



## TAKE-AWAYS

The delivery-boy looked doubtfully up at the tree. Then he looked at the address which had been written down on the delivery-slip. This was surely it: “Oak Tree Mansions, Forest Hill”. There were no other houses about. And there, on the trunk of the tree, was nailed a rather flimsy piece of cardboard which stated quite clearly, if messily: “OktREE MANSHUNS”.

But who on earth lived here? “Mr Nutkin” was written on the slip. Sounded a bit like a squirrel or something. The boy chuckled to himself, then stopped abruptly. It was a dark night, and he had no real wish to hang about here in the forest longer than was necessary. Anyway, he was needed back at the take-away to deliver to the next customers, it being Saturday night, when no one seemed capable of cooking themselves a proper meal.

The boy looked up and down the lane one last time, still saw no other possibility, cleared his throat and shouted: “Delivery for Mr Nutkin!”. There was silence, apart from the creaking of the branches of the trees in the night-wind. The boy shouted again. “Mr Nutkin! Mr Nutkin, delivery for -!”

All at once there was a commotion in the branches above him, and a rather angry-looking red squirrel rushed and jumped and sprang to the ground in front of the boy. He stepped back several paces, startled.

“What is the meaning of all the noise you are making at this time?” demanded the squirrel, paws on his rather broad hips, large beady eyes examining the intruder.

“Um – are you Mr Nutkin?” asked the boy nervously, holding out the bag of tin-foil trays.

“Yes, I am indeed he!” snapped the squirrel. “Who wants to know this thing?”

“I’ve a delivery from *The Indian Banquet...*” stammered the delivery-boy.

“Ah, then why did you say not so, instead you stand there in shouting off your head and in waking up the animals abiding by the law of the land? Do you not realise it is night-time?” The squirrel hopped to the bag and poked his nose in. His voice slightly muffled, he demanded to know if everything was as it should be.

“Well, there’s – let’s see...” The boy examined the delivery-note by the light of his torch. “Yes, one Chana with Puri, three Vegetable Samosas, one Tel Baigan. That’s for starters. Then there’s a Sabzi Korma, a large Sag Panier, two Chat Potties and four helpings of Kumbi Pilau rice.”

“And what is it with the Naan bread, I expect?” demanded the squirrel, head still thrust into the carrier bag. “I ask with specific reason for Naan bread four items and Papadoms enough of quantity. I can see them not one!”

“Oh, they’re in there too, in a separate bag. I’m sure –“

“H’mph, well, I am supposing that it will must be so,” grumbled the squirrel. “I am of the certain view that you delayed in arrival – where have you been idling? I hope not you were making deliveries to the Flopsy Bunnies?” he asked accusingly.

“Er, no. Just one delivery before this one, to some – um...” the boy was going to say ‘normal people’, but thought better of it.

“To some humans, I’ll be bound?! Always the same it is with you guys: the animals are in receipt of a service of the second-class! We are paying you some good money, don’t we? It is a disgrace of the downright kind – while you are acting the swan with your deliveries to the humans, we animals must have to sit with hungry tummies and have in the very end cold food. That is the way that it is, isn’t it not? Try to persuade me that it is not true!”

The boy didn’t know how to answer that one, so he changed the subject.

“But Mr Nutkin, I thought squirrels only ate nuts and berries and things?”

“Do not you say ‘Mr Nutkin’ to me!” said the squirrel, now furious. “Russell Leavenhulme is the name.”

“But it says Mr Nutkin here on the delivery slip,” faltered the boy. “Look...”

“Bah, I say to you, bah! Of course I said the name was ‘Nutkin’ when speaking into the public telephone box. You other humans know not how to spell any names of squirrels except ‘Nutkin’. We’re all ‘Nutkins’ to you, I am supposing. Listen, if I had told you what my name was really, which is really Russell Leavenhulme, you would have written it all wrong down, and never would I have received a sniff even of my dinner!”

“Sorry, sir. But nuts and berries...?”

“There again you go once more: please, you just kindly eat nuts and berries, Mr Nutkin! Have just some worms and grubs, Mrs Tiggiwinkle, go ahead! Surely you would prefer some carrots and lettuce, Mr Rabbit, sir? What is the matter with you humans? – do you not think we probably get ourselves fed up with the basic diet? How you like it to live on beech-nuts and pine-cones all the winter months through? How you like it to have to remember extremely hard where you buried the meal that is next to come, then to must sally out in all the weathers that come for to dig it up? Would you like that thing!? I think not so! Do you think not perhaps that a squirrel can – maybe just once in the whiles – examine in details at the carry-out menus and aspire himself to something who is tastier? Something who is warmer? Something who is spicier? “ The squirrel fluffed up his tail and stamped his feet. “I have a hard day in the trees had and all which I would like now to do is to get indoors with my paid-for Indian, to sit down with my feet up on the mantelpieces and out-pig myself. Is that too much to ask, I ask?”

“Well, I suppose not,” supposed the boy. “Anyway, I’d better be going. Here’s your meal. That’ll be £34.45”

The squirrel looked scornfully at him. “What is this meaning - £34.45? Where you think that I am finding that kind of money from? Do you think that I have relentless chests of doubloons buried in all the parts of the forest? Is that possibly what you are thinking? Anyways, what is that sort of price to charge for a carrying-out?”

“Well, it’s not so bad: there’s free delivery for orders over £10,” said the boy helpfully.

“Free delivery for - ! Well, excuse me a lot, I am very sorry for being the nuisance! Oh, ‘free delivery’, I sing lah-di-dah to you!” The squirrel glowered. “Have you not heard of the disconto for orders valued over £30? What perhaps are you to do about that, then?”

The boy looked doubtful. “It’s not a policy I’ve heard of before,” he muttered.

“Now though you have heard me tell of it,” said the squirrel firmly. “A disconto amounting to 25% for orders over the value £30. And another disconto of 25% for myself being a red squirrel, rather than a grey with no significance. I have calculated that is £2.75 in net total. Now, where I put my wallet, let me search myself...” He poked about in his plentiful pockets, all the while keeping his tail firmly curled around the handle of the take-away.

The boy scratched his head, engaging in some stressful mental arithmetic. At last he said, “But 50% of £34.45 is about £17 twenty-something, not £2.75. That’s wrong!”

The squirrel suddenly went quite still. Then chattered once, twice with his teeth. Almost immediately, three more burly squirrels came bounding out of the tree, one with a bitten ear and only half a tail. They looked mean and hungry and eager for their carry-out.

“This gentleman who is still young does not like to learn the arithmetics of squirrels, my boys,” said Russell quietly. “Like me, are you thinking that he stands in need of some lessons?”

At that, the boy just ran. He ran all the way back down Forest Hill, jumped aboard his scooter and pattered off into the night.

Up on Forest Hill, it was just the usual Saturday night take-away.

