

The Ram of Sweetriver

Colin Dann

Random House Children's Books

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

1. The Flood
2. The Ram of Sweetriver
3. To Pastures New
4. A Coming of Age
5. Missing
6. A Leap at Dawn
7. A Warning
8. A Helping Hand
9. Reuben
10. Envy
11. Sheep Killer
12. The Lure
13. 'The Noise from the Sky'
14. 'Make Yourselves Seen'
15. To Remain Free
16. A Death and a Birth
17. The Turning Back
18. Francis Again
19. To the Valley

20. Strange Country

Epilogue: 'The Sheep who Returned Home'

About the Author

Also by Colin Dann

Copyright

About the Book

‘Jacob could see the sheep scattering. The flock was being fragmented into a dozen little groups. This was exactly what the fox had hoped for ...’

The Sweetriver flock has survived the terrible storm which destroyed their valley. But can they survive the long, hungry journey to find new pastures? Jacob, the ram of Sweetriver, must use every ounce of his courage to fend off danger and keep the flock together.

But his enemies are not only from outside the flock ...

The Ram of Sweetriver

Colin Dann

Dedication

For my father and mother
with all my love

—1—

The Flood

THE RAIN HAD been falling steadily in August for nearly a fortnight. Day after day it poured down from the lowering mass of cloud that hung over Sweetriver like an immense grey sponge: it seemed the water never could be quite squeezed out. It was immovable, and the inhabitants of Sweetriver felt that their world had become one of water.

The village of Sweetriver lay on either side of the mouth of the River Leck, the two sides linked by a narrow bridge. Its streets and lanes were steep. The land rose sharply behind the promenade, and then climbed remorselessly up beyond the village, through deep valleys and gorges to the moorland and forest of the uplands. The river had its source up here. Now it rushed with increasing might down through the village towards the sea.

And there was not only the river - every rivulet and tributary was swollen. The village streets were flooded and the drains were choked; they could take no more. The gardens, too, stood under water. The surrounding fields and pastures became swamps into which the animals sank up to their knees, and even the houses began to feel damp. High up, the peaty moorland could absorb no more moisture ... then the final catastrophe occurred.

On the night of 13 August a heavy storm broke. The rain crashed down in torrents and in an hour the moorland was awash. The river burst its banks and the storm, with incredible violence, drove the floodwater down towards the

village. The farms lying higher up suffered serious damage, the animals in the fields drowned and uprooted trees crashed to the ground. The land was scoured by this furious onslaught: plants, soil, trees, rocks and boulders were swept away in the floodwater. The little bridges across the valley were smashed one by one. Telegraph poles were felled. Power cables broke and impenetrable darkness spread over the devastated countryside.

Those people who had made their homes in the valley had almost no warning of their fate. Most were in bed when the storm began and although the din had kept them awake, they had no idea how serious the situation really was. When they looked out of their windows they found they could see very little, so they did not know their houses were threatened. The worst horrors were reserved for the farmhouses and cottages lying on lower ground. These were directly in the path of the incalculable mass of water and debris which had continued to gather momentum as it descended towards the sea.

At Rookery Farm Matthew Talbot, a sheep farmer, and his wife Joan had returned late after visiting some friends in the village. As they rushed indoors out of the storm, Talbot thought he could hear a distant howl above the moaning wind. 'Sounds like Kep,' he muttered uncertainly. Kep was his sheepdog, a Welsh Collie bitch.

'Can't be,' his wife replied. 'She'll be in her kennel now.'

'I think I'll take a look anyway and get her indoors,' said Talbot. 'It's a deluge out there.'

He did not realize then how apt his words were. He dashed outside again, and round the corner of the farmhouse to where the dog was usually kept. He found the kennel chain snapped in two, the kennel turned on its side and no sign of Kep. 'Kep! Kep! Come on, girl!' he called, and he heard the terrified beast answer with a faint whine and a howl of fear.

Talbot had no idea where she was – the noise and darkness made it impossible to tell. He continued to call, rather hopelessly, for a few minutes, while the rain drove at him mercilessly, soaking him. Then, at last, he went back indoors.

‘No sign of her,’ he told his wife. ‘She’s broken free and wandered off. I can hear something, but—’

‘She’ll come back on her own eventually,’ his wife said, ‘when the storm’s abated a bit. No good worrying – you can’t search for her in this.’

Kep, however, had no mind to return home. With an animal’s sixth sense, she knew of the impending disaster that was descending on the house with breakneck speed, and it was this that she had been so desperate to escape.

Some minutes later, Talbot heard a roar, quite different from the other noises all around him. He stopped at the foot of the stairs, listening, as the roar grew louder. His wife faced him from the landing.

‘What’s that?’ she whispered.

Talbot took a couple of steps up. ‘I don’t know ...’ he began.

The next instant the house was engulfed by the full force of the flood. The stone building, which had endured three hundred years of every kind of weather, was battered to pieces. By an extraordinary act of providence, the stairwell and part of the connecting wall and landing remained intact. The rest of the house disintegrated – but the two people survived.

Shocked and stunned beyond belief, Talbot nevertheless had the presence of mind to leap up the tottering staircase, grab his wife and drag her down after him. Here they huddled, cowering on the bottom step, whilst masonry, roof timbers and tiles crashed around them and were hurled along by the current.

Further downstream, as the floodwater galloped on towards its outlet to the sea, some people managed to

evacuate their homes in time, knowing that they would have no homes to return to. In Sweetriver itself, the last remaining bridge connecting the two halves of the village had collapsed. The village was now entirely exposed to the mountains of water which carried tree trunks, boulders, furniture, masonry, boats and cars with it, and proceeded to sweep through Sweetriver and flood into the sea.

By the time rescue teams had arrived it was too late for many to be saved. The rescue work was hampered by the chaos in the destroyed village and by the awful darkness and it was hours before the Talbots were reached. They had suffered severely from exposure and shock, and were badly cut and bruised – but they were only two among many in the same plight. All these people were taken for treatment to the nearest hospital outside the area of devastation.

A few animals escaped death, most of these purely by chance. Amongst them was Kep, the Talbot's black and white sheepdog. She had swum feebly, borne along at the edge of the current, and had finally managed to pull herself out on to a tree stump. Then she had been able to climb on to higher ground away from the boiling flood water. Here she stood shivering, with her matted coat dripping pools of water whilst she howled out her misery.

Higher up the valley still, on a sort of plateau of pasture land, the Talbots' flock of sheep had miraculously survived the catastrophe intact. The waters had thundered all around this plateau but had descended either side of it, so that the frightened sheep stood in a sodden field, their fleeces pouring rivers of rainwater, but otherwise unscathed.

By first light the northerly wind had dropped and the rain lessened to a drizzle. Eventually, the storm clouds shifted in a new breeze and began to move away slowly from Sweetriver, having wrought their havoc and caused a state of emergency to be declared in the county.

The Ram of Sweetriver

THE TALBOTS' SHEEP were the only sheep in the area of Sweetriver, principally one of dairy farming, so they had come to be known as the Sweetriver flock. They were hill sheep: hardy animals with dense fleeces, stocky and rather chubby in appearance, with white faces and rudimentary horns. The flock consisted of about forty breeding ewes and their twenty-five lambs, recently weaned. There were some barren ewes amongst them and these were fatter than the others. There was also one ram in the flock. He was getting old and coming to the end of his breeding life. He, alone of the rams, had been allowed to run with the flock so that he might fatten up during the summer on good pasture. And he, alone of the rams, survived. The other mature males, in their separate area, all fell victim to the flood and were drowned. This surviving ram was a very wise beast, experienced in the ways of predators and with a knowledge of all sorts of dangers. He was called Jacob.

Jacob was still a fine, strong-looking beast; his face had a noble expression and he had the massive curling horns of the male. He looked confident and content and most of the time he was of an easy-going temperament. In his day he had mated with many of the ewes, but his favourite was Myriam. She was the eldest ewe and of a placid and motherly disposition. Barley, another ewe in the flock, was openly scornful of Myriam, who tended to ignore her. She had a rather frivolous nature and cared little for Jacob's

authority. Then there was Bell, a pretty little ewe, with a very serene appearance. She admired Jacob enormously and was jealous of all the females to whom he showed any attention.

Some of the lambs were daughters and sons of Jacob, the progeny of what was intended to be his final tuppings season. Frolic was Jacob's favourite daughter; loveable and loyal. Of his sons, Reuben was the biggest; a strong lamb who already showed signs of independence. Myriam was the mother of these two lambs. Jacob was also father to Jess, who had a less strong character and seemed only to want to imitate his father, following him closely whenever he could.

For some time now Jacob had been warning the flock to expect bad weather. He had sensed the storm's approach but even he had not anticipated its full fury. 'Prepare yourselves,' he had said, 'and keep together. We shall need each other's comfort soon.'

The lambs had not understood his meaning and had looked at their mothers uncertainly. But Jacob had kept his warning in their minds by murmuring from time to time: 'There's rough weather about, I know it. Yes, I know it.'

The ewes heeded him. As the clouds darkened overhead they roamed the pasture in a close-knit group, keeping their lambs next to them. Their pasture was well drained but the days of rain had made the ground softer and muddier. On the night of the storm, although the flood bypassed them their feeding ground soon became a morass. For hours in the darkness they stood shoulder to shoulder beneath the blast, trying to protect their young from harm. Jacob knew they must find shelter.

One tributary that skirted their little plateau had on its far bank a thick brake of stunted thorn, whose twisted branches formed a dense screen. Jacob knew that was the place they should try to reach. He stood and stared at the perilous water, trying to assess its depth and flow. He knew

the lambs could never swim it, even if the adult animals should be strong enough. He left the flock behind and went further upstream, lowering his heavy head against the vicious wind. All the time he searched for a crossing point.

He saw there was only one possibility. A fallen tree had wedged itself across the stream and, at every moment, threatened to be torn loose by the angry water or the buffets of the wind. But Jacob could see that, if he hurried the flock onwards, they might mount the trunk and run across in time. He returned and quickly gathered the sheep together, telling them of his plan. 'I'll go first in case of danger,' he said. 'If it's safe you must come at once, but don't rush together or jostle. Think of your lambs.'

He led them at a run to where the tree still wavered in the watercourse. With a little jump he was on it and, despite its rocking, with the surefootedness of his kind he kept his balance and trotted across. Myriam followed him. Then her young and the other ewes with their lambs followed her. Jacob watched patiently, trying to mask his fears as slowly but surely the line of sheep stepped across, leaving an ever-dwindling group on the other side.

Suddenly the tree received a particularly strong gust of wind at one end where its exposed roots were frantically flailing the water. It was nearly wrenched free but somehow the knotted roots held it back. One of the last ewes, an unmated animal, was just jumping on to the trunk as this happened. She was thrown off her feet and fell into the torrent where she was rushed downstream in an instant. Her terrified bleats were soon lost in the noise of the storm and in a few moments the current had dragged her under. The remaining sheep hesitated now, looking nervously across at their companions.

'Come on, come on,' Jacob called authoritatively. 'Soon it will be too late!'

The tree had steadied again and the rest of the unmated females now hurried across with the utmost haste.

Immediately the last one was safe Jacob led them all at a run to the stand of blackthorn. Ignoring the thorns which could not pierce their thick fleeces, the flock got right in amongst the lowest branches, glad of any relief from the tempest which still raged across the countryside. Even as they took shelter they saw the very tree trunk which had served them so well go crashing past them on the spate. Its resistance to the storm had been overcome.

‘Oh! Oh!’ bleated Bell. ‘Look at that! Jacob’s so wise. How could he have known that it was safe to cross?’

‘He didn’t know,’ retorted Barley. ‘We might all have been washed away!’

Jacob looked on impassively. It was pointless to remind her that they had not all been on the crossing at once – the fact was that they were safe. But they were reminded of the one member of the flock who had fallen victim to the flood and some of the lambs began to ask their mothers what had happened to her.

‘She has gone,’ said Myriam, answering for each. ‘We won’t see her any more.’

The lambs accepted this at once. They really were not sufficiently interested to question further and they nestled closer to their mothers, content to be sheltered from the storm. Some of the flock lay down where they could to make themselves comfortable. Others nibbled at the few tufts of herbage that sprouted under the thicket. All the animals were tired.

Gradually a little light penetrated the massed clouds and the moaning wind dropped to a whisper. As it grew lighter the sheep could see that most of the land was under water. Jacob realized that the water was spreading and that they must move if they were not to starve. He knew that this meant climbing to higher ground but he waited a little longer before he roused the flock.

The storm had abated. Now another survivor was making her way up the valley through the drizzle. The

sheepdog Kep, still soaked to the skin, had recovered her senses in the quiet of the early morning. She still would not return to the scene of her master's shattered home. Her instinct told her things were not as they had been. But she remembered her duty to prevent the flock from straying and she sensed that the sheep had moved. She knew she must act on her own.

By climbing here, paddling and swimming a little there, she reached the plateau where the flock had been pastured. Kep soon spotted the white fleeces dotted amongst the greenery on the opposite bank. She surveyed the foaming waters of the Leck's tributary that separated her from them and knew she could not swim across.

The sheep sensed Kep's presence before they saw her. A stir of awareness spread through the whole flock and they shifted nervously. Jacob moved out from the thorn screen to look. He saw the collie bitch standing on the edge of the pasture close to where the sheep had crossed during the night. He saw her matted coat, the white hairs of which were now a muddy brown. He saw her heaving sides, her long muzzle, her lolling tongue and the fixed stare she used to control the ewes. For a while the two beasts eyed one another with an even gaze. Then Jacob turned and Kep watched the ram's solid shape return unhurriedly to the thicket. With the water as a barrier, Jacob thought the collie presented no threat.

'It's time to move on,' he said, rousing the flock. 'There are some fields higher up with good feed where I was once allowed to roam. We must go there now before we're swamped.'

'What about Kep?' Myriam asked quietly. They could all see the bitch now, hovering close.

'She'll be no problem,' Jacob said confidently, 'as long as we stay on this side.'

He moved ahead of the flock with his stately walk, splashing through the mire and pools of water. The ewes

and lambs followed him. Jacob kept them well away from the bank of the stream but always in view of Kep.

The dog kept abreast of their progress, loping up and down the far bank and moving along with them. Every now and then she took a step or two down towards the water as if in two minds whether to hazard a crossing, but always she jumped back up again. 'You won't stray too far,' she yelped at the sheep in warning. 'I'll prevent you.'

The flock scurried a little off course as they heard her, but Jacob brought them back in line. 'Empty words,' he told them. 'She can't enter the flood.'

But the ewes remained unsettled and bleated amongst themselves. They knew Kep of old and were daunted by her.

The land began to rise more steeply and became firmer. Jacob was encouraged by this as he knew the danger to sheep's feet from soggy fields. Now he led the flock away from the rushing stream towards the higher levels. Kep, frustrated, started to bark.

'She'll catch us. I'm sure she'll catch us,' Bell wailed, shaking her soft, pretty head.

Kep's barks were angry and shrill: they sounded threatening. In spite of the collie's distance, the ewes became panicky and started to run.

'Keep behind me!' Jacob called to them. 'You don't know the way.'

The flock quietened but the barking went on – gradually growing fainter as they moved on.

'Of, I know she won't let us get away,' Bell continued tremulously. 'She'll reach us somehow.'

'Be quiet, Bell!' Jacob said angrily. 'Can't you see you're affecting the others?'

Bell was silenced: Jacob's authority was, for her, supreme. The flock continued to climb.

Kep was furious at the flock's escape – she could see them in the distance ascending the slope and every step took them further away from where they ought to be. She

ran along the length of the tributary, trying in vain to find a way of gaining access to the other bank. She knew that if she did not stop them soon they would be lost to her master: she ran faster.

The drizzle stopped. A warm, westerly breeze sprang up and, at last, the clouds began slowly to disperse. Kep watched the stream. It was still in spate but its pace had slackened. The flood from the water table on the high levels was gradually draining away.

Further upstream the dog finally found a crossing place. It was like a bridge over the tributary. Here, men had dug a channel under the turf to carry the usually docile current, and to provide themselves and their animals with a sort of causeway over the stream. Of course the torrent of water from the storm had flooded over this spot, but its depth was insufficient to prevent Kep from swimming across, most of the current roaring through the channel underneath. The bitch soon reached the other side and pulling herself out, shook the drips from her coat in a fine spray. Now she had to make up for lost time, and she raced after the flock to cut it off.

As Kep closed the gap she could see where the sheep were heading. Instead of following them directly, she ran swiftly round in an arc to a point ahead where she could forestall them. She was a fleet-footed young collie and when Jacob's head appeared above the next rise, he saw Kep waiting for them. He halted.

Jess, who was right behind him, said: 'Is this where we stop?'

Jacob was thinking hard.

'Do we stay here now?' Jess persisted and the other animals milled about uncertainly.

'We'll have a short rest,' said Jacob quickly, trying to find time to decide what to do.

The ewes and lambs took the opportunity to graze a little, but Jacob did not feed. Kep was lying immobile, her

head resting on the ground. She watched him intently, looking alert and determined. Jacob turned on his heel and descended a few paces. The rest of the flock had not climbed as high as he and could not see Kep lying in wait. Even so, Bell's doubts had infected them with unease and they were fidgety, raising their heads sharply as they grazed and staring down to the land below them for a sight of the familiar black and white body.

Jacob knew he had to deal with Kep now. If he did not, she would drive the flock downhill again to the pasture they had left and keep them there until her master returned. He wondered what he could do, wishing he could consult another member of the flock. But he dared not risk a panic by mentioning Kep's nearness. How had she reached them? Oh, she was a clever beast!

He decided he would go on alone. First he went to Myriam, the ewe he trusted the most. She was grazing by herself.

'Will you keep the flock together?' he asked her. 'They'll follow you as the eldest. There's a difficulty ahead and I have to go and see about it.'

Myriam looked at him with her soft steady eyes. She chewed her mouthful pensively, half understanding him. 'Is there some danger?' she murmured.

'There might be,' Jacob answered. 'If you hear anything, don't move for a while. Stay here. But if I don't come back lead the flock on upwards. You'll find the pasture I mentioned beyond a line of dark trees.'

'I'll do as you say,' she answered him. 'But don't risk danger, Jacob. We need you with us.'

'I'm a cautious animal,' he said simply. He gave Myriam an affectionate look and turned away. She watched him disappear over the ridge.

Jacob intended to ignore Kep and go on past her. He thought he might draw her away from her vantage point.

Kep saw Jacob coming and flattened herself against the ground. She was absolutely motionless. As soon as the flock appeared she meant to dash out and intercept them; then drive them down. But the flock did not appear. Jacob came on alone, drew level with Kep and passed by without so much as a glance. Kep lifted her head and looked at him.

She raised herself. 'Where are you going?' she called. 'You can't take the sheep up there. It's not my master's domain.'

Jacob stopped and turned. 'As you see, I'm alone,' he answered evenly. He looked at the dog without fear.

Kep looked back. She had never seen Jacob at such close quarters before. She noted his broad, strong head with the great curling horns, his muscular neck and shoulders, his firm stocky body: his whole demeanour spelt authority. She knew that, in a tussle, he would be more than a match for her. But her sense of duty and loyalty to her master were paramount.

'The others will follow you,' she muttered.

'Not until I tell them to,' Jacob returned.

'Then where are you going?' Kep repeated.

'That rather depends on you,' said the ram.

Kep licked her chops perplexedly. What would her master wish her to do with Jacob? Not lose him, at any event. The ram continued to regard her patiently.

Kep played for time. 'Why did you leave your pasture?' she questioned.

'Look behind you,' Jacob told her. 'The land is under water. How could we feed?'

'I don't have to look,' answered Kep. 'I know what happened in the night; I broke free and escaped. My master and mistress didn't but I know they're alive.'

'Then why don't you look for them?'

'If I did, you would stray, quite out of reach, and I can't allow that. That's why I'm here; it's what I've been trained for.'

Jacob admired loyalty. He could almost sympathize with the sheepdog's point of view. 'Then what do you propose?' he asked quietly.

'I propose to take the flock back to my master's land,' replied Kep.

'If you do they will all die,' Jacob warned her. 'And I can't allow that.'

There was no mistaking the challenge in the voice of the ram. Kep swallowed and began to pant.

'All right,' she said finally. 'If I let you remain here until my master comes back for you, do you agree not to wander further?'

Jacob was scornful. 'Despite your training, you don't understand sheep. We seek the best herbage. There is no good grazing here, so we must move on to find it.'

'You want to have it all your own way,' Kep yapped angrily. 'I've tried to be reasonable.'

'That may be,' said Jacob. 'But I have to think of the well-being of the flock. How do I know when or if the master will return?'

'A good farmer looks after his animals,' Kep answered.

'Very well,' said Jacob. 'If he's as good as you believe he is, he won't want to leave us untended for long. Now listen.' He drew himself up impressively. 'I promise that the flock will stay here one day and one night. You bring the master to us. If you don't return with him by then, we will move on.'

Kep narrowed her brown eyes. 'How do I know you mean what you say?' she demanded.

'I'll keep my word,' Jacob replied, with a note of pride in his voice. 'But mind what I say. One day and one night. Is it a bargain?'

'I suppose it must be,' muttered Kep unhappily. She felt she had got the worst of this encounter.

Jacob turned and went back down the valley to the flock. He was pleased with the arrangement. He had no