

Battle for the Park

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About the Book

'I've been looking for him all over the Park. He's just not around any more, Vixen. He's gone.'

When Plucky the fox disappears, the other animals soon realise that he isn't the only one missing from the White Deer Park nature reserve. And the Warden, whom the animals have learnt to trust, is responsible!

The animals are frightened and confused – and then another threat appears. A stealthy gang of rats, led by the cunning Bully is invading White Deer Park . . .

Battle for the Park

Colin Dann

Illustrated by Trevor Newton

RHCP DIGITAL

*In fond memory of a great friend, John
Goodchild, who was the first to risk publishing
me, this book is dedicated with my deepest
gratitude.*



Fox and Hare

Plucky the young fox and Dash the yearling hare were firm friends. They had grown up together in the corner of White Deer Park Nature Reserve where the animals from Farthing Wood had settled and brought up their young. Plucky was a direct descendant of the Farthing Wood Fox who, though now elderly, was still active and living with his beloved Vixen in the same earth they had always used. As for Dash, she was the daughter of a hare who had travelled the long journey from Farthing Wood as a tiny leveret and who, because of this, had always been known as Leveret by his friends. For a while Dash had stood a little in awe of Plucky on account of his illustrious ancestor. She had been too shy and wary to join in his frolics. But after her first winter she grew bolder and began to accompany him on his rambles. She was very frisky and liked to dart about, enjoying the power and speed her long legs gave her.

She knew she was perfectly safe with Plucky. Amongst the Farthing Wood community, fox and hare could be friends

and, besides, none of its predator animals, fox or otherwise, ever hunted in the home area of the Park. This was how it had always been, ever since the animals first settled near the Hollow where the elders gathered periodically to meet.

One beautiful sunny day in late April Plucky and Dash went gambolling together. 'Race me,' Dash challenged the fox, 'over the grass to the leaning pine.'

'I never go near leaning trees,' Plucky answered. 'After the great storm, you can never be sure when they might fall.'

'Oh, all right then,' Dash said impatiently, twitching her long silky ears, 'you say where.' Her hind feet shifted nervously, she was so eager to be off.

'See the gorse bush? Let's make it there.'

'That's not far enough,' Dash declared, her large liquid eyes glancing almost superciliously at the young fox.

'Far enough for me,' Plucky muttered.

'What about there and back again?'

'If you want to.'

'Come on then, Plucky. Ready?' Dash sprang away and galloped over the short spring grass, exhilarated by the freshness of the weather and her own pace and verve. And Plucky was no slouch at running himself. He hurtled after the young hare gleefully and, because Dash was averse to running in a straight line and instinctively swerved and deviated from her course, now bearing this way and now that, he managed to keep up with her as he aimed directly for the gorse bush. He soon found, however, that Dash had been toying with him. As he rounded the prickly shrub close on her tail, he saw her suddenly accelerate, as if she had decided all at once to give him an example of real speed. In no time at all, it seemed, he was watching her lithe brown-coated body disappearing into the distance. He actually stopped to watch her more closely, marvelling at the smaller animal's awesome swiftness. Dash checked herself and turned to see just how far behind her Plucky was. He

hastened now to catch her up. Dash looked back at her friend's efforts with a touch of disdain. Plucky made a great thing of arriving in a breathless state and he panted lavishly.

'I hope I haven't exhausted you?' Dash asked with real concern.

'Oh no,' Plucky gasped. 'But I think we may as well give up these races; they're too one-sided.'

Dash looked pleased. She began to groom herself laboriously although she was already spotless.

'What a simply wonderful runner you are,' Plucky said with admiration. 'You're as fleet as the wind and as agile as a grasshopper.' He had made up this eulogy some time before but had never got round to speaking it. Dash wasn't quite sure about the grasshopper bit but she was very flattered. Mostly she was flattered because it was Plucky who had praised her. She held him in the highest regard, and indeed throughout the Farthing Wood community he was accepted as the strongest and boldest of the young foxes, with many of the attributes of the Farthing Wood Fox when young. That she - a mere hare - should be praised by such an impressive animal! And she hadn't even fully stretched herself!

'If I could run over the downland like my father did, then I'd truly show you something,' she told her companion. 'But you're very kind to compliment me.'

'Your father? When did he run over the downland?' Plucky was puzzled.

'On the journey to White Deer Park from his old home, with *his* father and mother and the elders like Fox and Badger. He wasn't much more than a baby then.'

'Does he remember all about the journey still?'

'Yes. You'd never forget something like that, would you?'

Plucky looked away towards the Park's boundaries as though he were trying to picture what it must have been like. But all the descendants of the original animals of Farthing Wood were familiar enough with the story. He

turned back and gave Dash a dubious look. 'I don't think you'll ever be able to exercise your speed beyond the Reserve,' he remarked. 'The fences have been strengthened since the hurricane and there are no exits any more. Except for a bird,' he added with a wry expression.

'It's not fair,' Dash complained. 'Tawny Owl and Whistler don't have to be cooped up like we are.'

'We're not cooped up, Dash,' said Plucky firmly. 'We're protected here. And surely this Park is big enough for you?'

Dash considered. 'To live in most of the time, yes. But I would so love to know just how fast I can go. However, as I haven't got wings,' she continued peevishly, 'I suppose I never will.'

'But you *have* got wings,' Plucky told her. 'Wings to your feet.'

The young hare melted at this new flattery. 'Oh, you're a - a - smooth-tongued animal,' she said coyly.

'Maybe. But I'm no racer,' said Plucky. 'Have you thought of challenging your father?'

'Yes. We've run together and he's no match for me.'

'What about the rabbits?'

'Rabbits? If my father can't beat me, I hardly think - '

Plucky interrupted her. 'Have you raced against a deer?' he asked subtly. He wanted very much for Dash to forget any notion of testing herself beyond the safety of the Nature Reserve.

'No, I haven't done that,' she admitted. She seemed rather to like the suggestion. 'It could certainly be an interesting competition. But how could I approach them? They'd probably think I was silly.'

'I'm sure they wouldn't; but, if you like, I'll tackle them for you.'

'Would you really, Plucky? I know you're not scared of deer.'

'Scared of them? I should think not.' Plucky drew himself up. 'After the stag Trey was injured and taken away there's

now no-one to fear in the herd.'

'You even stood up to *him*, didn't you?' Dash murmured wonderingly. 'D'you think he'll ever come back?'

'No, not after all this time. He must have died from the injuries he received during the storm.'

Dash was beginning to feel restless. She wanted to be moving again. 'Let's go to the Pond,' she said. 'There's often something interesting happening there.' And she bounded away.

'Wait!' cried Plucky urgently. 'Don't go that way!'

Dash checked herself and turned about. 'Why not?'

'There are men approaching,' Plucky explained. 'Look!'

Men had been noticeable around the Reserve for some months and, although the resident wild creatures were accustoming themselves to this, they still didn't care to be too close to them. Apart from the Warden, with whom all the animals were so familiar that they accepted him almost as one of themselves, the human presence had first been evident after the hurricane. Then the operation of clearing fallen or dangerous trees, repairing boundary fences and so on had meant that, in the daylight hours, a contingent of workmen was needed within White Deer Park. There had been a lot to do and, now that everything had finally reached completion, there was a different kind of work taking place. At the instigation of the Warden, the County Naturalists' Trust was conducting a population census of the chief groups of the Park's fauna. This was done every few years anyway, but now there was an additional, more pressing need. This was because, after the second mild winter in succession, all the animal groups were enjoying something of a population explosion. They had increased well beyond the levels that had existed before the last really severe winter. Beasts and birds had multiplied so much that the fact of the matter was the Reserve was becoming crowded.

But Plucky and Dash didn't know that. The young fox led his friend away from the interested humans in a circuitous route towards the Pond. The Pond had become a focal point in the Park since almost every creature now used it as its water hole. The stream that ran through the Park had been designated a dangerous place when it became infected by poisonous chemicals, and the Park's inhabitants had discovered this the hard way. Now it was avoided as a drinking place and thus the Pond was frequently busy. On this occasion, however, since it was mid-morning, few animals were about. Dash was disappointed. She had hoped to see some of the deer, at least.

'We seem to be on our own,' she commented. She watched Plucky lap messily at the water's edge. 'Where *is* everyone?'

Plucky looked up from his drink. 'Under cover, I should think.' Water trickled down his chin, forming large drops. 'I bet Toad's skulking around here, though, amongst the reeds.'

Dash didn't answer. She wasn't tremendously interested in this prospect, preferring more lively companions. But Plucky was fond of this smallest member of the Farthing Wood elders, just as he was of all of them, and went to look for him. Dash let him go. She wanted to race some more and could see that, for the present, Plucky had other ideas. She decided she wouldn't wait for the young fox to speak to the deer, she would go and do it herself now. She gave Plucky a last glance and then bounded away in search of the herd.

Toad was swimming lazily in the shallows under a fringe of rushes. He didn't venture further out these days. He was an old toad and didn't exert himself too much. He was actually contemplating the profusion of tadpoles – well-grown by now – that had hatched in the water that season. Some of them, doubtless, were his and other toads' progeny but there were others that were unmistakably those of frogs.

The Edible Frog colony had grown steadily in size and the population of Common Frogs in the Park was equally thriving. All the tadpoles were voracious feeders. They seemed to be competing in outgrowing one another and the Pond was alive with their darting, wriggling little bodies.

‘There can’t be sufficient food for all of them,’ Toad mused. ‘Some of ’em are never going to make adulthood.’ It was as he was brooding like this that Plucky spied him and barked a greeting.

Toad croaked in answer. ‘Now then,’ he went on, ‘where’s your playmate?’

Plucky looked a mite rueful. ‘Oh well, to be honest, you know, Toad, she wears me out sometimes.’

‘Yes. She makes me tired just watching her,’ Toad commented. ‘But how glorious it must feel to be able to run like that!’ He pulled himself on to the bank. His brown wrinkly skin glistened and gleamed.

Plucky became aware of the churning of the water. ‘My word!’ he exclaimed, noticing the writhing mass of tadpoles. ‘There’s a feast going there for hungry fish.’ Then, recalling suddenly with whom he was conversing, he apologized. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he said contritely. ‘I forgot for a moment they may be your kin.’

‘Quite all right, my young friend,’ Toad answered cheerily. ‘I could never tell you which of them are, anyway. But, since you mention it, I can tell you there are fewer fish in here than there were, and that may partly explain this – this – multitude.’

‘Fewer fish?’ Plucky echoed. ‘How’s that?’

‘The Warden’s moved some of them to the stream.’

‘The *stream*?’ Plucky cried. ‘But I thought – ’

Toad interrupted. ‘So Whistler says. He used to fish there, as you know, but when the poison got into the water, everything died. Now he tells me he’s seen fish swimming in it once more, and so the water must be clean again. He’s kept an eye on the stream all along. He says the Warden’s

been very busy, introducing all sorts of creatures and plants along its length.'

'Then the stream's alive again,' Plucky concluded. 'Does the heron feed there once more?'

Toad chuckled. 'Not Whistler. You know him; he's a canny old bird. He'll give it a while yet to make sure.'

'I think he's very - ' Plucky began, then broke off as he heard the rapid thump of galloping feet. He looked up sharply. Toad squatted beside him, ready to dive back into the Pond if necessary. Across the broad pool they saw a young hind, running full-tilt. Almost before they could quite make out what was happening they picked out a second blur of movement to the rear of the female deer. This materialized into the shape of a hare, which rapidly drew level with the hind and then, almost without effort, hurtled ahead, kicking up dust as it went. Dash was once again demonstrating her superiority as a racer. She galloped on round the Pond's perimeter until she was running toward Plucky.

'You see!' he and Toad heard her call. 'I'm invincible!' She arrived, braking sharply and then dancing her delight. The hind had slowed down and had turned to drink. 'There's nothing here to test me,' Dash declared. 'You saw it, Plucky. Not even a deer can offer me real competition. Most of the hinds had their young to tend. This one's unmated and I had to goad *her* before she would run at all. I just shan't ever know how good I am until I can get outside this place and really stretch my legs.'

'Don't talk so silly,' Toad reprimanded her. 'Try and be more sensible, Dash. You can't go out of bounds. You'd be putting yourself at risk.'

'Pooh, what could catch *me*?' Dash scoffed airily.

'What about a gun?' Toad reminded her. He was annoyed.

'A gun? There are no guns round here. I never hear a gun,' she argued obstinately. She turned to Plucky. 'Oh Plucky, won't you scrape a little exit for me under the fence

somewhere, just a little shallow one? I'd only use it once, you know, to get out and really - '

'Certainly not!' Plucky snapped. 'We're friends, you and I, Dash, but don't expect me to be your accomplice in such a foolhardy escapade. And besides, I want you safe,' he added in a much softer tone.

Dash ignored the last remark. 'Oh, you've no sense of adventure!' she derided him. 'All right then. You're not the only one who can dig a hole. I'll simply find someone else!' Piqued, she leapt away, flinging him a scornful look.

'I wouldn't put it past her,' Toad grunted. 'She's a wilful young creature.'

Plucky left the Pond anxiously. Toad urged him to follow the hare if he could and try to talk some sense into her.

'I'll do my best,' Plucky promised, 'though I don't know if she'll listen to me. I've tried once already but she's got this idea into her head . . .' He loped away, looking all around for a sight of his friend's bounding brown figure. When he couldn't find her he put his nose to the ground in an attempt to track her. It was a vain attempt. Dash, like all hares, left a zigzagging track that sometimes doubled back on itself, and it was certainly beyond Plucky's skills to follow this. He gave up the trail and, moving more slowly, headed in the direction of his home area, hoping to find Dash there.



Round and Round

The mild winters had been kind to Badger, who, ancient as he was, could not have withstood much harsh weather. Since the storm he had lived comfortably and contentedly in his new set close to Fox and Vixen. He was always able to find sufficient food for his needs. He had the best company he could have wished for in his two old friends and, once he had refined his set and shaped it to his liking, he didn't really miss his old home, which had been destroyed by a fallen tree during the hurricane. But Badger was puzzled and, this day, when he was talking to Fox, he mentioned his puzzlement.

'I don't understand it,' he said. 'This little wood was never like this at one time.'

Fox looked at Badger dubiously, wondering what was coming next. The old creature sometimes became confused about things. 'It was never like what?' he queried.

'Well, sort of – sort of *full*, Fox,' Badger replied. 'There was always plenty of room for everyone. You never felt crowded.'