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Opening extract from

The Animals of Farthing Wood

Written by

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Published by

Egmont Books Limited an imprint of Egmont UK Ltd

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First published in Great Britain 1979 by William Heinemann Ltd
This edition published 2013 by Egmont UK Limited
The Yellow Building, 1 Nicholas Road, London W11 4AN
www.egmont.co.uk

Text copyright © 1979 Colin Dann
Chapter illustration copyright © 1979 Jacqueline Tettmar
Cover illustration © 2013 Jimothy Oliver

ISBN 978 1 4052 6733 5

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Singapore

55065/1

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I
Drought

For most of the animals of Farthing Wood a new day was beginning. The sun had set, and the hot, moistureless air was at last cooling a little. It was dusk, and for Badger, time for activity.

Leaving his comfortable underground sleeping chamber, lined with dry leaves and grass, he ambled along the connecting tunnel to the exit and paused, snuffling the air warily. Moving his head in all directions, his powerful sense of smell soon told him no danger was present, and he emerged from the hole. Badger's set was on a sloping piece of ground in a clearing of the wood, and the earth here was now as hard as biscuit. No rain had fallen on Farthing Wood for nearly four weeks.

Badger noticed Tawny Owl perched on a low branch of a beech tree a few yards away, so he trotted over for a few words while he sharpened his claws on the trunk. 'Still no rain,' he

remarked unnecessarily, as he stretched upward and raked the bark. 'I think it's been hotter than ever today.'

Tawny Owl opened one eye and ruffled his feathers a little. 'They've filled in the pond,' he said bluntly.

Badger stopped scratching and dropped to all fours. His striped face took on a look of alarm. 'I could hear the bulldozer moving around in the distance, all day long,' he said. 'But this is serious. Very serious.' He shook his head. 'I really don't know where we'll go to drink now.'

Tawny Owl did not reply. His head had swivelled, and he was looking intently under the trees behind him. Presently Badger's snout began snuffling again as he caught the scent of Fox, who was approaching them.

Fox's brush started to wag in greeting as he spotted his friends. He could guess from Badger's worried expression that he had heard the news.

'I've just been over there to look,' he called as he ran up. 'Not a drop of water left. You wouldn't know there had ever been a pond.'

'What can they be doing?' asked Badger.

'Levelling the earth, I suppose,' said Fox. 'They've cut some more of the trees down as well.'

Badger shook his head again. 'How long before . . .?' he began.

'Before they reach us?' interrupted Tawny Owl. 'Could be this summer. Human destruction moves swiftly.'

'What do you think, Fox?'

'Tawny Owl's right. In another year all of this could be concrete and brick. In five years they've dug up all the grassland, and cut down three-quarters of the wood. There are human dwellings on either side of us. We've been driven back and driven back, so that we're like a bunch of rabbits cowering in the last stalks of corn in the middle of a cornfield, listening to the approach of the harvester, and knowing we've very soon got to run.'

'And now they've taken our last proper water-hole,' groaned Badger. 'What can we do?'

'We still have the stream at the foot of the hill,' said Fox.

'It must be just a muddy trickle by now,' retorted Badger. 'With all the animals in the wood using it, it'll be dry in a few days.'

Tawny Owl rustled his wings impatiently. 'Why don't you go and look?' he suggested. 'There are sure to be others there. Perhaps someone will have an idea.'

Without another word he jumped off the branch, flapped into flight and disappeared.

The last faint rays of daylight were gone as Badger and Fox descended the slope into the depths of the wood. Everywhere the ground was baked hard, and even the quivering leaves on the

trees sounded brittle and dusty. Only the darkness around them was any comfort: that familiar, noiseless darkness that enfolded the timid animals of Farthing Wood in a cloak of security.

Badger and Fox trotted along, shoulder to shoulder, each wondering what they would find at the stream. Neither animal spoke. Eventually they could see some movement ahead. A number of creatures were jostling together on the banks of the stream, milling about in a rather purposeless, disconcerted manner. There was a family of fieldmice, and about half a dozen rabbits, all of whom scuttled away when they saw Fox approaching.

A number of hedgehogs remained. Some of them stood their ground, but the majority quickly rolled themselves up, projecting their spines in a precautionary way against the two most powerful inhabitants of the wood.

'Tut, tut. Don't be alarmed,' Badger reassured them. 'Fox and I have merely come to examine the stream. It's the only piece of water left to us now, you know.' He smiled kindly. 'We're all in this together – big and small alike. There must be no . . . er . . . er . . .' He broke off, unable to find the right words.

'Differences of opinion?' suggested Fox, with just the beginnings of a grin.

'Er . . . quite,' replied Badger. 'How diplomatic.' He peered

forward over the bank, his weak eyes straining in the darkness. 'Oh dear!' he exclaimed. 'Oh dear, oh dear!'

At this point the rolled-up hedgehogs unrolled themselves, and the young ones began to squeak excitedly: 'It's dried up! All dried up!'

From under the trees, and from the entrance to their burrows, the rabbits edged forward again, wondering what the clever Fox and experienced Badger would decide to do. One by one they seated themselves, still a little nervously, on the bank, keeping in a group as they watched Fox and Badger discussing the situation.

The fieldmice returned too, and pretty soon their noses, like the rabbits', were all twitching expectantly.

'There will have to be an Assembly,' Fox was saying. 'Everyone must attend. We ought to discuss this problem together, so that everyone will be able to put forward their ideas.'

Badger nodded. 'Yes. It must be held without delay,' he said. 'The situation is critical. Our lives are in danger.' He looked earnestly at Fox. 'I suggest no later than tomorrow night – at twelve,' he said.

Fox was agreeable. 'Will you chair the meeting?' he asked.

'Certainly. Unless Tawny Owl . . .'

'Oh, Owl! He probably won't even come. You know what he's like. Can't bear anyone else to arrange anything,' grumbled Fox.

'He *must* come,' insisted Badger. 'I'll tell him so myself. When an Assembly is called, the whole of Farthing Wood has to attend. Five years ago, my father chaired the Assembly that was called when the humans first started to build here. There were more of us then, of course. Farthing Wood was almost a forest in those days, with a large stretch of grassland all round it, and also . . .'

'Yes, yes,' Fox cut in, a little impatiently. He knew Badger loved to talk about 'The Old Days', but once he started it was sometimes very difficult to divert him. 'We know what it used to be like,' he said. 'But *we're* concerned about what it's like at present. *My* father,' he added, in case Badger was offended, 'was at that Assembly. But no good came of it. What could mere animals do?'

'So true,' mumbled Badger sadly. 'But this time, unless we're all to die of thirst, something has *got* to be done.'

He turned towards the group of onlookers. 'Fox and I are agreed that an Assembly of the animals of Farthing Wood must be called,' he announced. 'You should all arrive at my set by twelve o'clock tomorrow night.' He began to digress again. 'There's plenty of room for everyone. Once upon a time many families of badgers lived there, but now I'm the sole survivor . . .' He sighed reminiscently. 'The last of a long line of Farthing Wood badgers, going back for centuries.'

'We must spread the word to the others,' Fox cut in quickly. 'You rabbits must find Hare and his family, and, fieldmice, you can pass the word to the voles. Badger knows where to find Weasel, and I myself will look out for Adder and the lizards. Any of you who are about during the daytime can tell the squirrels about it.'

'What about the birds?' asked one of the hedgehogs.

'We'll leave them to Tawny Owl,' replied Fox. 'Badger was right – he must play his part.'

'I'll tell him when I get back home,' said Badger. 'Now don't forget, all of you. Twelve o'clock tomorrow night.'

The smaller animals scurried away, the younger ones chattering excitedly and feeling important because of the duties entrusted to them.

Badger turned to Fox. 'You'd better impress on Adder,' he warned, 'that we haven't arranged this meeting to provide him with a wonderful opportunity to gorge himself. Remind him that every creature attending an Assembly is strictly bound by the Oath of Common Safety.'

'Your father introduced that, I believe?' Fox queried.

'He did,' replied Badger seriously. 'It was very necessary, to prevent the possibility of bullying or fighting. Do you think Adder will listen to you?'

'As much as he ever does,' Fox replied evasively. He shrugged. 'But I think even Adder respects the rules of the Assembly.'

They stood a little longer; then Badger turned to go. Fox called him back. 'What about Mole?' he asked.

'Oh, don't worry about him,' Badger managed to laugh. 'Once he hears all the feet running overhead, he'll soon surface to discover what all the commotion is about.'

Fox grinned. 'Till tomorrow then,' he said.

'Till tomorrow,' said Badger.