













Philip longed for a camera so he could photograph the nests. "If only I could take photos of them," he would say over and over again, "I might be a great naturalist—my book might even be printed."

But the cheapest camera in the shop windows cost pounds, and our money box held exactly nine shillings and sixpence, even though we had been saving for weeks and weeks. We emptied the coins onto the bed and counted them once again, just in case we'd made a mistake the time before. But we hadn't. Philip sighed deeply.

"I shall nearly be going to boarding school by the time I get that camera," he said sadly. "I wish we could earn some money, Ruth."

We gazed out into the garden rather sadly, trying hard to think of a plan, but we couldn't think of anything we could do. It was April, and the first fruit trees were all covered in lacy white blossom. Yellow primroses and daffodils shone brightly in the sun.

All of a sudden I felt Philip's body go stiff beside me, and he half dived out of the window.

"Tree creeper—on the plum," he hissed.

I leaned out beside him and we watched a neat brown bird running up the plum tree, tapping the bark for insects. Philip was alert now, noticing everything he could about the little bird until it spread its wings and disappeared. Then out came his notebook, and for the next five minutes Philip was busily writing down everything he could remember about the tree creeper.

Then he looked up. "Ruth," he said eagerly, "we must get

to the woods early today and have plenty of time. And Ruth, I was thinking in bed last night, we should have a naturalists' headquarters. We should have a place where we could keep pencils and paper and tins of food, instead of always carrying them with us, because we shall go every day during the holidays. We must escape early before Aunt Margaret thinks of jobs we ought to do."

I nearly fell out of bed with excitement. "Yes! We'll race through our holiday jobs, and I'll be as good as gold so she'll hardly notice me, and she won't watch me, and when I've swept and dusted in the lounge, I'll just slip out before she thinks of anything else. If she asks where we've been, we'll say we've been getting wood. And we'll bring some back to make it true. But I don't see why we should have to work at all on our holidays! I know what I'll do. I'll dress quickly and go down now and help Aunt Margaret with breakfast to make her think how good I'm being!"

I was out of bed in a flash, and ten minutes later I was down in the kitchen with a clean apron on and my hair neat and tidy.

"Can I help you, Aunt Margaret?" I asked politely. "I got up early in case you might need me."

My aunt looked very surprised, as I was usually very late in the mornings.

"Thank you, Ruth," she answered pleasantly, hiding her surprise. "You can lay the table for me. I should be very glad."

Everything went smoothly. Philip and I ate our breakfast very fast and sat impatiently while Aunt Margaret and Uncle



Peter slowly sipped their second cups of coffee, discussing the day ahead. Then Uncle Peter went off to work and Aunt Margaret turned to us.

“And what plans have you two made?” she asked. Philip had the answer all ready. “As soon as we’ve done our holiday jobs, we’re going to get wood in the Cowleights, Aunt Margaret,” he replied in his sweetest voice.

“Very well,” my aunt answered, sounding a bit doubtful. “But you must remember I need your help in the mornings. Ruth is old enough to help in the house now. She can start with wiping up and doing the lounge, and then we’ll see.”

I could be quick when I liked, and I wiped up the breakfast things in a very short time. Then, without saying anything more to my aunt, I seized the broom and duster and headed for the lounge. I flicked the dust off the shelves at high speed. I pushed the broom wildly around the edges of the room, then lifted the carpet and swept the pile of dust under it, as I couldn’t find the dustpan. Then I tiptoed back to the kitchen, put the broom and duster back in the cupboard, and ran out of the front door like a streak of lightning.

Out and free on an April morning, with the sun shining and the birds singing and the lambs bleating! I tore around the back and pounced upon Philip all unexpectedly, nearly knocking him over. But he was quite used to me by now, so wasn’t really alarmed.

“Finished already?” he inquired, rather surprised.

“Yes, haven’t you?”

“No,” he answered. “I’ve got to chop these sticks into kindling wood. It will take ages.”

“Oh,” I cried. “We can’t wait! You’ve made quite enough of those silly bundles. No one will know we haven’t chopped them all up if they can’t see the rest. Quick—give those sticks to me!”

Before Philip could say anything, I had thrown the rest of the sticks into the ditch and was kicking dead leaves over them. “Just think,” I shouted, jumping up and down, “how quickly we shall find them when we are sent to get more!” And with a final leap I was away across the orchard and out through the gap in the back hedge like a young rabbit, with Philip at my heels.

No one else knew about our gap in the hedge. It was our own special right of way. Aunt Margaret could see the gate from the kitchen window, and sometimes we didn’t want anyone to know about our comings and goings. So we had found a gap behind the hen house that was invisible to anyone else because it was covered by overhanging branches, which we brushed aside. It led out into another meadow, which led to the road and in turn led to our dear woods.

Once on the road I danced and shouted like a young mad thing. It was sheer joy to be alive on such a morning. Philip followed more quietly, his eyes fixed on the hedges, now and then stopping to listen or to watch. I did not wait for him. I felt as if spring had gotten into my feet. I think I scared away most of the birds before Philip came anywhere near them.

I jumped over the gate that led through the meadow and stood still for a minute, watching the mother sheep with their

joyful, long-legged lambs, leaping, like me, among the daisies. As I watched, one of the lambs with a smudged nose and black socks suddenly saw me and came rushing toward me, giving little bleats of welcome. I bent down and held out my arms. He ran straight into them and started licking my face with his eager, warm tongue.

“Philip,” I cried. “Look what’s happening!”

Philip was beside me by this time, and together we knelt in the grass while the little lamb prodded us, licked us, and leapt from one lap to another. As we played, an old shepherd came and leaned over the gate, smiling at us.

“That’s the little orphan,” he explained. “He’s bottle fed, and he’s not afraid of anyone. The other sheep push him away, so off he goes on his own. He’s always in trouble, the little rascal!”

The lamb at this moment leaped from my knee and ran to the gate. The old man stooped and picked it up.

“He knows my voice all right, don’t he?” he remarked, smiling. Then, tucking it inside his coat, he turned away toward the farm.

“That’s a new shepherd,” I said to Philip. “I’ve never seen him before.”

“I have,” answered Philip. “He’s over from Cradley for the lambing season. Come on, Ruth! We’re wasting time!”

He jumped up, and we raced across the open meadow with the wind blowing my plaits out behind me. Then over a stile, and we were standing in our woods.