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Opening extract from

The Children of Green Knowe Collection

Written by

Lucy M. Boston

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A LITTLE BOY WAS SITTING IN the corner of a railway carriage looking out at the rain, which was splashing against the windows and blotching downward in an ugly, dirty way. He was not the only person in the carriage, but the others were strangers to him. He was alone as usual. There were two women opposite him, a fat one and a thin one, and they talked without stopping, smacking their lips in between sentences and seeming to enjoy what they said as much as if it were something to eat. They were knitting all the time, and whenever the train stopped the click-clack of their needles was loud and clear like two clocks. It was a stopping train – more stop than go – and it had been crawling along through flat flooded country for a long time. Everywhere there was water – not sea or rivers or lakes, but just senseless flood water with

the rain splashing into it. Sometimes the railway lines were covered by it, and then the train-noise was quite different, softer than a boat.

'I wish it was *the* Flood,' thought the boy, 'and that I was going to the Ark. That would be fun! Like the circus. Perhaps Noah had a whip and made all the animals go round and round for exercise. What a noise there would be, with the lions roaring, elephants trumpeting, pigs squealing, donkeys braying, horses whinnying, bulls bellowing, and cocks and hens always thinking they were going to be trodden on but unable to fly up on to the roof where all the other birds were singing, screaming, twittering, squawking and cooing. What must it have sounded like, coming along on the tide? And did Mrs Noah just knit, knit and take no notice?'

The two women opposite him were getting ready for the next station. They packed up their knitting and collected their parcels and then sat staring at the little boy. He had a thin face and very large eyes; he looked patient and rather sad. They seemed to notice him for the first time.

'What's your name, son?' asked the fat woman suddenly. 'I've never seen you on this train before.'

This was always a question he dreaded. Was he to say his unexpected real name or his silly pet names?

'Toseland,' he said.

'Toseland! That's a real old-fashioned name in these parts. There's Fen Toseland, and Toseland St Agnes and Toseland Gunning. What's your Christian name?'

'That is it – Toseland.'

'Do your mum and dad live round here, son?'

'No, they live in Burma.'

'Fancy that now! That's a long way away. Where are you going, then?'

'I don't know. That is, I'm going to my great-grandmother Oldknow at Green Noah. The station is Penny Soaky.'

'That's the next station after this. We get out here. Don't forget – the next station. And make sure there's some dry land before you get out of the train. The floods are bad there. Bye-bye, cheerio.'

They got out, shouting and joking with the porters and kissing the people who had come to meet them. They started off into the hissing rain as if they loved it. Toseland heard the fat woman's loud voice saying, 'Oh, I don't mind this. I like it, it's our home-rain, not

like that dirty London water.'

The train jogged on again and now Toseland was quite alone. He wished he had a family like other people – brothers and sisters, even if his father were away. His mother was dead. He had a stepmother but he hardly knew her and was miserably shy of her. He had been at a boarding-school, and for the last holidays he had been left behind to stay with the head mistress, Miss Spudd, and her old father. They meant to be kind to him, but they never spoke to him without saying 'dear'. It was 'Finish up your porridge, dear, we don't want you to get thin,' or 'Put on your coat, dear, we don't want you to catch cold,' or 'Get ready for church, dear, we don't want you to grow up a heathen.' And every day after breakfast, 'Run along to your room, dear, we want to read the papers.'

But now his great-grandmother Oldknow had written that he was to come and live with her. He had never seen her, but she was his own great-grandmother, and that was something. Of course she would be very old. He thought of some old people he had seen who were so old that it frightened him. He wondered if she would be frighteningly old. He began to feel afraid already, and to shake it off he thought about Green Noah and

Penny Soaky. What queer names! Green Noah was pure mystery, but Penny Soaky was friendly like a joke.

Suddenly the train stopped, and the porters were shouting 'Penny Soaky! Penny Soaky!' Toseland had no sooner got the door open than a man wearing a taxi-driver's hat came along calling:

'Anybody here for Green Noah? Are you Master Toseland for Green Noah?'

'Oh yes, please. It's me.'

'This your luggage? Two more in the van? You stand here out of the rain while I get it.'

There were a few houses to be seen on one side of the line, and on the other nothing but flooded fields with hedges standing in the water.

'Come along,' said the taxi-man. 'I've put all your luggage in the car. It'll be dark before we get there and we've got to go through a lot of water.'

'Is it deep?'

'Not so deep, I hope, that we can't get through.'

'If it rains forty days and forty nights will it be a real flood?'

'Sure enough it would.'

Toseland sat by the driver and they set off. The windscreen wipers made two clear fans on the

windscreen through which he could see the road half covered with water, with ditches brimming on either side. When they came near the bridge that crossed the river, the road disappeared under water altogether and they seemed to drive into the side of the river with a great splash that flew up against the windows; but it was only a few inches deep and then they reached the humpbacked bridge and went up and over it, and down again into deeper water on the other side. This time they drove very carefully like bathers walking out into cold water. The car crept along making wide ripples.

'We don't want to stick here,' said the driver, 'this car don't float.'

They came safely through that side too, and now the headlights were turned on, for it was growing dark, and Toseland could see nothing but rain and dazzle.

'Is it far?' he asked.

'Not very, but we have to go a long way round to get past the floods. Green Noah stands almost in the middle of it now, because the river runs alongside the garden. Once you get there you won't be able to get out again till the flood goes down.'

'How will I get in, then?'

'Can you swim?'

'Yes, I did twenty strokes last summer. Will that be enough?'

'You'll have to do better than that. Perhaps if you felt yourself sinking you could manage a few more?'

'But it's quite dark. How will I know where to swim to?'

The driver laughed. 'Don't you worry. Mrs Oldknow will never let you drown. She'll see you get there all right. Now here we are. At least, I can't go any further.' Toseland pushed the car door open and looked out. It had stopped raining. The car was standing in a lane of shallow water that stretched out into the dark in front and behind. The driver was wearing Wellington boots, and he got out and paddled round the car. Toseland was afraid that he would be left now to go on as best he could by himself. He did not like to show that he was afraid, so he tried another way of finding out.

'If I am going to swim,' he said, 'what will you do with my luggage?'

'You haven't got no gum boots, have you?' said the driver. 'Come on, get on my shoulders and we'll have a look round to see if anyone's coming to meet you.' Toseland climbed on to his shoulders and they set off, but almost at once they heard the sound of

oars, and a lantern came round the corner of the lane rocking on the bows of a rowing boat. A man called out, 'Is that Master Toseland?' The driver shouted back, 'Is that Mr Boggis?' but Toseland was speechless with relief and delight.

'Good evening, Master Toseland,' said Mr Boggis, holding up the lantern to look at him, while Toseland looked too, and saw a nice old cherry-red face with bright blue eyes. 'Pleased to meet you. I knew your mother when she was your size. I bet you were wondering how you were going to get home?' It was nice to hear somebody talking about 'home' in that way. Toseland felt much happier, and now he knew that the driver had been teasing him, so he grinned and said: 'I was going to swim.'

The boat was moored to somebody's garden gate while the two men put the trunk and tuck-box into it.

'You'll be all right now,' said the taxi-man. 'Good night to you both.'

'Good night, and thank you,' said Toseland.

Mr Boggis handed him the lantern and told him to kneel up in the bows with it and shout if they were likely to bump into anything. They rowed round two corners in the road and then in at a big white gate.