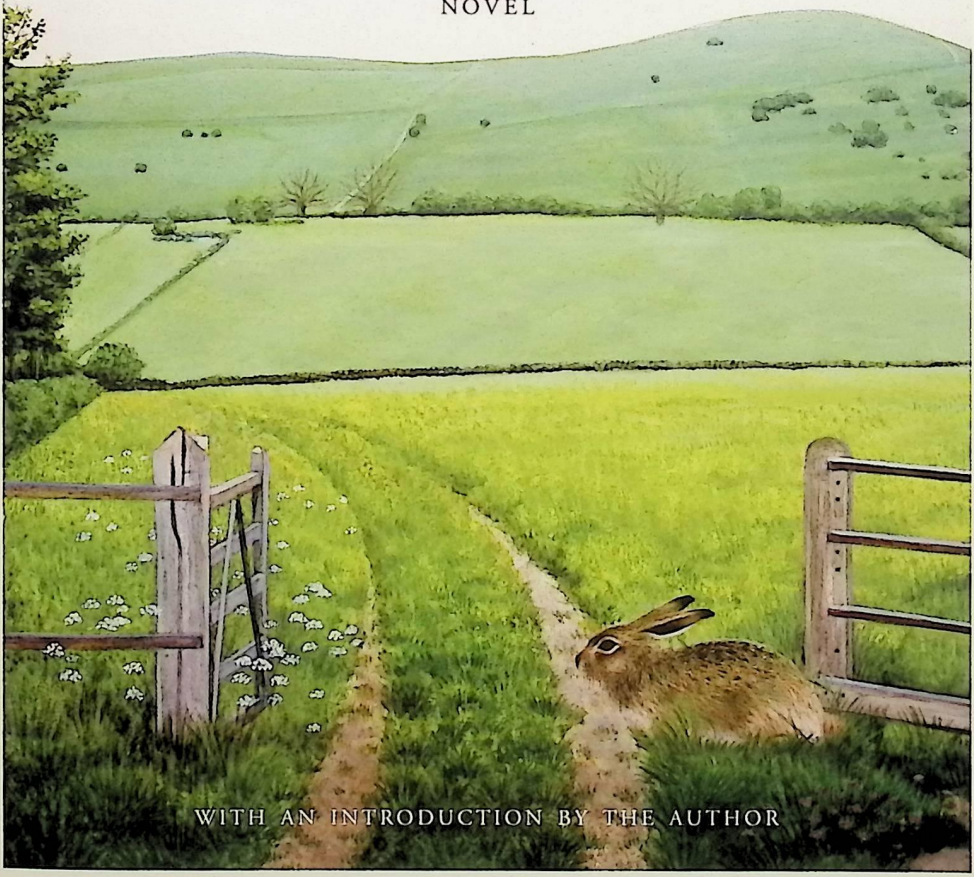
RICHARD ADAMS

Watershed Down

A
NOVEL



WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

Watership Down

RICHARD ADAMS

SCRIBNER
New York • London • Toronto • Sydney • New Delhi

To JULIET *and* ROSAMOND,
remembering
the road to Stratford-on-Avon

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.

Acknowledgments

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 overcrowding 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.

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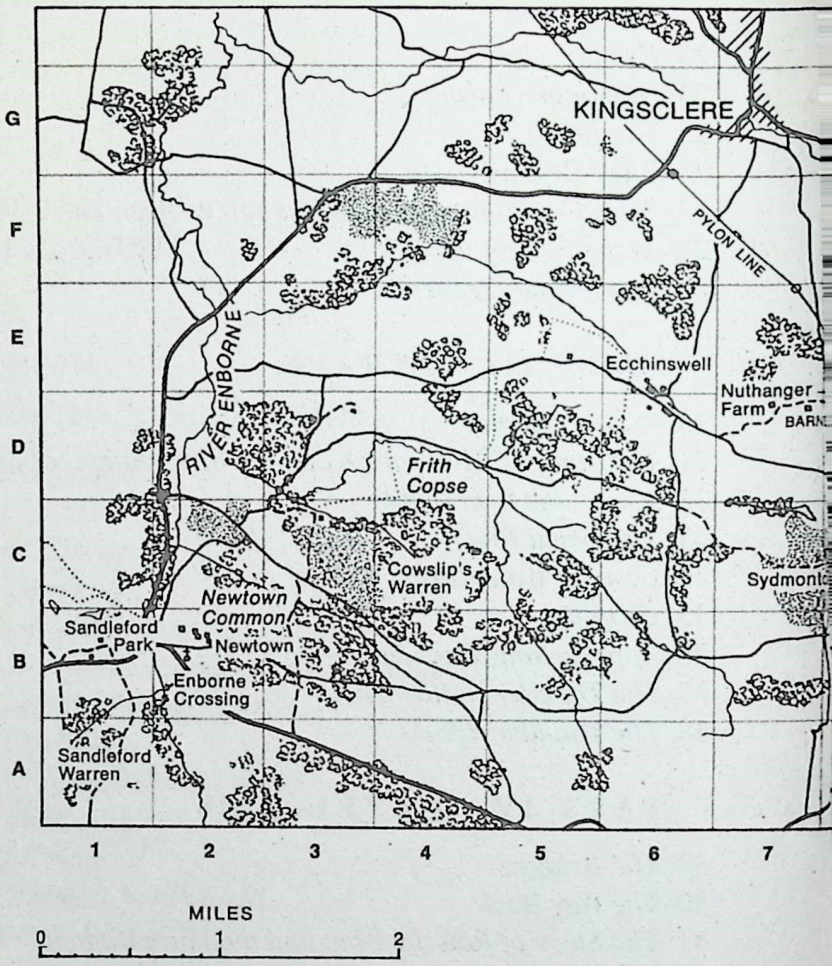


LEGEND

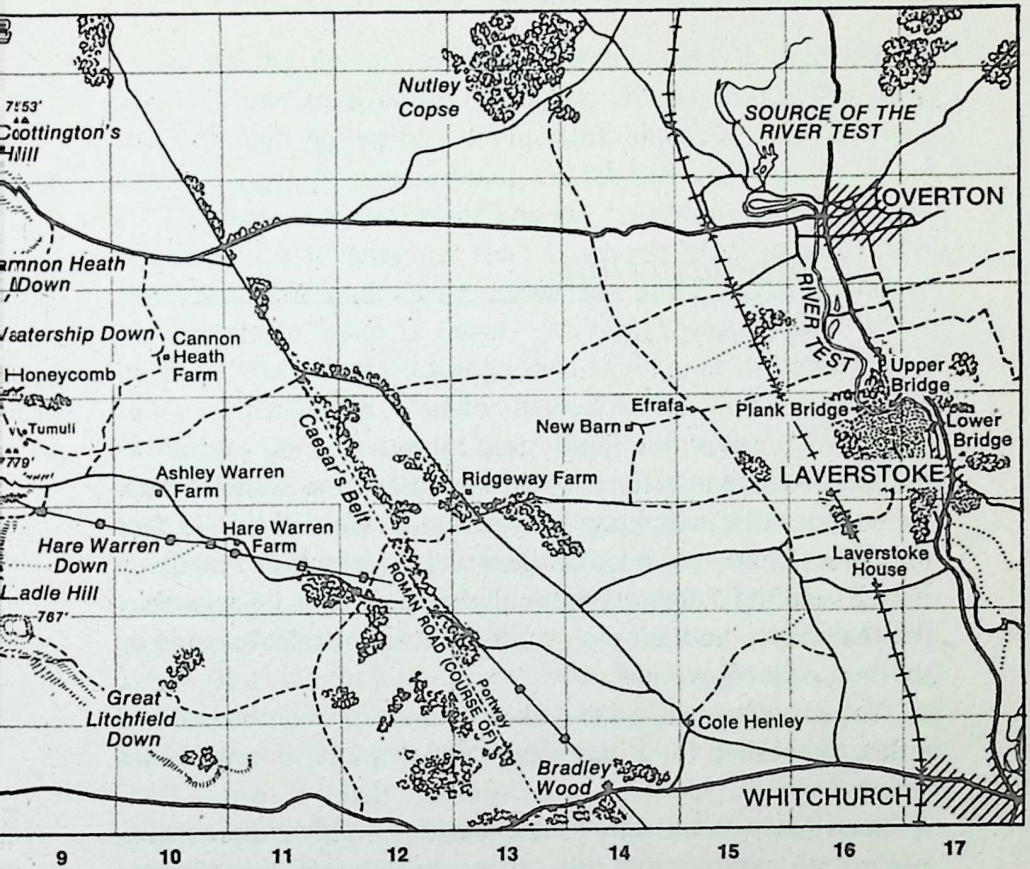
Main road

Minor road

Footpath

Bridle track

Railroad



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The map is adapted from one drawn by Marilyn Hemmett

Introduction

Richard Adams

Whenever our family had to make a long journey in the car, I used to tell stories to my two little girls. Some of these were stories that everybody knows, such as *Cinderella* and *Jack the Giant Killer;* but a lot of them were stories that I made up myself, and my daughters particularly liked these, because they felt that they were their own stories and no one else's, made up for their own enjoyment.

One day, when we had to make a journey of over one hundred miles, they asked for a long story "which we have never heard before."

Such a story could only be spontaneous. I began improvising, and started with the first thing that came into my head. "Once upon a time there were two rabbits, called Hazel and Fiver—" For some of the animals in the story, I took characteristics and features from real people I had met over the years, so that each rabbit had a distinct, individual personality. As for Kehaar the seagull, he was based on a Norwegian Resistance fighter whom I had met during the war. Fiver was derived from Cassandra, the Trojan prophetess who was cursed by the god Apollo always to tell the truth and never to be believed. To Hazel I gave the qualities of an officer under whom I had served. He had the natural power of leadership. He was not only brave but modest and retiring, yet with excellent judgment.

Bigwig was based upon another officer I knew, a tremendous fighter, who was at his best when he had been told exactly what he had to do.

In making up this anthropomorphic story, I followed the idea of Rudyard Kipling, in his two *Jungle Books.* That is to say, although my rabbits could think and talk, I never made them do anything physical that real rabbits could not do.

The story was not finished on that car journey, and I continued it during morning car runs to school. When at last it was finished, Juliet said, "That story's too good to waste, Daddy. You ought to write it down." At first I demurred, but one evening, when I was reading aloud to them at bedtime from a not-very-good book, I finally threw it across the room and said, "Good Lord, I could write better than that myself." Rosamond said, "Well, I only wish you would, Daddy, instead of keeping on talking about it." Thus taken to task, I finally agreed.

I used to write in the evenings, after supper, and I read to the girls each bit as I finished it. They were free to criticize and often suggested alterations and additions, which I adopted. (The comic rabbit Bluebell, for instance, was introduced at their suggestion.)

To make the rabbits as convincing as possible, I had recourse to *The Private Life of the Rabbit* by R. M. Lockley, a well-known English naturalist and ornithologist. We first met when I asked him to read the final draft of the book, and he contributed several good suggestions. I remember, in particular, that he devised the passage in *Watership Down* in which the rabbits raid Nuthanger Farm.

We became great friends and used to go for walks together in the country. We also went together on a cruise ship through the Antarctic. (An account of this was published in our book *Voyage Through the Antarctic.*)

Watership Down is a real place, like all the places in the book. It lies in north Hampshire, about six miles southwest of Newbury and two miles west of Kingsclere. When I was a little boy I often walked on the Downs with my father, who used to point out the birds and wild flowers; and thus began my lifelong love of natural history. The Downs form a singular feature of southern England. Geologically, they are chalk and have several birds and wild flowers peculiar to the chalk country.

The Ordnance Survey Map for this area is Sheet 174, which includes Watership Down in square 4957. This and Sheet 185 cover the whole area of the story.

The rabbit language, "Lapine," was invented word by word in the course of writing. This took place wherever a rabbit word was needed rather than words used by human beings. For example, "going above ground to feed" is a phrase hardly needed by human beings. But rabbits would need a single word—a word they quite often needed to use, for example, *silflay.* Again, *tharn* was a rabbit word meaning *stupefied* or *paralyzed with fear.*

The Lapine plural suffix *il,* rather than the English suffix *s,* was used to help to emphasize that Lapine was a different language.

There is a certain amount of Arabic influence, for example, *hraka* and Kehaar. (*Behaar* is one of the Arabic words for *sea.*) Again, some of the invented words were given a kind of wuffy, fluffy sound (for example, *Efrafa*)—the sort of noises that rabbits *might* make if they did talk. There is no grammar or construction in the language. It is simply a motley collection of substantives, adjectives, and verbs. Here and there, a word is onomatopoeic (for example, *hrududu,* the sound of a tractor going along).

With regard to the epigraphs at the head of each chapter, Juliet said, "I like them because when you read one for the first time, you can't imagine how it is going to have anything to do with the story; and then, as you read on, you see how it does."

I never thought of the book becoming a bestseller, but I did think in terms of a modest hardback, which I could give to my daughters, saying, "There you are. This is the book you wanted me to write."

I submitted it to one publisher after another as well as to several literary agents. It was rejected again and again (seven times in all), always on the same grounds. "Older children wouldn't like it because it is about rabbits, which they consider

babyish; and younger children wouldn't like it because it is written in an adult style." I refused to alter the draft in any way, and went on knocking on doors.

One day I read in *The Spectator* a review of a book called *Wood Magic* by the Victorian author Richard Jefferies, first published in 1881 and never reprinted until now. It occurred to me that the publisher who had reprinted *Wood Magic* might possibly react favorably to my book. His name, I saw from the review, was Rex Collings. I guessed that this was a fairly small firm, without much capital, but it was worth a try. I got in touch with him, and submitted the fair typescript.

My judgment was right; Rex Collings accepted the book at once. It was he who gave it the title *Watership Down.*

The first edition consisted of no more than twenty-five hundred copies, as much as Rex Collings could afford. He might not have much money, but one thing he could do: he could get a review copy onto every London desk that mattered. That was in November 1972.

I was staggered by the number of favorable reviews. But the first edition was quickly sold out, and quite a lot of people complained to me that, much as they wanted to buy a copy, apparently there was none to be had.

That winter, Macmillan's, New York, accepted the book for publication. What followed was a rather amusing paradox. The American edition—a much larger one—attracted attention in the United Kingdom, so that in effect, the book came from America to England. (The Penguin edition appeared in 1974.)

A deluxe edition, beautifully illustrated by John Lawrence, appeared in 1976. Since that time the book has never been out of print and has been published in many translations throughout the world.

Year by year, I receive a great deal of fan mail, and not only from young people, but people of all ages. Following the example of the Duke of Wellington, who replied personally to every letter he received, I do my best to answer.

Naturally, I am glad that the book has been enjoyed by so large a public, and that it plainly has a wide appeal (although the reason has never been altogether clear to me).

I want to emphasize that *Watership Down* was never intended to be some sort of allegory or parable. It is simply the story about rabbits made up and told in the car.

PART I

The Journey

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 odor of the altar sacrifice.
CASSANDRA: The stench is like a breath from the tomb.

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

The primroses were over. Toward 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 kingcups, watercress and blue brooklime. 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 further 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 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 bumblebee 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 bluebottles 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."*

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 neighborhood 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 nearby 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."

*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."

*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 warlord: in another, it may consist largely of clever patrollers or garden-raiders. Sometimes a good storyteller 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).

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."

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!"

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 paralyzed 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 color 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:

> THIS IDEALLY SITUATED ESTATE, COMPRISING SIX ACRES OF EXCELLENT BUILDING LAND, IS TO BE DEVELOPED WITH HIGH CLASS MODERN RESIDENCES BY SUTCH AND MARTIN, LIMITED, OF NEWBURY, BERKS.

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. 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 toward 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 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 further 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 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 behavior of most rabbits. It was well known that he never let himself become excited by rumor 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) onto 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 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 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 traipsing 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.

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 neighbor, Dandelion, who had now brought the talk back to the Threarah and his indifference to Fiver's fear.

"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 afterward 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.

"Hello, 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 quite 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.

"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 cer-

tainly 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've persuaded me, Fiver. But anyway, there are 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."

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 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 center 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.

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 snowbound 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."

"I don't blame you," said Hazel. "Knowing Toadflax, I'm surprised he didn't knock you over first and ask questions afterward. 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,

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