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Opening extract from

The Faber Book of Nursery Stories

Illustrated by

Shirley Hughes

Published by

Faber Children's Books an imprint of Faber and Faber

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First published in 1966
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

This edition published in 2013

Typeset by Faber and Faber
Printed in England by TJ International



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

ISBN 978–0–571–30759–3

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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BLACK BILL



Snowdrop was a white rabbit, white as snow. She had soft brown eyes and pink insides to her ears. She could do almost everything but talk, and that did not matter much. She could wrinkle her nose, flap her ears, and half-close her eyes. This was how she smiled, or frowned, or showed she was pleased.

Snowdrop lived in a wooden hutch. The front was made of wire netting, so she could look out. There was also a dark part with no window, filled with straw. This was her bedroom. She made herself a cosy hole in the middle of the straw, and slept with her nose resting on her fluffy, white paws.

The hutch was in a shed in the garden. The door of the shed was always left wide open, so she could see some trees, some bushes, and a path. She could see the sky as well. Better than trees, or bushes, or sky, was the sight of Susan, her mistress, running down the path calling, "Hallo, Snowdrop! Hallo, Snowdrop!" Then Snowdrop smiled her widest, sweetest smile. She belonged to Susan and loved her best in the world.

Susan was a little girl with long, fair pigtails. She took great care of Snowdrop, and never forgot to feed her. She gave her just the things rabbits like best, such as crisp lettuce, young carrots, and a tempting mash of tea-leaves and bran. She cleaned the hutch out every day, and put fresh straw in the bedroom on Saturdays.

Snowdrop was very happy. She had plenty to eat, plenty to watch, and plenty to think about.

One evening, when it was getting dark, Snowdrop had a visit from some wild rabbits who lived on the moor beyond the garden. They were a strange crowd, with untidy brown fur and bold eyes. They had a way of showing their sharp, pointed teeth when they spoke. They crept into the shed like shadows, jumped on to the wheelbarrow, and peeped into the hutch.

Snowdrop was glad there was strong wire netting between herself and the visitors. She trembled when they spoke in their loud, shrill voices, showing their sharp teeth. They asked a great many questions, and if she did not answer at once, they asked the questions again and again and again.

"What do you eat?"

"Where do you sleep?"

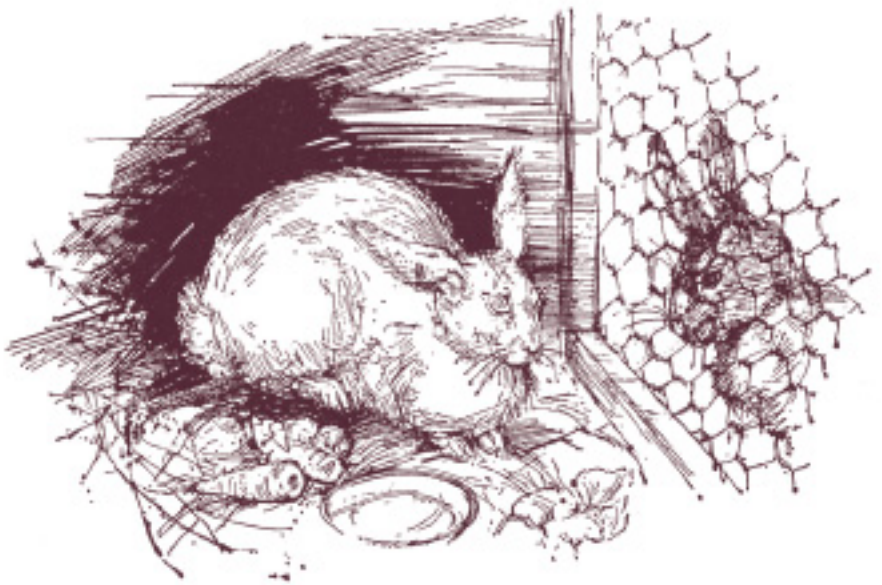
"What do you do all day long?"

"Aren't you tired of being shut up in a cage like a prison?"

Snowdrop did not think her cage was at all like a prison. It was like a home, but she was not brave enough to say so.

Just then, Dandy, the dog, barked, and the shadows stole away leaving her alone. She cuddled down in her cosy straw bed and tried to go to sleep, but she dreamed of loud, shrill voices, and sharp teeth.

The next evening, the wild rabbits came again. This time there was a black rabbit with them, named Black Bill. He told her stories of his life on the moors, and the fun he had with his friends.



"No cage for me!" said Black Bill. "No food poked between the wire netting, smelling of human fingers. I eat what I choose. I nibble fresh green leaves with the dew on them, and tender shoots that melt in the mouth. Have you ever danced in the moonlight?"

"No," said Snowdrop sadly.

"Have you chased your shadow over the moors?"

"No," said Snowdrop again.

"Have you ever played leapfrog with a band of jolly companions?"

"No, never."

"Then why don't you join us?" Black Bill smiled in a cunning way and went on. "We will find you a snug burrow in the warren where we live, and show you the best feeding places. We will take care of you, and be your friends. What do you say?"

But Snowdrop was afraid of Black Bill, and too fond of Susan to want to run away.



The wild rabbits came again and told her more stories. Snowdrop listened. It would be nice to have a burrow all to herself, with a front door, a back door, and a soft, sandy floor. Then she could play with the other rabbits and run and jump on the wide, rolling moor. One evening she said timidly: "I will go with you, and just have a *look* at your home. I can come back to my hutch, if I want to."

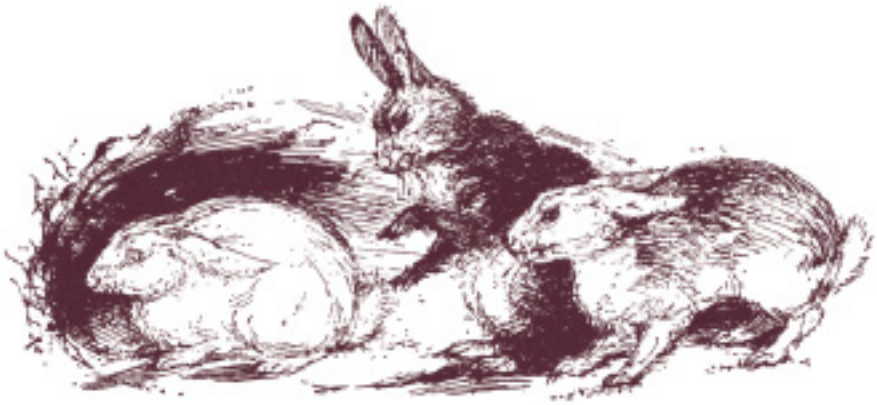
"Of course you can. You can please yourself," said Black Bill, smiling and showing his teeth in a horrid way. Then, before Snowdrop could say "Carrots!" the wild rabbits were biting at the door of the hutch, and scratching with their strong claws. Soon the catch gave way, and the door swung open. She was pulled and pushed down the path, out of the garden.

It was a long way to the warren on the moor. Snowdrop was soon very tired. Her legs ached. Her head ached. Her feet were sore. She kept bumping into things and hurting herself. If she lagged behind, one of the wild rabbits gave her a prod in the back with a hard foot, or a nip on the ear with sharp teeth.

"Oh dear!" thought Snowdrop, tears running down her furry face. "Why did I leave my quiet, safe hutch?"

At last they reached the warren, which was a sandy hollow. It was full of rabbit holes, dozens and dozens of them.

"This is your burrow," growled Black Bill, pushing her into the entrance of a small, dark hole. She crept a little way down the tunnel. It was a horrid place,



cold and damp. It smelt of dead cabbage leaves. Indeed, it smelt more like a dustbin than a home.

Snowdrop was too tired to make any fuss. She fell asleep, with her nose resting on her tired paws.

The next morning, she woke up feeling stiff and hungry. "I am going home now," she said to Black Bill.

Then the wild rabbits burst out laughing, "Ha! Ha! Ha! He! He! He!" Black Bill laughed loudest of all.

"Go home!" he said, showing his teeth. "You'll never see your hutch again. You'll never find your way back. We shan't show you. You belong to us now."

"No, I don't!" cried Snowdrop. "I belong to Susan, and I wish I had never left her."

"Oh, no! You belong to US. You are our slave. Come on, you fellows! Roll her in the mud to start with. Whoever heard of a WHITE rabbit?"

They rolled her in the mud, and rolled her in the mud, until she was a dirty brown all over. Even the pink linings of her ears were brown.

"That is better," said Black Bill, looking at her. "Much better. Now you can set to work. You must do whatever we tell you."

They gave her so many different orders that she got very muddled. "Come here! Go there! Do this! Do that!"

Then she was set to clean out all the burrows, and carry away any rotten leaves and stalks. There were so many twists and turns in the tunnels that she often got lost, and however hard she worked, there always seemed some rubbish left in a dark corner. "Take this! Take that! Move this! Move that!" The unkind voices went on and on.

Her next job was to mind the rabbit babies. This was a little better, but not much. The babies would not keep still for a minute. They wriggled and squiggled like eels. If they squeaked, their mothers appeared, and scolded her for not taking proper care of their darlings.

Not one of the lovely things Black Bill had promised her came true. Not even one. She never nibbled tender shoots with the dew on them but only hard stalks left by the others.

She never danced in the moonlight.

She never chased her shadow over the moor with a band of jolly companions. She *had* no jolly companions. She was only a slave.

Snowdrop decided to run away. From the wild rabbits she had heard horrible stories about the dangers of the moor. There were stoats and weasels, whose teeth never let go, once they had met in a fierce bite. There were men with guns who shot rabbits from far away, so their wives could make them huge rabbit pies, with thick gravy and brown crusts. But she did not care. Better be a dinner for a family of hungry stoats or weasels, or even a pie for a man with a gun, than a slave to such cruel masters.

One morning, when the sun had made the other rabbits sleepy, Snowdrop crept out of the burrow she had been told to clean, and hopped quietly into the heather. She did not know which way to go, north or south, east or west. She just lifted her pink nose, and sniffed.

Among the smells of gorse and heather, dry grass and hot soil was a faint smell of home. That was the way she must go.

She set off at a steady trot-trot. The poor food the wild rabbits had given her had left her weak, but the work had hardened her soft pads. She saw the bees buzzing round the bells of the heather, and heard a lark singing, high above her, in the sky. "They are free," thought Snowdrop, "and I am free, too."

Her heart was beating as she ran, thud, thud, thud. Suddenly it beat so loudly that she felt frightened. Was it her heart thudding, or was it something else she could hear? Something behind her? The sound of running feet?

Snowdrop turned her head, and had one look over her shoulder. One look was enough. She saw a black shape racing after her, followed by some brown ones. It was Black Bill and his companions, hot on her trail.

How Snowdrop ran! Ears laid back flat, she sped like the wind. Home felt near. If only she could cross the last strip of bracken, and the sloping field, then she could dive through the fence into the safe garden.



She zig-zagged through the bracken and gained a little, as Black Bill lost sight of her under the tall, green leaves. But the open field had no cover, and he gained on her, muttering and hissing under his breath. Luckily she was so thin that she slipped between the posts of the fence easily, while plump Black Bill had to push and squeeze.

The garden seemed empty. There was not a friend in sight. No Susan. No Dandy the dog. Not even a squirrel. She made for the summer-house, and jumped over the door-step. Where could she hide?

There was a table with some chairs. Perhaps she could get under a cushion? Then she saw Susan's dolls' cradle on the floor, hung with white muslin curtains. Into this she sprang, burrowing under the sheets and blankets.

Rose, the talking doll, was already asleep in the cradle. Snowdrop landed on her middle, and she gave a loud and surprised, "Ma-ma! Ma-ma! Ma-ma!"

Black Bill heard the voice, and slunk away. Human beings had guns. Some had sticks and stones, or other things that could hurt. He would lie low for a while.

Susan was up the pear tree. She heard a scuffle. She heard Rose calling: "Ma-ma!

Ma-ma! Ma-ma!" She climbed down the tree, ran to the summer-house, and knelt beside the cradle. There was Rose, with her yellow wig and pink cheeks, and beside her were two long, brown ears.

Susan slid her hand very gently under the blankets. She felt fur. Then she felt the whiskers and paws of a warm, trembling body. She took it into her arms and began stroking the long ears. She whispered comforting words. "Poor little rabbit! Poor little frightened thing! I know you are my own lost Snowdrop, though you are so brown and dirty. I wish you could tell me where you have been. But I'll soon have you clean and white again."

First, Susan washed the mud off. Then she let Snowdrop dry in the sunshine. Last of all, she brushed her until she was like a soft, white snowball.

As Snowdrop sat in her hutch, with clean straw, and a tea of fresh lettuce and carrot, she was the happiest rabbit in the world.

Of course the wicked wild rabbits tried to get her back, but they never managed to harm her, as Dandy the dog kept watch near the shed. One growl—and they ran for their lives.

Dandy sent a message to Black Bill by a friendly crow, saying that if Black Bill came into the garden once more, Dandy would tear him into little pieces, and crunch his bones to powder.

This so frightened Black Bill and his friends, that none of them dared even poke a whisker through the fence, and Snowdrop lived in peace ever after.

RUTH AINSWORTH