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WATERSHIP DOWN

RICHARD ADAMS



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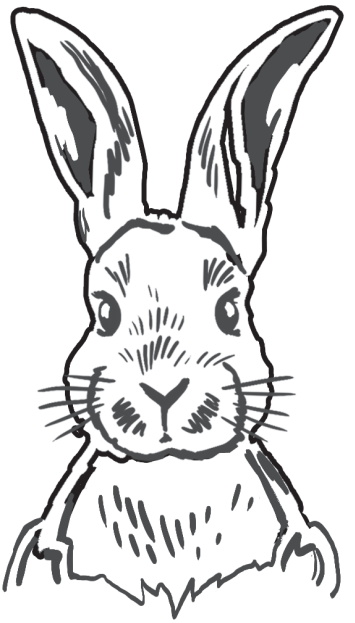
Richard Adams, the son of a country doctor, was born in Newbury in England in 1920. He was educated at Bradfield College and Worcester College, Oxford. He served in the Second World War and in 1948 joined the Civil Service. In the mid-1960s he completed his first novel, *Watership Down*, for which he struggled for several years to find a publisher. It was eventually awarded both the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian award for children's fiction for 1972. In 1974 he retired from the Civil Service and published a series of further novels, including *Shardik*, *Tales from Watership Down*, *Maia*, *The Plague Dogs* and *The Girl in a Swing*. Richard died on Christmas Eve, 2016.

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Books by Richard Adams

Watership Down
Tales From Watership Down

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RICHARD ADAMS

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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Rex Collings 1972
Published in Puffin Books 1973
Reissued with new illustrations 1993
Published in this edition 2014
Reissued 2022
This clothbound classic edition published 2023
014

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Set in 10.5/14.5 pt Sabon LT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–65570–2

All correspondence to:
Puffin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW



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Master Rabbit I saw

– Walter de la Mare

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To Juliet and Rosamond, remembering
the road to Stratford-on-Avon

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Acknowledgements

I acknowledge with gratitude the help I have received not only from my family but also from my friends Reg Sones and Hal Summers, who read the book before publication and made valuable suggestions.

I also wish to thank warmly Mrs Margaret Apps and Miss Miriam Hobbs, who took pains with the typing and helped me very much.

I am indebted, for a knowledge of rabbits and their ways, to Mr R. M. Lockley's remarkable book, *The Private Life of the Rabbit*. Anyone who wishes to know more about the migrations of yearlings, about pressing chin glands, chewing pellets, the effects of over-crowding in warrens, the phenomenon of re-absorption of fertilized embryos, the capacity of buck rabbits to fight stoats, or any other features of Lapine life, should refer to that definitive work.

Note

Nuthanger Farm is a real place, like all the other places in the book. But Mr and Mrs Cane, their little girl Lucy and their farmhands are fictitious and bear no intentional resemblance to any persons known to me, living or dead.

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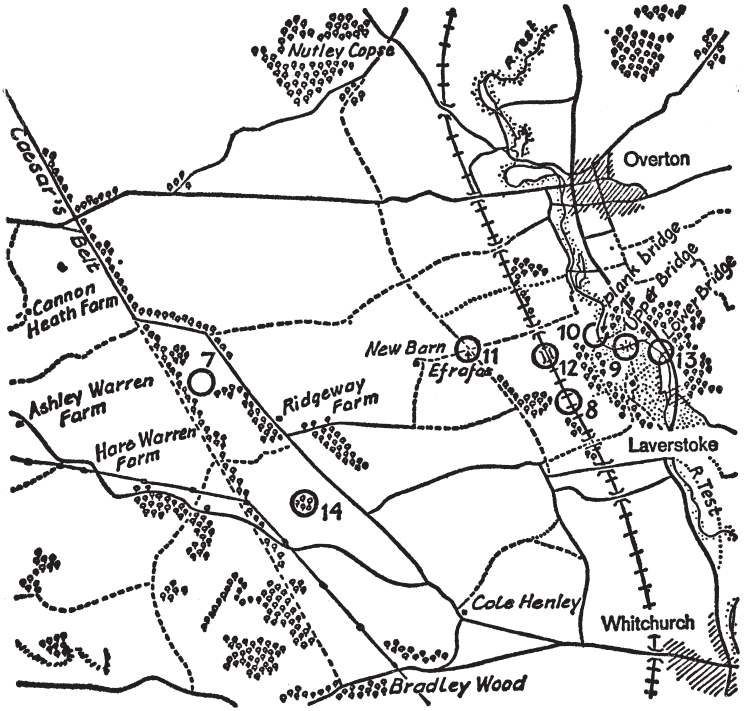
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PART ONE

The Journey



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1. The Notice Board

CHORUS: Why do you cry out thus, unless at some vision of horror?

CASSANDRA: The house reeks of death and dripping blood.

CHORUS: How so? 'Tis but the odour of the altar sacrifice.

CASSANDRA: The stench is like a breath from the tomb.

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

THE PRIMROSES were over. Towards the edge of the wood, where the ground became open and sloped down to an old fence and a brambly ditch beyond, only a few fading patches of pale yellow still showed among the dog's mercury and oak-tree roots. On the other side of the fence, the upper part of the field was full of rabbit-holes. In places the grass was gone altogether and everywhere there were clusters of dry droppings, through which nothing but the ragwort would grow. A hundred yards away, at the bottom of the slope, ran the brook, no more than three feet wide, half-choked with king-cups, water-cress and blue

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brook-lime. The cart-track crossed by a brick culvert and climbed the opposite slope to a five-barred gate in the thorn hedge. The gate led into the lane.

The May sunset was red in clouds, and there was still half an hour to twilight. The dry slope was dotted with rabbits – some nibbling at the thin grass near their holes, others pushing farther down to look for dandelions or perhaps a cowslip that the rest had missed. Here and there one sat upright on an ant-heap and looked about, with ears erect and nose in the wind. But a blackbird, singing undisturbed on the outskirts of the wood, showed that there was nothing alarming there and in the other direction, along the brook, all was plain to be seen, empty and quiet. The warren was at peace.

At the top of the bank, close to the wild cherry where the blackbird sang, was a little group of holes almost hidden by brambles. In the green half-light, at the mouth of one of these holes, two rabbits were sitting together side by side. At length, the larger of the two came out, slipped along the bank under cover of the brambles and so down into the ditch and up into the field. A few moments later the other followed.

The first rabbit stopped in a sunny patch and scratched his ear with rapid movements of his hind-leg. Although he was a yearling and still below full weight, he had not the harassed look of most 'outskirters' – that is, the rank-and-file of ordinary rabbits in their first year who, lacking either aristocratic parentage or unusual size and strength, get sat on by their elders and live as best they can – often in the open – on the edge of their warren. He looked as though he

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knew how to take care of himself. There was a shrewd, buoyant air about him as he sat up, looked round and rubbed both front paws over his nose. As soon as he was satisfied that all was well, he laid back his ears and set to work on the grass.

His companion seemed less at ease. He was small, with wide, staring eyes and a way of raising and turning his head which suggested not so much caution as a kind of ceaseless, nervous tension. His nose moved continually and when a bumble-bee flew humming to a thistle bloom behind him, he jumped and spun round with a start that sent two nearby rabbits scurrying for holes before the nearest, a buck with black-tipped ears, recognized him and returned to feeding.

'Oh, it's only Fiver,' said the black-tipped rabbit, 'jumping at blue-bottles again. Come on, Buckthorn, what were you telling me?'

'Fiver?' said the other rabbit. 'Why's he called that?'

'Five in the litter, you know: he was the last – and the smallest. You'd wonder nothing had got him by now. I always say a man couldn't see him and a fox wouldn't want him. Still, I admit he seems to be able to keep out of harm's way.'*

* Rabbits can count up to four. Any number above four is *Hrair* – 'a lot', or 'a thousand'. Thus they say *U Hrair* – 'The Thousand' – to mean, collectively, all the enemies (or *elil,* as they call them) of rabbits – fox, stoat, weasel, cat, owl, man, etc. There were probably more than five rabbits in the litter when Fiver was born, but his name, *Hrairoo,* means 'Little thousand', i.e. the little one of a lot or, as they say of pigs, 'the runt'.

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The small rabbit came closer to his companion, lolloping on long hind legs.

'Let's go a bit further, Hazel,' he said. 'You know, there's something queer about the warren this evening, although I can't tell exactly what it is. Shall we go down to the brook?'

'All right,' answered Hazel, 'and you can find me a cowslip. If you can't find one, no one can.'

He led the way down the slope, his shadow stretching behind him on the grass. They reached the brook and began nibbling and searching close beside the wheel-ruts of the track.

It was not long before Fiver found what they were looking for. Cowslips are a delicacy among rabbits, and as a rule there are very few left by late May in the neighbourhood of even a small warren. This one had not bloomed and its flat spread of leaves was almost hidden under the long grass. They were just starting on it when two larger rabbits came running across from the other side of the near-by cattle-wade.

'Cowslip?' said one. 'All right – just leave it to us. Come on, hurry up,' he added, as Fiver hesitated. 'You heard me, didn't you?'

'Fiver found it, Toadflax,' said Hazel.

'And we'll eat it,' replied Toadflax. 'Cowslips are for *Owsla** – don't you know that? If you don't, we can easily teach you.'

* Nearly all warrens have an *Owsla,* or group of strong or clever rabbits – second-year or older – surrounding the Chief Rabbit and his doe and exercising authority. Owslas vary. In one warren, the Owsla may be the band of a war-lord: in another, it may consist largely of clever

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Fiver had already turned away. Hazel caught him up by the culvert.

'I'm sick and tired of it,' he said. 'It's the same all the time. "These are my claws, so this is my cowslip." "These are my teeth, so this is my burrow." I'll tell you, if ever I get into the Owsla, I'll treat outskirters with a bit of decency.'

'Well, you can at least expect to be in the Owsla one day,' answered Fiver. 'You've got some weight coming and that's more than I shall ever have.'

'You don't suppose I'll leave you to look after yourself, do you?' said Hazel. 'But to tell you the truth, I sometimes feel like clearing out of this warren altogether. Still, let's forget it now and try to enjoy the evening. I tell you what – shall we go across the brook? There'll be fewer rabbits and we can have a bit of peace. Unless you feel it isn't safe?' he added.

The way in which he asked suggested that he did in fact think that Fiver was likely to know better than himself, and it was clear from Fiver's reply that this was accepted between them.

'No, it's safe enough,' he answered. 'If I start feeling there's anything dangerous I'll tell you. But it's not exactly danger that I seem to feel about the place. It's – oh, I don't know – something oppressive, like thunder: I can't tell what; but it worries me. All the same, I'll come across with you.'

---

patrollers or garden-raiders. Sometimes a good story-teller may find a place; or a seer, or intuitive rabbit. In the Sandleford warren at this time, the Owsla was rather military in character (though, as will be seen later, not so military as some).

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They ran over the culvert. The grass was wet and thick near the stream and they made their way up the opposite slope, looking for drier ground. Part of the slope was in shadow, for the sun was sinking ahead of them, and Hazel, who wanted a warm, sunny spot, went on until they were quite near the lane. As they approached the gate he stopped, staring.

'Fiver, what's that? Look!'

A little way in front of them, the ground had been freshly disturbed. Two piles of earth lay on the grass. Heavy posts, reeking of creosote and paint, towered up as high as the holly trees in the hedge, and the board they carried threw a long shadow across the top of the field. Near one of the posts, a hammer and a few nails had been left behind.

The two rabbits went up to the board at a hopping run and crouched in a patch of nettles on the far side, wrinkling their noses at the smell of a dead cigarette-end somewhere in the grass. Suddenly Fiver shivered and cowered down.

'Oh, Hazel! This is where it comes from! I know now – something very bad! Some terrible thing – coming closer and closer.'

He began to whimper with fear.

'What sort of thing – what do you mean? I thought you said there was no danger?'

'I don't know what it is,' answered Fiver wretchedly. 'There isn't any danger here, at this moment. But it's coming – it's coming. Oh, Hazel, look! The field! It's covered with blood!'

'Don't be silly, it's only the light of the sunset. Fiver, come on, don't talk like this, you're frightening me!'

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Fiver sat trembling and crying among the nettles as Hazel tried to reassure him and to find out what it could be that had suddenly driven him beside himself. If he was terrified, why did he not run for safety, as any sensible rabbit would? But Fiver could not explain and only grew more and more distressed. At last Hazel said,

'Fiver, you can't sit crying here. Anyway, it's getting dark. We'd better go back to the burrow.'

'Back to the burrow?' whimpered Fiver. 'It'll come there – don't think it won't! I tell you, the field's full of blood –'

'Now stop it,' said Hazel firmly. 'Just let me look after you for a bit. Whatever the trouble is, it's time we got back.'

He ran down the field and over the brook to the cattle-wade. Here there was a delay, for Fiver – surrounded on all sides by the quiet summer evening – became helpless and almost paralysed with fear. When at last Hazel had got him back to the ditch, he refused at first to go underground and Hazel had almost to push him down the hole.

The sun set behind the opposite slope. The wind turned colder, with a scatter of rain, and in less than an hour it was dark. All colour had faded from the sky: and although the big board by the gate creaked slightly in the night wind (as though to insist that it had not disappeared in the darkness, but was still firmly where it had been put), there was no passer-by to read the sharp, hard letters that cut straight as black knives across its white surface. They said:

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2. The Chief Rabbit

The darksome statesman, hung with weights and woe,
Like a thick midnight-fog, moved there so slow,
He did not stay, nor go.

Henry Vaughan, *The World*

IN THE darkness and warmth of the burrow Hazel suddenly woke, struggling and kicking with his back legs. Something was attacking him. There was no smell of ferret or weasel. No instinct told him to run. His head cleared and he realized that he was alone except for Fiver. It was Fiver who was clambering over him, clawing and grabbing like a rabbit trying to climb a wire fence in a panic.

'Fiver! Fiver, wake up, you silly fellow! It's Hazel. You'll hurt me in a moment. Wake up!'

He held him down. Fiver struggled and woke.

'Oh, Hazel! I was dreaming. It was dreadful. You were there. We were sitting on water, going down a great, deep stream, and then I realized we were on a board – like that board in the field – all white and covered with black lines.

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There were other rabbits there – bucks and does. But when I looked down, I saw the board was all made of bones and wire; and I screamed and you said, "Swim – everybody swim'; and then I was looking for you everywhere and trying to drag you out of a hole in the bank. I found you, but you said, "The Chief Rabbit must go alone," and you floated away down a dark tunnel of water.'

'Well, you've hurt my ribs, anyway. Tunnel of water, indeed! What rubbish! Can we go back to sleep now?'

'Hazel – the danger, the bad thing. It hasn't gone away. It's here – all round us. Don't tell me to forget about it and go to sleep. We've got to go away before it's too late.'

'Go away? From here, you mean? From the warren?'

'Yes. Very soon. It doesn't matter where.'

'Just you and I?'

'No, everyone.'

'The whole warren? Don't be silly. They won't come. They'll say you're out of your wits.'

'Then they'll be here when the bad thing comes. You must listen to me, Hazel. Believe me, something very bad is close upon us and we ought to go away.'

'Well, I suppose we'd better go and see the Chief Rabbit and you can tell *him* about it. Or I'll try to. But I don't expect he'll like the idea at all.'

Hazel led the way down the slope of the run and up towards the bramble curtain. He did not want to believe Fiver, and he was afraid not to.

It was a little after *ni-Frith*, or noon. The whole warren were underground, mostly asleep. Hazel and Fiver went a short way above ground and then into a wide, open hole in

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a sand patch and so down, by various runs, until they were thirty feet into the wood, among the roots of an oak. Here they were stopped by a large, heavily-built rabbit – one of the Owsla. He had a curious, heavy growth of fur on the crown of his head, which gave him an odd appearance, as though he were wearing a kind of cap. This had given him his name, *Thlayli,* which means, literally, 'Furhead', or as we might say, 'Bigwig'.

'Hazel?' said Bigwig, sniffing at him in the deep twilight among the tree-roots. 'It is Hazel, isn't it? What are you doing here? And at this time of day?' He ignored Fiver, who was waiting farther down the run.

'We want to see the Chief Rabbit,' said Hazel. 'It's important, Bigwig. Can you help us?'

'We?' said Bigwig. 'Is *he* going to see him too?'

'Yes, he must. Do trust me, Bigwig. I don't usually come and talk like this, do I? When did I ever ask to see the Chief Rabbit before?'

'Well, I'll do it for you, Hazel, although I'll probably get my head bitten off. I'll tell him I know you're a sensible fellow. He ought to know you himself, of course, but he's getting old. Wait here, will you?'

Bigwig went a little way down the run and stopped at the entrance to a large burrow. After speaking a few words that Hazel could not catch, he was evidently called inside. The two rabbits waited in silence, broken only by the continual nervous fidgeting of Fiver.

The Chief Rabbit's name and style was *Threarah,* meaning 'Lord Rowan Tree'. For some reason he was always referred to as '*The* Threarah' – perhaps because

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there happened to be only one threar, or rowan, near the warren, from which he took his name. He had won his position not only by strength in his prime, but also by level-headedness and a certain self-contained detachment, quite unlike the impulsive behaviour of most rabbits. It was well-known that he never let himself become excited by rumour or danger. He had coolly – some even said coldly – stood firm during the terrible onslaught of the myxomatosis, ruthlessly driving out every rabbit who seemed to be sickening. He had resisted all ideas of mass emigration and enforced complete isolation on the warren, thereby almost certainly saving it from extinction. It was he, too, who had once dealt with a particularly troublesome stoat by leading it down among the pheasant coops and so (at the risk of his own life) on to a keeper's gun. He was now, as Bigwig said, getting old, but his wits were still clear enough. When Hazel and Fiver were brought in, he greeted them politely. Owsla like Toadflax might threaten and bully. The Threarah had no need.

'Ah, Walnut. It is Walnut, isn't it?'

'Hazel,' said Hazel.

'Hazel, of course. How very nice of you to come and see me. I knew your mother well. And your friend –'

'My brother.'

'Your brother,' said the Threarah, with the faintest suggestion of 'Don't correct me any more, will you?' in his voice. 'Do make yourselves comfortable. Have some lettuce?'

The Chief Rabbit's lettuce was stolen by the Owsla from a garden half a mile away across the fields. Outskirters seldom or never saw lettuce. Hazel took a small leaf and

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nibbled politely. Fiver refused, and sat blinking and twitching miserably.

'Now, how are things with you?' said the Chief Rabbit. 'Do tell me how I can help you.'

'Well, sir,' said Hazel rather hesitantly, 'it's because of my brother – Fiver here. He can often tell when there's anything bad about, and I've found him right again and again. He knew the flood was coming last autumn and sometimes he can tell where a wire's been set. And now he says he can sense a bad danger coming upon the warren.'

'A bad danger. Yes, I see. How very upsetting,' said the Chief Rabbit, looking anything but upset. 'Now what sort of danger, I wonder?' He looked at Fiver.

'I don't know,' said Fiver. 'B-but it's bad. It's so b-bad that – it's very bad,' he concluded miserably.

The Threarah waited politely for a few moments and then he said, 'Well, now, and what ought we to do about it, I wonder?'

'Go away,' said Fiver instantly. 'Go away. All of us. Now. Threarah, sir, we must all go away.'

The Threarah waited again. Then, in an extremely understanding voice, he said, 'Well, I never did! That's rather a tall order, isn't it? What do you think yourself?'

'Well, sir,' said Hazel, 'my brother doesn't really think about these feelings he gets. He just has the feelings, if you see what I mean. I'm sure you're the right person to decide what we ought to do.'

'Well, that's very nice of you, to say that. I hope I am. But now, my dear fellows, let's just think about this a moment, shall we? It's May, isn't it? Everyone's busy and

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most of the rabbits are enjoying themselves. No elil for miles, or so they tell me. No illness, good weather. And you want me to tell the warren that young – er – young – er – your brother here has got a hunch and we must all go trapesing across country to goodness knows where and risk the consequences, eh? What do you think they'll say? All delighted, eh?'

'They'd take it from you,' said Fiver suddenly.

'That's very nice of you,' said the Threarah again. 'Well, perhaps they would, perhaps they would. But I should have to consider it very carefully indeed. A most serious step, of course. And then –'

'But there's no time, Threarah, sir,' blurted out Fiver. 'I can feel the danger like a wire round my neck – like a wire – Hazel, help!' He squealed and rolled over in the sand, kicking frantically, as a rabbit does in a snare. Hazel held him down with both forepaws and he grew quieter.

'I'm awfully sorry, Chief Rabbit,' said Hazel. 'He gets like this sometimes. He'll be all right in a minute.'

'What a shame! What a shame! Poor fellow, perhaps he ought to go home and rest. Yes, you'd better take him along now. Well, it's really been extremely good of you to come and see me, Walnut. I appreciate it very much indeed. And I shall think over all you've said most carefully, you can be quite sure of that. Bigwig, just wait a moment, will you?'

As Hazel and Fiver made their way dejectedly down the run outside the Threarah's burrow, they could just hear, from inside, the Chief Rabbit's voice assuming a rather sharper note, interspersed with an occasional 'Yes, sir,' 'No, sir.'

Bigwig, as he had predicted, was getting his head bitten off.

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3. Hazel's Decision

> What am I lying here for? . . . We are lying here as though we had a chance of enjoying a quiet time . . . Am I waiting until I become a little older?
>
> Xenophon, *The Anabasis*

'BUT, Hazel, you didn't really think the Chief Rabbit would act on your advice, did you? What were you expecting?'

It was evening once more and Hazel and Fiver were feeding outside the wood with two friends. Blackberry, the rabbit with tipped ears who had been startled by Fiver the night before, had listened carefully to Hazel's description of the notice board, remarking that he had always felt sure that men left these things about to act as signs or messages of some kind, in the same way that rabbits left marks on runs and gaps. It was another neighbour, Dandelion, who had now brought the talk back to the Threarah and his indifference to Fiver's fear.

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'I don't know what I expected,' said Hazel. 'I'd never been near the Chief Rabbit before. But I thought, "Well, even if he won't listen, at least no one can say afterwards that we didn't do our best to warn him".'

'You're sure, then, that there's really something to be afraid of?'

'I'm quite certain. I've always known Fiver, you see.'

Blackberry was about to reply when another rabbit came noisily through the thick dog's mercury in the wood, blundered down into the brambles and pushed his way up from the ditch. It was Bigwig.

'Hullo, Bigwig,' said Hazel. 'You're off duty?'

'Off duty,' said Bigwig, 'and likely to remain off duty.'

'How do you mean?'

'I've left the Owsla, that's what I mean.'

'Not on our account?'

'You could say that. The Threarah's rather good at making himself unpleasant when he's been woken up at ni-Frith for what he considers a piece of trivial nonsense. He certainly knows how to get under your skin. I dare say a good many rabbits would have kept quiet and thought about keeping on the right side of the Chief, but I'm afraid I'm not much good at that. I told him that the Owsla's privileges didn't mean all that much to me in any case and that a strong rabbit could always do just as well by leaving the warren. He told me not to be impulsive and think it over, but I shan't stay. Lettuce-stealing isn't my idea of a jolly life, nor sentry-duty in the burrow. I'm in a fine temper, I can tell you.'

'No one will steal lettuces soon,' said Fiver quietly.

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'Oh, that's you, Fiver, is it?' said Bigwig, noticing him for the first time. 'Good, I was coming to look for you. I've been thinking about what you said to the Chief Rabbit. Tell me, is it a sort of tremendous hoax to make yourself important, or is it true?'

'It *is* true,' said Fiver. 'I wish it weren't.'

'Then you'll be leaving the warren?'

They were all startled by the bluntness with which Bigwig went to the point. Dandelion muttered, 'Leave the warren, *Frithrah!*' while Blackberry twitched his ears and looked very intently, first at Bigwig and then at Hazel.

It was Hazel who replied. 'Fiver and I will be leaving the warren tonight,' he said deliberately. 'I don't know exactly where we shall go, but we'll take anyone who's ready to come with us.'

'Right,' said Bigwig, 'then you can take me.'

The last thing Hazel had expected was the immediate support of a member of the Owsla. It crossed his mind that although Bigwig would certainly be a useful rabbit in a tight corner, he would also be a difficult one to get on with. He certainly would not want to do what he was told – or even asked – by an outskirter. 'I don't care if he is in the Owsla,' thought Hazel. 'If we get away from the warren, I'm not going to let Bigwig run everything, or why bother to go?' But he answered only, 'Good. We shall be glad to have you.'

He looked round at the other rabbits, who were all staring either at Bigwig or at himself. It was Blackberry who spoke next.

'I think I'll come,' he said. 'I don't quite know whether it's you who's persuaded me, Fiver. But anyway, there are

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too many bucks in this warren, and it's pretty poor fun for any rabbit that's not in the Owsla. The funny thing is that you feel terrified to stay and I feel terrified to go. Foxes here, weasels there, Fiver in the middle, begone dull care!'

He pulled out a burnet leaf and ate it slowly, concealing his fear as best he could; for all his instincts were warning him of the dangers in the unknown country beyond the warren.

'If we believe Fiver,' said Hazel, 'it means that we think no rabbits at all ought to stay here. So between now and the time when we go, we ought to persuade as many as we can to join us.'

'I think there are one or two in the Owsla who might be worth sounding,' said Bigwig. 'If I can talk them over, they'll be with me when I join you tonight. But they won't come because of Fiver. They'll be juniors, discontented fellows like me. You need to have heard Fiver yourself to be convinced by him. He's convinced me. It's obvious that he's been sent some kind of message, and I believe in these things. I can't think why he didn't convince the Threarah.'

'Because the Threarah doesn't like anything he hasn't thought of for himself,' answered Hazel. 'But we can't bother with him any more now. We've got to try to collect some more rabbits and meet again here, *fu Inlé*. And we'll start fu Inlé, too: we can't wait longer. The danger's coming closer all the time – whatever it is – and besides, the Threarah isn't going to like it if he finds out that you've been trying to get at rabbits in the Owsla, Bigwig. Neither is Captain Holly, I dare say. They won't mind odds-and-ends like us clearing off, but they won't want to lose you. If I were in your place, I'd be careful whom I picked to talk to.'

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4. The Departure

Now sir, young Fortinbras,
Of unimproved mettle hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
Sharked up a list of lawless resolutes
For food and diet to some enterprise
That hath a stomach in't.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

FU INLÉ means 'after moonrise'. Rabbits, of course, have no idea of precise time or of punctuality. In this respect they are much the same as primitive people, who often take several days over assembling for some purpose and then several more to get started. Before such people can act together, a kind of telepathic feeling has to flow through them and ripen to the point when they all know that they are ready to begin. Anyone who has seen the martins and swallows in September, assembling on the telephone wires, twittering, making short flights singly and in groups over the open, stubbly fields, returning to form longer and even

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longer lines above the yellowing verges of the lanes – the hundreds of individual birds merging and blending, in a mounting excitement, into swarms, and these swarms coming loosely and untidily together to create a great, unorganized flock, thick at the centre and ragged at the edges, which breaks and re-forms continually like clouds or waves – until that moment when the greater part (but not all) of them know that the time has come: they are off, and have begun once more that great southward flight which many will not survive; anyone seeing this has seen at work the current that flows (among creatures who think of themselves primarily as part of a group and only secondarily, if at all, as individuals) to fuse them together and impel them into action without conscious thought or will: has seen at work the angel which drove the First Crusade into Antioch and drives the lemmings into the sea.

It was actually about an hour after moonrise and a good while before midnight when Hazel and Fiver once more came out of their burrow behind the brambles and slipped quietly along the bottom of the ditch. With them was a third rabbit, *Hlao* – Pipkin – a friend of Fiver. (Hlao means any small concavity in the grass where moisture may collect, e.g. the dimple formed by a dandelion or thistle-cup.) He too was small, and inclined to be timid, and Hazel and Fiver had spent the greater part of their last evening in the warren in persuading him to join them. Pipkin had agreed rather hesitantly. He still felt extremely nervous about what might happen once they left the warren and had decided that the best way to avoid trouble would be to keep close to Hazel and do exactly what he said.

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The three were still in the ditch when Hazel heard a movement above. He looked up quickly.

'Who's there?' he said. 'Dandelion?'

'No, I'm Hawkbit,' said the rabbit who was peering over the edge. He jumped down among them, landing rather heavily. 'Do you remember me, Hazel? We were in the same burrow during the snow last winter. Dandelion told me you were going to leave the warren tonight. If you are, I'll come with you.'

Hazel could recall Hawkbit – a rather slow, stupid rabbit, whose company for five snow-bound days underground had been distinctly tedious. Still, he thought, this was no time to pick and choose. Although Bigwig might succeed in talking over one or two, most of the rabbits they could expect to join them would not come from the Owsla. They would be outskirters who were getting a thin time and wondering what to do about it. He was running over some of these in his mind when Dandelion appeared.

'The sooner we're off the better, I reckon,' said Dandelion. 'I don't much like the look of things. After I'd persuaded Hawkbit here to join us, I was just starting to talk to a few more, when I found that Toadflax fellow had followed me down the run. "I want to know what you're up to," he said, and I don't think he believed me when I told him I was only trying to find out whether there were any rabbits who wanted to leave the warren. He asked me if I was sure I wasn't working up some kind of plot against the Threarah and he got awfully angry and suspicious. It put the wind up me, to tell you the truth, so I've just brought Hawkbit along and left it at that.'

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'I don't blame you,' said Hazel. 'Knowing Toadflax, I'm surprised he didn't knock you over first and ask questions afterwards. All the same, let's wait a little longer. Blackberry ought to be here soon.'

Time passed. They crouched in silence while the moon shadows moved northward in the grass. At last, just as Hazel was about to run down the slope to Blackberry's burrow, he saw him come out of his hole, followed by no less than three rabbits. One of these, Buckthorn, Hazel knew well. He was glad to see him, for he knew him for a tough, sturdy fellow, who was considered certain to get into the Owsla as soon as he reached full weight.

'But I dare say he's impatient,' thought Hazel, 'or he may have come off worst in some scuffle over a doe and taken it hard. Well, with him and Bigwig, at least we shan't be too badly off if we run into any fighting.'

He did not recognize the other two rabbits and when Blackberry told him their names – Speedwell and Acorn – he was none the wiser. But this was not surprising, for they were typical outskirters – thin-looking six-monthers, with the strained, wary look of those who are only too well used to the thin end of the stick. They looked curiously at Fiver. From what Blackberry had told them, they had been almost expecting to find Fiver foretelling doom in a poetic torrent. Instead, he seemed more calm and normal than the rest. The certainty of going had lifted a weight from Fiver.

More time went slowly by. Blackberry scrambled up into the fern and then returned to the top of the bank, fidgeting nervously and half-inclined to bolt at nothing. Hazel and Fiver remained in the ditch, nibbling half-heartedly at the

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dark grass. At last Hazel heard what he was listening for; a rabbit – or was it two? – approaching from the wood.

A few moments later Bigwig was in the ditch. Behind him came a hefty, brisk-looking rabbit, something over twelve months old. He was well-known by sight to all the warren, for his fur was entirely grey, with patches of near-white that now caught the moonlight as he sat scratching himself without speaking. This was Silver, a nephew of the Threarah, who was serving his first month in the Owsla.

Hazel could not help feeling relieved that Bigwig had brought only Silver – a quiet, straightforward fellow, who had not yet really found his feet among the veterans. When Bigwig had spoken earlier of sounding out the Owsla, Hazel had been in two minds. It was only too likely that they would encounter dangers beyond the warren and that they would stand in need of some good fighters. Again, if Fiver was right and the whole warren was in imminent peril, then of course they ought to welcome any rabbit who was ready to join them. On the other hand, there seemed no point in taking particular pains to get hold of rabbits who were going to behave like Toadflax.

'Wherever we settle down in the end,' thought Hazel, 'I'm determined to see that Pipkin and Fiver aren't sat on and cuffed around until they're ready to run any risk just to get away. But is Bigwig going to see it like that?'

'You know Silver, don't you?' asked Bigwig, breaking in on his thoughts. 'Apparently some of the younger fellows in the Owsla have been giving him a thin time – teasing him about his fur, you know, and saying he only got his place because of the Threarah. I thought I was going to get

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some more, but I suppose nearly all the Owsla feel they're very well off as they are.'

He looked about him. 'I say, there aren't many here, are there? Do you think it's really worth going on with this idea?'

Silver seemed about to speak when suddenly there was a pattering in the undergrowth above and three more rabbits came over the bank from the wood. Their movement was direct and purposeful, quite unlike the earlier, haphazard approach of those who were now gathered in the ditch. The largest of the three newcomers was in front and the other two followed him, as though under orders. Hazel, sensing at once that they had nothing in common with himself and his companions, started and sat up tensely. Fiver muttered in his ear, 'Oh, Hazel, they've come to –' but broke off short. Bigwig turned towards them and stared, his nose working rapidly. The three came straight up to him.

'Thlayli?' said the leader.

'You know me perfectly well,' replied Bigwig, 'and I know you, Holly. What do you want?'

'You're under arrest.'

'Under arrest? What do you mean? What for?'

'Spreading dissension and inciting to mutiny. Silver, you're under arrest too, for failing to report to Toadflax this evening and causing your duty to devolve on a comrade. You're both to come with me.'

Immediately Bigwig fell upon him, scratching and kicking. Holly fought back. His followers closed in, looking for an opening to join the fight and pin Bigwig down. Suddenly, from the top of the bank, Buckthorn flung himself headlong into the scuffle, knocked one of the guards flying

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with a kick from his back legs and then closed with the other. He was followed a moment later by Dandelion, who landed full on the rabbit whom Buckthorn had kicked. Both guards broke clear, looked round for a moment and then leapt up the bank into the wood. Holly struggled free of Bigwig and crouched on his haunches, scuffling his front paws and growling, as rabbits will when angry. He was about to speak when Hazel faced him.

'Go,' said Hazel, firmly and quietly. 'Or we'll kill you.'

'Do you know what this means?' replied Holly. 'I am Captain of Owsla. You know that, don't you?'

'Go,' repeated Hazel. 'Or you will be killed.'

'It is you who will be killed,' replied Holly. Without another word he too went back up the bank and vanished into the wood.

Dandelion was bleeding from the shoulder. He licked the wound for a few moments and then turned to Hazel.

'They won't be long coming back, you know, Hazel,' he said. 'They've gone to turn out the Owsla, and then we'll be for it right enough.'

'We ought to go at once,' said Fiver.

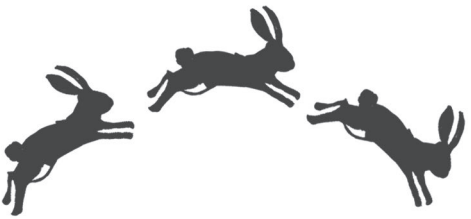
'Yes, the time's come now all right,' replied Hazel. 'Come on, down to the stream. Then we'll follow the bank – that'll help us to keep together.'

'If you'll take my advice –' began Bigwig.

'If we stay here any longer I shan't be able to,' answered Hazel.

With Fiver beside him, he led the way out of the ditch and down the slope. In less than a minute the little band of rabbits had disappeared into the dim, moonlit night.

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5. In the Woods

> These young rabbits . . . must move out if they are to survive. In a wild and free state they . . . stray sometimes for miles . . . wandering until they find a suitable environment.
>
> R. M. Lockley, *The Private Life of the Rabbit*

IT WAS getting on towards moonset when they left the fields and entered the wood. Straggling, catching up with one another, keeping more or less together, they had wandered over half a mile down the fields, always following the course of the brook. Although Hazel guessed that they must now have gone further from the warren than any rabbit he had ever talked to, he was not sure whether they were yet safely away: and it was while he was wondering – not for the first time – whether he could hear sounds of pursuit that he first noticed the dark masses of the trees and the brook disappearing among them.

Rabbits avoid close woodland, where the ground is shady, damp and grassless and they feel menaced by the undergrowth. Hazel did not care for the look of the trees.

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Still, he thought, Holly would no doubt think twice before following them into a place like that, and to keep beside the brook might well prove safer than wandering about the fields in one direction and another, with the risk of finding themselves, in the end, back at the warren. He decided to go straight into the wood without consulting Bigwig, and to trust that the rest would follow.

'If we don't run into any trouble and the brook takes us through the wood,' he thought, 'we really shall be clear of the warren and then we can look for somewhere to rest for a bit. Most of them still seem to be more or less all right, but Fiver and Pipkin will have had as much as they can stand before long.'

From the moment he entered it the wood seemed full of noises. There was a smell of damp leaves and moss, and everywhere the splash of water went whispering about. Just inside, the brook made a little fall into a pool and the sound, enclosed among the trees, echoed as though in a cave. Roosting birds rustled overhead; the night breeze stirred the leaves; here and there a dead twig fell. And there were more sinister, unidentified sounds, from further away; sounds of movement.

To rabbits, everything unknown is dangerous. The first reaction is to startle, the second to bolt. Again and again they startled, until they were close to exhaustion. But what did these sounds mean and where, in this wilderness, could they bolt to?

The rabbits crept closer together. Their progress grew slower. Before long they lost the course of the brook, slipping across the moonlit patches as fugitives and halting

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in the bushes with raised ears and staring eyes. The moon was low now and the light, wherever it slanted through the trees, seemed thicker, older and more yellow.

From a thick pile of dead leaves beneath a holly tree, Hazel looked down a narrow path, lined on either side with fern and sprouting fire-weed. The fern moved slightly in the breeze, but along the path there was nothing to be seen except a scatter of last year's fallen acorns under an oak. What was in the bracken? What lay round the further bend? And what would happen to a rabbit who left the shelter of the holly tree and ran down the path? He turned to Dandelion beside him.

'You'd better wait here,' he said. 'When I get to the bend I'll stamp. But if I run into trouble, get the others away.'

Without waiting for an answer he ran into the open and down the path. A few seconds brought him to the oak. He paused a moment, staring about him, and then ran on to the bend. Beyond, the path was the same – empty in the darkening moonlight and leading gently downhill into the deep shadow of a grove of ilex trees. Hazel stamped, and a few moments later Dandelion was beside him in the bracken. Even in the midst of his fear and strain it occurred to him that Dandelion must be very fast: he had covered the distance in a flash.

'Well done,' whispered Dandelion. 'Running our risks for us are you – like El-ahrairah?'*

Hazel gave him a quick, friendly glance. It was warm praise and cheered him. What Robin Hood is to the English

* The stresses are the same as in the phrase 'Never say die'.

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and John Henry to the American Negroes, Elil-Hrair-Rah, or El-ahrairah – The Prince with a Thousand Enemies – is to rabbits. Uncle Remus might well have heard of him, for some of El-ahrairah's adventures are those of Brer Rabbit. For that matter, Odysseus himself might have borrowed a trick or two from the rabbit hero, for he is very old and was never at a loss for a trick to deceive his enemies. Once, so they say, he had to get home by swimming across a river in which there was a large and hungry pike. El-ahrairah combed himself until he had enough fur to cover a clay rabbit, which he pushed into the water. The pike rushed at it, bit it and left it in disgust. After a little, it drifted to the bank and El-ahrairah dragged it out and waited a while before pushing it in again. After an hour of this, the pike left it alone and when it had done so for the fifth time, El-ahrairah swam across himself and went home. Some rabbits say he controls the weather, because the wind, the damp and the dew are friends and instruments to rabbits against their enemies.

'Hazel, we'll have to stop here,' said Bigwig, coming up between the panting, crouching bodies of the others. 'I know it's not a good place, but Fiver and this other half-sized fellow you've got here – they're pretty well all in. They won't be able to go on if we don't rest.'

The truth was that every one of them was tired. Many rabbits spend all their lives in the same place and never run more than a hundred yards at a stretch. Even though they may live and sleep above ground for months at a time, they prefer not to be out of distance of some sort of refuge that will serve for a hole. They have two natural gaits – the

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gentle, lolloping, forward movement of the warren on a summer evening and the lightning dash for cover that every human has seen at some time or other. It is difficult to imagine a rabbit plodding steadily on: they are not built for it. It is true that young rabbits are great migrants and capable of journeying for miles, but they do not take to it readily.

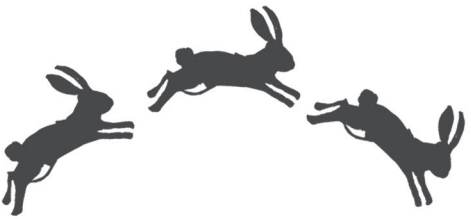
Hazel and his companions had spent the night doing everything that came unnaturally to them, and this for the first time. They had been moving in a group, or trying to: actually, they had straggled widely at times. They had been trying to maintain a steady pace, between hopping and running, and it had come hard. Since entering the wood they had been in severe anxiety. Several were almost *tharn* – that is, in that state of staring, glazed paralysis that comes over terrified or exhausted rabbits, so that they sit and watch their enemies – weasels or humans – approach to take their lives. Pipkin sat trembling under a fern, his ears drooping on either side of his head. He held one paw forward in an awkward, unnatural way and kept licking it miserably. Fiver was little better off. He still looked cheerful, but very weary. Hazel realized that until they were rested they would all be safer where they were than stumbling along in the open, with no strength left to run from an enemy. But if they lay brooding, unable to feed or go underground, all their troubles would come crowding into their hearts, their fears would mount and they might very likely scatter, or even try to return to the warren. He had an idea.

'Yes, all right, we'll rest here,' he said. 'Let's go in among this fern. Come on, Dandelion, tell us a story. I know you're handy that way. Pipkin here can't wait to hear it.'

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Dandelion looked at Pipkin and realized what it was that Hazel was asking him to do. Choking back his own fear of the desolate, grassless woodland, the before-dawn-returning owls that they could hear some way off and the extraordinary, rank animal smell that seemed to come from somewhere rather nearer, he began.

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6. The Story of the Blessing of El-Ahrairah

Why should he think me cruel
  Or that he is betrayed?
I'd have him love the thing that was
  Before the world was made.
    W. B. Yeats, *A Woman Young and Old*

LONG ago, Frith made the world. He made all the stars too and the world is one of the stars. He made them by scattering his droppings over the sky and this is why the grass and the trees grow so thick on the world. Frith makes the brooks flow. They follow him as he goes through the sky and when he leaves the sky they look for him all night. Frith made all the animals and birds, but when he first made them they were all the same. The sparrow and the kestrel were friends and they both ate seeds and flies. And the fox and the rabbit were friends and they both ate grass. And there was plenty of grass and

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plenty of flies, because the world was new and Frith shone down bright and warm all day.

'Now El-ahrairah was among the animals in those days and he had many wives. He had so many wives that there was no counting them and the wives had so many young that even Frith could not count them and they ate the grass and the dandelions and the lettuces and the clover and El-ahrairah was the father of them all.' (Bigwig growled appreciatively.) 'And after a time,' went on Dandelion, 'after a time the grass began to grow thin and the rabbits wandered everywhere, multiplying and eating as they went.

'Then Frith said to El-ahrairah, "Prince Rabbit, if you cannot control your people, I shall find ways to control them. So mark what I say." But El-ahrairah would not listen and he said to Frith, "My people are the strongest in the world, for they breed faster and eat more than any of the other people. And this shows how much they love Lord Frith, for of all the animals they are the most responsive to his warmth and brightness. You must realize, my lord, how important they are and not hinder them in their beautiful lives."

'Frith could have killed El-ahrairah at once, but he had a mind to keep him in the world, because he needed him to sport and jest and play tricks. So he determined to get the better of him not by means of his own great power but by means of a trick. He gave out that he would hold a great meeting and that at that meeting he would give a present to every animal and bird, to make each one different from the rest. And all the creatures set out to go to the meeting-place. But they all arrived at different times, because Frith

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made sure that it would happen so. And when the blackbird came, he gave him his beautiful song, and when the cow came, he gave her sharp horns and the strength to be afraid of no other creature. And so in their turn came the fox and the stoat and the weasel. And to each of them Frith gave the cunning and the fierceness and the desire to hunt and slay and eat the children of El-ahrairah. And so they went away from Frith full of nothing but hunger to kill the rabbits.

'Now all this time, El-ahrairah was dancing and mating and boasting that he was going to Frith's meeting to receive a great gift. And at last he set out for the meeting-place. But as he was going there, he stopped to rest on a soft, sandy hillside. And while he was resting, over the hill came flying the dark Swift, screaming as he went, "News! News! News!" For you know, this is what he has said ever since that day. So El-ahrairah called up to him and said, "What news?" "Why," said the Swift, "I would not be you, El-ahrairah. For Frith has given the fox and the weasel cunning hearts and sharp teeth and to the cat he has given silent feet and eyes that can see in the dark and they are gone away from Frith's place to kill and devour all that belongs to El-ahrairah." And he dashed on over the hills. And at that moment El-ahrairah heard the voice of Frith calling, "Where is El-ahrairah? For all the others have taken their gifts and gone and I have come to look for him."

'Then El-ahrairah knew that Frith was too clever for him and he was frightened. He thought that the fox and the weasel were coming with Frith and he turned to the

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face of the hill and began to dig. He dug a hole, but he had dug only a little of it when Frith came over the hill alone. And he saw El-ahrairah's bottom sticking out of the hole and the sand flying out in showers as the digging went on. When he saw that, he called out, "My friend, have you seen El-ahrairah, for I am looking for him to give him my gift?" "No," answered El-ahrairah, without coming out, "I have not seen him. He is far away. He could not come." So Frith said, "Then come out of that hole and I will bless you instead of him." "No, I cannot," said El-ahrairah, "I am busy. The fox and the weasel are coming. If you want to bless me you can bless my bottom, for it is sticking out of the hole."

All the rabbits had heard the story before: on winter nights, when the cold draught moved down the warren passages and the icy wet lay in the pits of the runs below their burrows; and on summer evenings, in the grass under the red may and the sweet, carrion-scented elder bloom. Dandelion was telling it well and even Pipkin forgot his weariness and danger, and remembered instead the great indestructibility of the Rabbits. Each one of them saw himself as El-ahrairah, who could be impudent to Frith and get away with it.

'Then,' said Dandelion, 'Frith felt himself in friendship with El-ahrairah, because of his resourcefulness, and because he would not give up even when he thought the fox and the weasel were coming. And he said, "Very well, I will bless your bottom as it sticks out of the hole. Bottom, be strength and warning and speed for ever and save the life of your master. Be it so!" And as he spoke, El-ahrairah's

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tail grew shining white and flashed like a star: and his back legs grew long and powerful and he thumped the hillside until the very beetles fell off the grass-stems. He came out of the hole and tore across the hill faster than any creature in the world. And Frith called after him, "El-ahrairah, your people cannot rule the world, for I will not have it so. All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies, and whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you, digger, listener, runner, prince with the swift warning. Be cunning and full of tricks and your people shall never be destroyed." And El-ahrairah knew then that although he would not be mocked, yet Frith was his friend. And every evening, when Frith has done his day's work and lies calm and easy in the red sky, El-ahrairah and his children and his children's children come out of their holes and feed and play in his sight, for they are his friends and he has promised them that they can never be destroyed.'

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7. The Lendri and the River

> Quant au courage moral, il avait trouvé fort rare, disait-il, celui de deux heures après minuit; c'est-à-dire le courage de l'improviste.
>
> Napoleon Bonaparte

AS DANDELION ended, Acorn, who was on the windward side of the little group, suddenly started and sat back, with ears up and nostrils twitching. The strange, rank smell was stronger than ever and after a few moments they all heard a heavy movement close by. Suddenly, on the other side of the path, the fern parted and there looked out a long, dog-like head, striped black and white. It was pointed downwards, the jaws grinning, the muzzle close to the ground. Behind, they could just discern great, powerful paws and a shaggy, black body. The eyes were peering at them, full of savage cunning. The head moved slowly, taking in the dusky lengths of the wood-ride in both directions, and then fixed them once more with its fierce, terrible stare. The jaws opened wider and they could see the teeth, glimmering

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white as the stripes along the head. For long moments it gazed and the rabbits remained motionless, staring back without a sound. Then Bigwig, who was nearest to the path, turned and slipped back among the others.

'A *lendri*,' he muttered as he passed through them. 'It may be dangerous and it may not, but I'm taking no chances with it. Let's get away.'

They followed him through the fern and very soon came upon another, parallel path. Bigwig turned into it and broke into a run. Dandelion overtook him and the two disappeared among the ilex trees. Hazel and the others followed as best they could, with Pipkin limping and staggering behind, his fear driving him on in spite of the pain in his paw.

Hazel came out on the farther side of the ilexes and followed the path round a bend. Then he stopped dead and sat back on his haunches. Immediately in front of him, Bigwig and Dandelion were staring out from the sheer edge of a high bank, and below the bank ran a stream. It was in fact the little river Enborne, twelve to fifteen feet wide and at this time of year two or three feet deep with spring rain, but to the rabbits it seemed immense, such a river as they had never imagined. The moon had almost set and the night was now dark, but they could see the water faintly shining as it flowed and could just make out, on the further side, a thin belt of nut-trees and alders. Somewhere beyond, a plover called three or four times and was silent.

One by one, most of the others came up, stopped at the bank and looked at the water without speaking. A chilly

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breeze was moving and several of them trembled where they sat.

'Well, this is a nice surprise, Hazel,' said Bigwig at length. 'Or were you expecting this when you took us into the wood?'

Hazel realized wearily that Bigwig was probably going to be troublesome. He was certainly no coward, but he was likely to remain steady only as long as he could see his way clear and be sure of what to do. To him, perplexity was worse than danger; and when he was perplexed he usually grew angry. The day before, Fiver's warning had troubled him, and he had spoken in anger to the Threarah and left the Owsla. Then, while he was in an uncertain mood about the idea of leaving the warren, Captain Holly had appeared in capital time to be attacked and to provide a perfect reason for their departure. Now, at the sight of the river, Bigwig's assurance was leaking again and unless he, Hazel, could restore it in some way, they were likely to be in for trouble. He thought of the Threarah and his wily courtesy.

'I don't know what we should have done without you just now, Bigwig,' he said. 'What was that animal? Would it have killed us?'

'A lendri,' said Bigwig. 'I've heard about them in the Owsla. They're not really dangerous. They can't catch a rabbit that runs, and nearly always you can smell them coming. They're funny things: I've heard of rabbits living almost on top of them and coming to no harm. But they're best avoided, all the same. They'll dig out rabbit kittens and they'll kill an injured rabbit if they find one. They're

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one of the Thousand, all right. I ought to have guessed from the smell, but it was new to me.'

'It had killed before it met us,' said Blackberry with a shudder. 'I saw the blood on its lips.'

'A rat, perhaps, or pheasant chicks. Lucky for us it *had* killed, otherwise it might have been quicker. Still, fortunately we did the right thing. We really came out of it very well,' said Bigwig.

Fiver came limping down the path with Pipkin. They, too, checked and stared at the sight of the river.

'What do you think we ought to do now, Fiver?' asked Hazel.

Fiver looked down at the water and twitched his ears.

'We shall have to cross it,' he said. 'But I don't think I can swim, Hazel. I'm worn out, and Pipkin's a good deal worse than I am.'

'Cross it?' cried Bigwig. 'Cross it? Who's going to cross it? What do you want to cross it for? I never heard such nonsense.'

Like all wild animals, rabbits can swim if they have to: and some even swim when it suits them. Rabbits have been known to live on the edge of a wood and regularly swim a brook to feed in the fields beyond. But most rabbits avoid swimming and certainly an exhausted rabbit could not swim the Enborne.

'I don't want to jump in there,' said Speedwell.

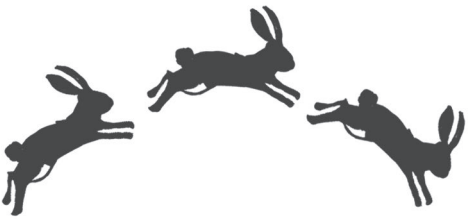
'Why not just go along the bank?' asked Hawkbit.

Hazel suspected that if Fiver felt they ought to cross the river, it might be dangerous not to. But how were the others to be persuaded? At this moment, as he was still wondering

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what to say to them, he suddenly realized that something had lightened his spirits. What could it be? A smell? A sound? Then he knew. Near-by, across the river, a lark had begun to twitter and climb. It was morning. A blackbird called one or two deep, slow notes and was followed by a wood-pigeon. Soon they were in grey twilight and could see that the stream bordered the farther edge of the wood. On the other side lay open fields.

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8. The Crossing

> The centurion . . . commanded that they which could swim should cast themselves first into the sea and get to land. And the rest, some on boards and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land.
>
> *The Acts of the Apostles,* Chapter 27

THE TOP of the sandy bank was a good six feet above the water. From where they sat, the rabbits could look straight ahead upstream, and downstream to their left. Evidently there were nesting holes in the sheer face below them, for as the light grew they saw three or four martins dart out over the stream and away into the fields beyond. In a short time one returned with his beak full, and they could hear the nestlings squeaking as he flew out of sight beneath their feet. The bank did not extend far in either direction. Upstream, it sloped down to a grassy path between the trees and the water. This followed the line of the river, which ran straight from almost as far away as they could see, flowing smoothly without fords, gravel

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shallows or plank bridges. Immediately below them lay a wide pool and here the water was almost still. Away to their left, the bank sloped down again into clumps of alder, among which the stream could be heard chattering over gravel. There was a glimpse of barbed wire stretched across the water and they guessed that this must surround a cattle-wade, like the one in the little brook near the home warren.

Hazel looked at the path upstream. 'There's grass down there,' he said. 'Let's go and feed.'

They scrambled down the bank and set to nibbling beside the water. Between them and the stream itself stood half-grown clumps of purple loosestrife and fleabane, which would not flower for nearly two months yet. The only blooms were a few early meadow-sweet and a patch of pink butter-bur. Looking back at the face of the bank, they could see that it was in fact dotted thickly with martins' holes. There was a narrow foreshore at the foot of the little cliff and this was littered with the rubbish of the colony – sticks, droppings, feathers, a broken egg and a dead nestling or two. The martins were now coming and going in numbers over the water.

Hazel moved close to Fiver and quietly edged him away from the others, feeding as he went. When they were a little way off, and half-concealed by a patch of reeds, he said, 'Are you sure we've got to cross the river, Fiver? What about going along the bank one way or the other?'

'No, we need to cross the river, Hazel, so that we can get into those fields – and on beyond them too. I know what we ought to be looking for – a high, lonely place with dry soil, where rabbits can see and hear all round and men hardly ever come. Wouldn't that be worth a journey?'

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