opening extract from

The Little White Horse

written by

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Dedicated to
Walter Hodges
With my thanks

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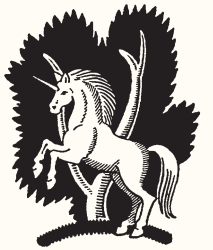

BY

Elizabeth Goudge

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The Little White Horse

It was under the white moon that I saw him,
The little white horse, with neck arched high in pride.
Lovely his pride, delicate, no taint of self
Staining the unconscious innocence denied
Knowledge of good and evil, burden of days
Of shame crouched beneath the flail of memory.
No past for you, little white horse, no regret,
No future of fear in this silver forest –
Only the perfect now in the white moon-dappled ride.

A flower-like body fashioned all of light,
For the speed of light, yet momently at rest,
Balanced on the sheer knife-edge of perfection;
Perfection of grass silver upon the crest
Of the hill, before the scythe falls, snow in sun,
Of the shaken human spirit when God speaks
In His still small voice and for a breath of time
All is hushed; gone in a sigh, that perfection,
Leaving the sharp knife-edge turning slowly in the breast.

The raised hoof, the proud poised head, the flowing mane,
The supreme moment of stillness before the flight,
The moment of farewell, of wordless pleading
For remembrance of things lost to earthly sight –
Then the half-turn under the trees, a motion
Fluid as the movement of light on water…
Stay, oh stay in the forest, little white horse!…
He is lost and gone and now I do not know
If it was a little white horse that I saw,
Or only a moonbeam astray in the silver night.

Chapter One

1

The carriage gave another lurch, and Maria Merryweather, Miss Heliotrope, and Wiggins once more fell into each other's arms, sighed, gasped, righted themselves, and fixed their attention upon those objects which were for each of them at this trying moment the source of courage and strength.

Maria gazed at her boots. Miss Heliotrope restored her spectacles to their proper position, picked up the worn brown volume of French essays from the floor, popped a peppermint into her mouth, and peered once more in the dim light at the wiggly black print on the yellowed page. Wiggins meanwhile pursued with his tongue the taste of the long-since-digested dinner that still lingered among his whiskers.

Humanity can be roughly divided into three sorts of people – those who find comfort in literature, those who

find comfort in personal adornment, and those who find comfort in food; and Miss Heliotrope, Maria, and Wiggins were typical representatives of their own sort of people.

Maria must be described first, because she is the heroine of this story. In this year of grace 1842 she was thirteen years old and was considered plain, with her queer silvery-grey eyes that were so disconcertingly penetrating, her straight reddish hair and thin pale face with its distressing freckles. Yet her little figure, small as that of a fairy's child, with a backbone as straight as a poker, was very dignified, and she had exquisitely tiny feet, of which she was inordinately proud. They were her chief beauty, she knew, which was why she took, if possible, a more burning interest in her boots than in her mittens and gowns and bonnets.

And the boots she had on today were calculated to raise the lowest spirits, for they were made of the softest grey leather, sewn with crystal beads round the tops, and were lined with snow-white lamb's-wool. The crystal beads, as it happened, could not be seen, because Maria's grey silk dress and warm grey wool pelisse, also trimmed with white lamb's-wool, reached to her ankles, but she herself knew they were there, and the thought of them gave her a moral strength that can scarcely be overestimated. She rested herself against the thought of those beads, just as in a lesser degree she rested herself against the thought of the piece of purple ribbon that was wound about her slender waist beneath the pelisse, the little bunch of violets that was tucked so far away inside the recesses of her grey velvet bonnet that it was scarcely visible, and the grey silk mittens adorning the small hands that were hidden inside the big white muff. For Maria was one of your true aristocrats; the perfection of

the hidden things was even more important to her than the outward show. Not that she did not like the outward show. She did. She was a showy little thing, even when dressed in the greys and purples of the bereaved.

For Maria was an orphan. Her mother had died in her babyhood and her father just two months ago, leaving so many debts that everything he possessed, including the beautiful London house with the fanlight over the door and the tall windows looking out over the garden of the quiet London Square, where Maria had lived throughout the whole of her short life, had had to be sold to pay them. When the lawyers had at last settled everything to their satisfaction, it was found that there was only just enough money left to convey her and Miss Heliotrope and Wiggins by coach to the West Country, a part of the world that they had never seen, where they were to live with Maria's second cousin, her nearest living relative, Sir Benjamin Merryweather, whom they had never seen either, in his manor-house of Moonacre in the village of Silverydew.

But it was not her orphaned state that had depressed Maria and made her turn to the contemplation of her boots for comfort. Her mother she did not remember, her father, a soldier, who had nearly always been abroad with his regiment, and who did not care for children anyhow, had never had much hold upon her affections; not the hold that Miss Heliotrope had, who had come to her when she was only a few months old, had been first her nurse and then her governess, and had lavished upon her all the love that she had ever known. No, what was depressing Maria was the wretchedness of this journey and the discomfort of country life that it surely foreboded. Maria knew nothing about the

country. She was a London lady born and bred, and she loved luxury, and in that beautiful house looking out on the London Square she had had it; even though it had turned out at her father's death that he really oughtn't to have had it, because there had not been the money to pay for it.

And now? Judging by this carriage, there would not be many comforts at Moonacre Manor. It was an awful conveyance. It had met them at Exeter, and was even more uncomfortable than the stage-coach that had brought them from London. The cushions on the seat were hard and moth-eaten, and the floor had chickens' feathers and bits of straw blowing about in the icy draughts that swept in through the ill-fitting doors. The two piebald horses, though they had shining coats and were obviously well loved and well cared for, a fact which Maria noticed at once because she adored horses, were old and stout and moved slowly.

And the coachman was a wizened little old man who looked more like a gnome than a human creature, clothed in a many-caped greatcoat so patched that it was impossible even to guess at its original colour, and a huge curly-brimmed hat of worn beaver that was so much too large for him that it came right down over his face and rested upon the bridge of his nose, so that one could scarcely see anything of his face except his wide toothless smile and the grey stubble upon his ill-shaven chin. Yet he seemed amiable and had been full of conversation when he tucked them up in the carriage, covering their knees tenderly with a torn and tattered rug, only owing to his lack of teeth they had found it difficult to understand him. And now, in the thick February mist that shrouded the countryside, they could scarcely see him through the little window in the front of the carriage.

Nor could they see anything of the country through which they were passing. The only thing they knew about it was that the road was so full of ruts and pits that they were jolted from side to side and flung up and down as though the carriage were playing battledore and shuttlecock with them. And soon it would be dark and there would be none of the fashionable new gas-lamps that nowadays illumined the London streets, only the deep black awful darkness of the country. And it was bitterly cold and they had been travelling for what seemed like a century, and still there seemed no sign of their ever getting there.

Miss Heliotrope raised her book of essays and held it within an inch of her nose, determined to get to the end of the one about endurance before darkness fell. She would read it many times in the months to come, she had no doubt, together with the one upon the love that never fails. This last essay, she remembered, she had read for the first time on the evening of the day when she had arrived to take charge of the motherless little Maria, and had found her charge the most unattractive specimen of a female infant that she had ever set eyes upon, with her queer silvery eyes and her air, even in babyhood, of knowing that her Blood was Blue and thinking a lot of herself in consequence. Nevertheless, after reading that essay she had made up her mind that she would love Maria, and that her love would never fail the child until death parted them.

At first Miss Heliotrope's love for Maria had been somewhat forced. She had made and mended her clothes with grim determination and with a rather distressing lack of imagination, and however naughty she was had applied the cane only very sparingly, being more concerned with

winning the child's affection than with the welfare of her immortal soul. But gradually all that had changed. Her tenderness, when Maria was in any way afflicted, had become eager; the child's clothes had been created with a fiery zeal that made of each small garment a work of art; and she herself had been whipped for her peccadilloes within an inch of her life, Miss Heliotrope caring now not two hoots whether Maria liked her or not, if only she could make of the child a fine and noble woman. This is true love and Maria had known it; and even when her behind had been so sore that she could scarcely sit upon it, her affection for Miss Heliotrope had been no whit abated. And now that she was no longer a child but a young lady in her teens, it was the best thing in her life.

For Maria from babyhood had always known a good thing when she saw it. She always wanted the best, and was quick to recognize it even when, as in the case of Miss Heliotrope, the outer casket gave little indication of the gold within. She was, perhaps, the only person who had ever discovered what a dear person Miss Heliotrope really was; and that, no doubt, was why Miss Heliotrope's feeling for her had become so eager.

Miss Heliotrope's outer casket was really very odd, and it just shows how penetrating were Maria's silvery eyes, that they had pierced through it so very soon. Most people when confronted with Miss Heliotrope's nose and style of dress stopped there and could not get any further. Miss Heliotrope's nose was hooked like an eagle's beak, and in colour was a deep unbecoming puce which aroused most people's instant suspicions. They thought she ate and drank too much and that that was why her nose was puce; but,

as a matter of fact, Miss Heliotrope scarcely ate or drank anything at all, because she had such dreadful indigestion.

It was the indigestion that had ruined her nose, not overindulgence. She never complained of her indigestion, she just endured it, and it was because she never complained that she was so misunderstood by everyone except Maria. Not that she had ever mentioned her indigestion even to Maria, for she had been brought up by her mother to believe that it is the mark of a True Gentlewoman never to say anything to anybody about herself ever. But Miss Heliotrope's passion for peppermints was in the course of time traced by the discerning Maria to its proper source. So distressing was Miss Heliotrope's nose, set in the surrounding pallor of her thin pale face, that the great beauty of her forget-me-not-blue eyes was not noticeable, nor the delicate arch of her fine dark eyebrows. Her scanty grey hair she wore in tight corkscrew ringlets all round her face, a mode of hairdressing which had been suitable when she had adopted it at the age of eighteen, but was not very becoming to her now that she was sixty.

Miss Heliotrope was tall and very thin, and stooped, but her thinness was not noticeable because she wore her old-fashioned dress of purple bombazine over a hoop, and winter and summer alike she wore a black shawl over her shoulders and crossed over her chest, so that she was well padded. Out of doors she always carried a large black umbrella and wore a voluminous shabby black cloak and a huge black poke bonnet with a purple feather in it, and indoors a snow-white mob-cap trimmed with black velvet ribbon. She always wore black silk mittens, and carried a black reticule containing a spotless white handkerchief scented with

lavender, her spectacles and box of peppermints, and round her neck she wore a gold locket the size of a duck's egg, that held Maria did not know what, because whenever she asked Miss Heliotrope what was inside her locket Miss Heliotrope made no answer. There was not much that Miss Heliotrope denied her beloved Maria, if what Maria wanted was not likely to injure her immortal soul, but she did consistently deny her a sight of what was inside her locket… It was, she said, a matter that concerned herself alone… Maria had no chance to have a look on the sly, because Miss Heliotrope was never parted from her locket; when she went to bed at night she put it under her pillow. But, in any case, Maria would not have looked on the sly, because she was not that kind of girl.

Maria, though decidedly vain and much too inquisitive, was possessed of the fine qualities of honour and courage and fastidiousness, and Miss Heliotrope was entirely made of love and patience. But it is difficult to draw up a list of Wiggins's virtues… In fact impossible, because he hadn't any… Wiggins was greedy, conceited, bad-tempered, selfish, and lazy. It was the belief of Maria and Miss Heliotrope that he loved them devotedly because he always kept close at their heels, wagged his tail politely when spoken to, and even kissed them upon occasion. But all this Wiggins did not from affection but because he thought it good policy. He was aware that from Miss Heliotrope and Maria there emanated all those things which made his existence pleasant to him – his food, always of good quality and served to him with punctuality in a green dish to which he was much attached; his green leather collar; his brush and comb and scented powder and soap. Other mistresses, Wiggins was aware from

the conversation of inferior dogs met in the park, could not always be relied on to make the comforts of their pets their first consideration… *His* could… Therefore Wiggins had made up his mind at an early age to ingratiate himself with Maria and Miss Heliotrope, and to remain with them for as long as they gave satisfaction. And he had got some sort of a feeling for them, though it could scarcely be dignified by the term affection; it was more a sense of ownership. They were poor things, Wiggins considered, but his own.

But though Wiggins's moral character left much to be desired, it must not be thought that he was a useless member of society, for a thing of beauty is a joy for ever, and Wiggins's beauty was of that high order that can only be described by that tremendous trumpet-sounding word 'incomparable'. He was a pedigree King Charles Spaniel. His coat was deep cream in colour, smooth and glossy everywhere upon his body except upon his chest, where it broke into an exquisite cascade of soft curls like a gentleman's frilled shirt-front. It was not then the fashion for spaniels to have their tails cut, and Wiggins's tail was like an ostrich feather. He was very proud of it and carried it always like a pennon in the wind, and sometimes when the sun shone through the fine hairs it scintillated with light to such an extent that it was almost dazzling to behold.

The only parts of Wiggins that were not cream-coloured were his long silky ears and the patches over his eyes, that were the loveliest possible shade of chestnut brown. His eyes were brown, too, and of a liquid melting tenderness that won all hearts; the owners of the said hearts being quite unaware that Wiggins's tenderness was all for himself, not for them. His paws and the backs of his legs were most

delicately feathered, like those of a heraldic beast. Wiggins's nose was long and aristocratic, and supported fine golden whiskers that were always well under control. His nose was jet black, shining, and cold, and his beautiful rose-pink tongue was never unpleasantly moist. For Wiggins was not one of those emotional dogs who let themselves go with quivering whiskers, hot nose, and dribbling tongue.

Wiggins was aware that excessive emotion is damaging to personal beauty, and he never indulged in it… Except, perhaps, a very little, in regard to food. Good food did make him feel emotional, so intense was his delight in it, so deep his thankfulness that the good fairies who at his birth had bestowed upon him an excellent digestion had also seen to it that over-eating never seemed to impair the exquisite slenderness of his figure… That dinner that he had had at the inn at Exeter had really been excellent, the chop, greens, and baked potatoes that had really been meant for Miss Heliotrope, but which she had not felt equal to… Thoughtfully his beautiful pink tongue caressed his golden whiskers. If the food of the West Country was always going to be as good as that meal at Exeter he would, he thought, be able to put up with cold mists and draughty carriages with calm and patience.

Presently it was quite dark, and the queer old coachman got down, grinned at them and lit the two antique lanterns that swung one on each side of the box. But they did not give much light, and all that could be seen from the coach windows were the drifting mist and steep precipitous banks covered with wet ferns. The road grew narrower and narrower, so that the ferns brushed against the carriage upon either side, and bumpier, and bumpier and more and

more precipitous, so that they were always either crawling painfully uphill or sliding perilously down what felt like the side of some horrible cliff. In the darkness Miss Heliotrope could no longer read, nor Maria contemplate her boots. But they did not grumble at all, because True Gentlewomen never grumble. Maria clasped her hands tightly inside her muff, and Miss Heliotrope clasped hers under her cloak, and they set their teeth and endured.

2

Perhaps in spite of the cold, they all three dozed a little from sheer weariness, because it was with a shock of complete surprise that they discovered that the carriage had stopped. And it must have been that between their loss of consciousness and its return they had come a long way, because everything was completely different. For one thing, the mist had gone and the moon was shining, so that they could see each other's faces quite plainly. Their depression had completely vanished and their hearts were beating fast with a sense of adventure. With the eagerness of small children Miss Heliotrope and Maria let down the carriage windows upon either side and leaned out, Wiggins pushing himself in beside Maria that he might lean out too.

The fern-covered banks that had been on each side of them had disappeared, and in their place, close up against the windows of the carriage, were walls of solid rock of a beautiful silvery grey, and in front of them, too, completely blocking their passage, was solid rock.

'Can we have come the right way?' asked Miss Heliotrope.

'There's a door in the rock!' said Maria, who was leaning so far out of the window that she was in danger of falling headlong into the narrow lane. 'Look!'

Miss Heliotrope also leaned out at a perilous angle, and saw that Maria was quite right. There was a door of weathered oak set in the rock, so old that it was of the same colour as the stone and hardly distinguishable from it. It was very large, big enough to admit a carriage. Close beside it there hung a rusty chain that issued from a hole in the wall.

'The coachman is getting down!' ejaculated Maria and with eyes shining with excitement she watched the gnome-like little man as he scurried to the rusty chain, seized hold of it, lifted both legs off the ground and swung there like a monkey on a stick. The result was a deep hollow clanging somewhere within the recesses of the rock. When there had been three clangs the coachman dropped to the ground again, grinned at Maria, and climbed back upon the box.

Slowly the great door swung open. The coachman clucked to the old piebald horses, Miss Heliotrope and Maria sat down again, and they moved forward, the door closing behind them as noiselessly as it had opened, shutting out the moonlight and leaving them once more with no illumination but that of the flickering lantern light gleaming upon the wet moss-grown walls of an underground tunnel. It gleamed also, Maria fancied, over some sort of shadowy figure, but of this she could not be sure, because the carriage moved forward before she could get a proper look.

'Ugh!' said Miss Heliotrope, not quite so happy as she had been, for it struck very clammy and cold, the tunnel seemed to go on for a very long time, and the echoing of the

'… Lifted both legs off the ground and swung there like a monkey on a stick.'