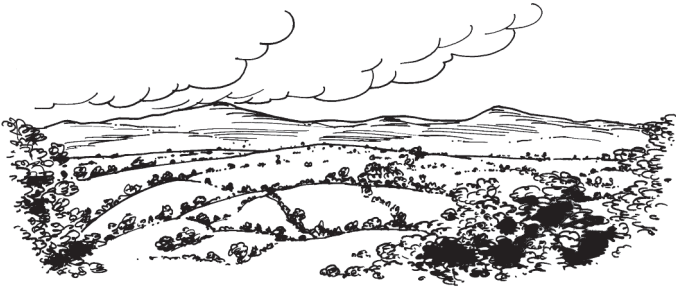


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About Ourselves



Philip and I lived with our Aunt Margaret in a white house on the side of a hill. It was a lovely home, with a garden and an orchard of apple trees. We slept in two attic bedrooms at the top of the house and had our doors open so we could shout across to each other. Philip's window looked out on the garden with the hills behind it, and it made me feel very safe. My window looked out over the countryside of Worcestershire, with the hills of Herefordshire in the distance, where I had never been. My view made me long for adventure.

I loved looking at the hills, and when Philip came to sit on my bed in the morning to listen to the first bird songs or watch the sun rise, we used to make up

stories about strange animals that lived on them.

Philip was a year and a half older than me, and I loved him more than anyone else on earth. He was gentle and thoughtful, and once he had made up his mind about something, he wouldn't change it! He had always been my friend and protector, and we were never apart, except when we were at school. We were so different. Philip was a big, strong boy with a round face and blue eyes. I was small and thin with dark, untidy hair and a pointed chin. Philip was good and obedient, but I was naughty and hated being told what to do. Aunt Margaret really loved Philip, but she shook her head sadly when she looked at me.

At the time of this story, we had been living with Aunt Margaret for five years. We had forgotten what Mum and Dad looked like. They lived and worked in India and they had sailed away when I was just four years old. Mum was going to come home, but the war stopped her.

I was worried that Mum wouldn't like me if she did come back, as Aunt Margaret kept telling me how disappointed she would be with me because I was so bad. In her letters, Mum sounded as if she loved me very much, but I thought that must be because she didn't know what I was like. I was sure she would like Philip much better than me because he was a good boy, and grown-ups always liked him. Philip would like Mum, too, because Philip likes everybody. I wanted Philip all to myself, so I tried not to think about Mum coming home. I didn't want to share him with anybody—not even our mother.

But Philip could remember her, and sometimes he talked to me about her. I remember one evening, when I was about eight years old, I had been sent to bed without any tea because I had been naughty. I was lying on my bed feeling hot and angry and very hungry, waiting for Philip to climb the stairs on his way to bed. As usual, he came straight into my room. He bent down and struggled to get something out of his sock. It was a sugar bun that looked rather squashed, and it had lots of wool sticking to the sugar. Philip was very proud of it, as he had managed to get it into his sock, under the table, without Aunt Margaret seeing him. I ate it happily while Philip sat on my pillow and put his arm around me.

“What else did you have for tea?” I asked, with my mouth full of bun.

“I’m afraid we had meatballs,” he replied, “but they were too squashy to put down my sock. They weren’t very nice. You didn’t miss much.”

“It’s very unkind of Aunt Margaret to send me to bed without my supper,” I whined. “If Mum was here, she wouldn’t be unkind to me like that.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” agreed Philip. “But then, you see, you were really, really rude to Aunt Margaret, and you would never have been rude to Mum.”

“How do you know? I might,” I said.

“Oh, no, you definitely wouldn’t,” said Philip. “There wouldn’t be anything to be rude about. You’re only rude when you’re cross, and we were never cross with Mum. She was so happy and bright. If we were a bit naughty, she used to pick us up in her arms and tell us lovely stories. Then we’d forget

all about being naughty. I wish you could remember her, Ruth.”

I was just about to ask Philip more about Mum, but he suddenly hopped off my bed and dived across to his own room like a frightened rabbit. I heard Aunt Margaret’s footsteps on the attic stairs.

She went into Philip’s room, and I heard her cross over to him and tuck him in. I heard him say, “Good night, Auntie” in a breathless sort of voice. Then she came across and stood in the doorway of my room.

“Good night, Ruth,” she said.

If I had answered and said I was sorry, she would have come over and tucked me in, too. But I hated saying sorry, so I pretended to be asleep and gave a very loud snore. Of course, she didn’t believe me.

“I’m sorry you are still in such a naughty temper,” she said in a cold voice, then she turned away and went downstairs.

“Did she see you weren’t undressed?” I whispered across to Philip.

“No,” answered Philip. “I pulled the bedclothes around my neck. Good night, Ruth.”

“Good night, Phil,” I answered, then turned over toward the window and stared out into the darkness. I kept thinking about what Philip had said about Mum. Mum would have come across and kissed me, whether I was sorry or not, and then of course I would have really been sorry, and Mum and I would have looked out at the stars together. She would have told me stories. As I fell asleep, I could almost feel her arms around me, but in my dreams she ran away from me, and she and Philip went away together, and I was left behind.

Holiday Plans



This story begins two years after the night I told you about in Chapter One.

I was now nine and a half, and Philip was nearly eleven. On the first day of the Easter holidays, Philip came into my room in his pajamas at half past six in the morning. He curled up on the end of my bed with a notebook and pencil in his hand. Together we leaned our elbows on the windowsill to watch the birds and to make plans.

Bird-watching was our great hobby that holiday. We had a notebook in which we recorded each different kind of bird we saw and everything we noticed about it—its song, its nest, its habits. Philip had made the book himself, and it was very neat. He did

all the writing and I painted the eggs when we found them. Philip's work was exactly right but my drawings were not very good.

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 Cowleighs, 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.