted's eardrums pounded with the beat of the creatures' laughter. "This is a bright little beast," commented one of the others...Tensor? or was it Flexor?

"Alright, tiny thing," said Spinor. "We have dallied far too much for today, and we must get back to work. It's no small job keeping this planet properly mixed. We've enjoyed speaking with you. Go in peace."

"But the Vik--"

Something Ted could only describe afterwards as a sonic snake entered his ears, tickled his brain, and caused him to fall into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, he was going upward, being lifted by many glowing blue things. The Nitrogen Fixers! he thought. But...how is it they're not scared? He turned his head and found himself face to tiny face with one of them. It looked like a pinky painted blue, then doodled with crude eyes and a mouth. It had a kind of crown on its head. Some kind of vapor coming from its mouth.

No, it was smoking a cigar.

"Hey, da kid's awake," he heard, more in his head than in his ears. "How ya doin kid. We's takin ya upstairs. When yuz come up from so deep, yuz need us to eat da nitrogen outta your blood. Get my drift?"

"No," Ted admitted, woozy.



## 9

"Is that the moon?" said Ted.

"No...that's a mylarite."

The four travelers rested their dogs on an outcrop above the desert. Wanda, who had no dogs to speak of, curled under a moist leaf. The decision to surface was greeted by her with apprehension, at best.

"An earthworm cannot surface in the desert!" she said, as if speaking to a child.

"Ted wants to see the stars again," explained Goofus (still a little woozy after his possession by that demon Dirtnap), "and so we're going to bring him up. If you don't want to come along, you don't have to."

"I'll dry up!"

"No you won't...not at night."

"I don't know," said Wanda doubtfully.

"You can stick only your head out of the hole."

"Got no eyes, nimrod."

"Nimrod," mused Mungbean. He smiled pensively, his yellow mole-teeth glistening. "The mighty hunter. I did a sermon on him once."

"It's not a pejorative?" said Wanda hesitantly.

"Well...yes and no."

"Ha haaaa!" said Goofus nastily.

"Shaddap."

Here now under the desert moon, a coyote sang.

"What's a mylarite?" said Ted.

"Why, it's a--"

Suddenly, a great flurry of wings exploded upon the travelers!



## Interlude: The Mylarites

The mylar balloons without logos and without strings -- they're spores extruded from the silver mines. You thought they were tapped out, those old mines -- but now and again in the dead of night, out come the mylar-balloon-like things, queuing at the dark maw of the entrance, probing out their silver snouts dull in the night, reflecting only the moon and stars, moon and stars swimming in the flock of mylarites bumping and jostling across the saltflats in the blue black darkness, headed for the lights of LA and Vegas.

They're searching for the mudflats, for the swampy areas, where the still stagnant water ripples under the moon, where schools of malarial gnats gestate underwater, hanging from flexible sucking tubes -- the spores will sink into the mud, bury themselves like lungfish, like flatfish, like mudtoads, like horseshoe crabs, like skates, then burrow deep and grow brand new veins of ore, of silver and gold and pyrite, copper and onyx and chalcedony, quartz and diamond and even antlers and veal, veins of veal veiled underneath the heavy curtains of soil.

Mylarites from Vegas  
Refugees in the desert  
Refugee eggs in the Gobi Desert  
Ergs for the Chinese peasantry  
Refugeesaurus from the dinosaur wars  
Smashed and broken in nests on the primeval Gobi  
The broken bones of Han Chinese rotting in the sweet wind  
The rotating flags of prisoners' hair in the dried head highways  
Every passing soldier gives their noses a sardonic flick  
Thus do the Tibetans meet their end  
In the sweet grass of the endless steppe



Sure she was seconds from being eaten, Wanda crossed herself, repeatedly coiling her pink, succulent body about the talons of the great bird, writhing and wriggling to try and get the cross to come out correctly.

"Oi! Cut it out down there!" came a thin voice from above.

"Yer wo'?" Was the bird talking to her? This had to be a first.

"Yew haired me."

"There's a Welshman about!" thought Wanda. "Or a Scot. Oh please let him be Welsh!"

"Om up hair, yuh dahffy betch." Urk, Wanda thought. Not a Welshman.

Between the shoulders of a beautiful red-tailed desert hawk, a point-snouted little worm sat, curled in a round cockpit which had once functioned as the lid of a jar of Sanka. His tail firmly clutching reins of pink hair ribbon, the worm adjusted his tartan and spat. "Kimon...up hair with

ye," he said, and tapped the bird, who immediately dropped Wanda screaming into space, then circled beneath and caught her in the cup.

"Oof!" gasped Wanda. "My, I wouldn't want to do that again!"

The Scottish worm grunted. He was a strong bastard, brought up to pierce the tough, cold, near-tundra soil of the isles. From Orkney he was, where his parents and his grandparents for a million generations threaded their way among mysterious standing stones, and the rusty bones of MacTavishes. His flanks were muscular and dark red with iron-rich blood. This prick was nearly a nightcrawler. Despite herself, Wanda felt love stir in her elongated guts.

Lining the bottom of the cap-cockpit was a moistened sponge. Wanda's backside luxuriated as she settled in. "Who are you?" she queried.

"MacWurm," said the driver. He pronounced it "wer-dum". "Hamish MacWurm. Sorry I got ye...I was tryin ta pluck thot gophair offa thot crag."

"You can't do that! They're my friends!"

"Friends! Holy shite, woman! They're only keepun ye around to eat ye when they git hoongry."

"Oh, bosh."

"Eh?"

"I know them. They're my friends. We're on our way to find the secret to defeating Dirtnap."

Hamish became quite speechless for a moment, and they soared through the air in pregnant silence. "Fookin Dirtnap!" he spluttered, when he could finally speak again.



## 10

"Since I am about to kill you, I might as well tell you," said Dirtnap, stirring the sauce. "I will tell you. And then I will kill you. And then I will eat you."

"I'll give you the worst indigestion you ever had!" said Ted bravely, straining at his bonds.

"You do that," mumbled Dirtnap indulgently. "Well, where to begin? I guess you would call me a zombi dog. I was a faithful, loving and stupid family pet. I lived a long and boring life playing ball, chasing after stuff, and so forth. When I died, they planted me on a hill behind their house. They didn't know it was an Indian graveyard. But not just any Indian graveyard. Oh, no. This was where they buried all the hard cases. The psychos, the serial killers, the retarded and deformed, the sociopaths, the ones possessed by devils and witches."

Dirtnap gave Ted a wry, bemused look. "Dumbasses. They didn't consecrate the ground beforehand. Kinda like keeping radioactive waste in a lead container. It's just something you gotta do with these kinda graveyards, to keep em at peace. You know an insane Indian spirit has a half-life of 50,000 years? Did you know that?"

"We didn't get to that in school," said Ted miserably. He was wishing he was there. It'd always been so boring, before, school. But now it didn't seem so bad.

"Heh, and you never will. Anyway. Next thing I knew, I was shambling about in the open air, all half-rotted, and with a seething hunger for systematic violence and mayhem. And that pretty much brings us up to date!"

Dirtnap approached Ted, his foetid breath preceding him like a ship's stinking bow wave. "There is," he said meditatively, "an old story from the Chuang Tzu. It is of the master carver, who can chop a hundred, a thousand bullocks and never dull his blade. He just touches the joints, and they fall apart neatly. It's uncanny. When asked his secret, he explains that in between the joints, there are spaces -- and what's more, the edge of his blade has no thickness." Dirtnap grinned a disgusting, wormy grin, and shook his blade comically at Ted. "So there's plenty of wiggle room."

He seemed to be waiting for a response. "Unh-huh," said Ted noncommittally.

"I just like that story," explained Dirtnap, and went to work.



## 11

Once inside Dirtnap, the pieces of Ted wasted little time heading to the evil beast's vital organs. But once there, the puzzled pieces had little or no idea what to do next.

Their reverie was interrupted by the arrival of the Chief Nitrogen Fixer, who stubbed out his cigar on Dirtnap's pericardium in a shower of sparks. "Hey, youse guys!"

The pieces whirled around. "It's you!" they squeaked.

"Dat's statin de obvious," said the Chief Nitrogen Fixer.

"What shall I do now, Chief?"

"Come in close. Youse guys up in the cranium! Get yuh patooties down hea! Gadder round, boyze. Lissen and lissen good."

Dirtnap spread the plans out on the disgusting, rotten picnic table which was the only piece of furniture in his scummy cavern. In runic characters, it explained the mystical properties of the Viking box, and the talismans contained therein. It also gave some very specific clues as to the location of the box. As Dirtnap understood it, from reading the ancient script, he had to find Mungbean's brain. Which was, presumably, in Mungbean's head. And Dirtnap was sure he'd figured out where Mungbean was hiding.

"This'll be the end of old Mungbrain now," he said. "To serve me as a wet and gooshy key to the one thing on earth that can destroy me! And with that out of the way, melted in the innards of the earth, my reign of terror can begin in earnest."

He rolled up the map and burped. The burp was the result of the tiny cigar being extinguished in his abdominal cavity. And as he headed to the slimy hole to ascend into the night to begin his evil depredations, he began to feel quite queer.

It was all over rather quickly -- even so, the process was of such a disgusting nature, that it's best not to go into it.

Out of the shattered husk of Dirtnap, as if out of a bunch of stinking old clothes, stood a pale young boy. Covered with gore and slime, in the darkness.

"We've done it!" Ted shouted.

"Jeez, ya wanna boist my eardrums?" whined the Chief Nitrogen Fixer, standing on the porch of Ted's right ear. "Cripes, you sure is a big boy!"

"I'm fairly small for my age, I'm told," remarked Ted. "Now, to get out of here and go back home!"

But try as he might, he couldn't get his head and shoulders through the small tunnel leading to the surface. He tried and tried, but just wouldn't fit. Soon, he began to cry.

"I'm stuck in the dirt from whence I came!" he blubbered.

"Not if I got anything ta say about it," winked the Chief Nitrogen Fixer. He clapped his tiny hands.

In a flash a hundred million Nitrogen Fixers slithered through the tunnel, performing molecular and subatomic machinations that widened the hole enough for Ted's skinny human shoulders, and breathing room besides.

Ted was just about to bid the Nitrogen Fixers goodbye when the dirt crumbled aside in one corner and out came Goofus, Mungbean and Wanda.

They all regarded each other. They'd had so many adventures, traveled to so many strange lands, seen so many very unusual things. What more could be said? Certainly a group hug was in order.

"But what about the Viking box?" Ted remembered.

"Oh," said Mungbean. "Don't you worry about that. We'll make sure it's kept safe and sound."

"Okay." Ted prepared to ascend to the surface and blessed daylight once again. As he did, he turned and regarded his friends. "I'm sure we'll see each other again soon," he said.

"No doubt about that," said Mungbean. "There are so many things left to be done! For example, someone ought to do something about the rabid Sea Captains, and Carloz Montez of the Mounties, not to mention Mac Strong and the Engines of Translucent Doom."

"Say what?" Ted exclaimed.

But they were gone, vanished the way they came. There was nothing for it but to swim back to the surface.

And swim he did.