

The Farthing Wood Collection III

Colin Dann

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Also by Colin Dann

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About the Book

Another three fantastic stories about the animals of Farthing Wood.

THE SIEGE OF WHITE DEER PARK

Terror has come to White Deer Park – a killer beast is on the loose. As the deaths mount up, the animals meet to make a plan ...

IN THE PATH OF THE STORM

Trey, the new leader of the stag herd, decides there is no room for the smaller animals at White Deer Park. Things look very bleak until the night of the great storm.

BATTLE FOR THE PARK

Animals are disappearing from White Deer Park. Could the Warden, whom the animals have learnt to trust, be responsible?

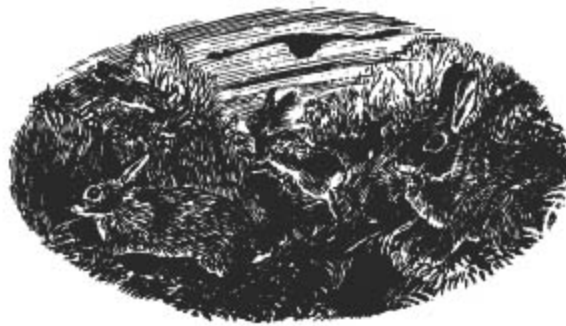
COLIN DANN

The
Farthing Wood
Collection
III

RED FOX

The Siege of White Deer Park

For Sarah, Rachael, David and Ruth



—1—

What Sort of Creature?

IN THE NATURE Reserve of White Deer Park the animals were looking forward to the bustle of Spring. It was the end of February and dead Winter's grasp was loosening little by little with each spell of sunshine. The survivors of the band of beasts and birds who had travelled to the haven of the Park from their destroyed home in Farthing Wood had passed their third winter in the confines of the Reserve. Only a few still survived. The short life spans of most had run their course. But now their descendants populated the Park, and they knew no other home. These voles and mice, hedgehogs, rabbits and hares mingled and mated as natives with others of their kind whose forefathers had always lived within the Park's boundaries. Yet they were still conscious of a sort of allegiance to the few stalwarts of the old Farthing Wood community who remained alive.

Foremost among these were the Farthing Wood Fox and his mate Vixen, venerated almost as mythical beings to whom the animals turned for advice and counsel. They were the doyens of the Park's inhabitants, along with the aged Great Stag who was still supreme among the deer

herd. Fox's oldest companion, Badger, was also a counsellor who tried to promote harmony between birds and beasts where it was feasible within their own natural order. Badger was very ancient now and never strayed far from his own set. He was slow, dim-sighted and rather feeble, but his kindly ways made him, if less respected, more loved even than Fox.

Tawny Owl, Adder, Toad, Weasel and Whistler the heron still lived and were occasional companions of Badger's extreme old age. But the old creature missed Mole, who had been his special friend. Mole's offspring – the result of his union with Mirthful, a female born in the Reserve – tended to live their own lives. So Badger suffered the loss of the wonderful bond that had existed between the two underground dwellers. Mole's allotted span of existence had reached its end during the winter. As he had lived, so he died – underground. His home had become his grave, and his tiny body went unnoticed in the labyrinth of tunnels. But he was remembered and mourned.

The descendants of Fox and Vixen now stretched almost to the fourth generation, for in the spring the cubs of their grandchildren would be born. From their own first litter Friendly and Charmer survived. Their cub Bold, who had left the Reserve and died outside it, had mated with Whisper who had journeyed to the Park for the safe birth of her own offspring. Now they, too, would become parents. So each season the Farthing Wood lineage was extended.

Badger and Tawny Owl had never paired off in their second home. They were too old and set in their ways – at least, so they said. As for Adder, who vanished altogether for long periods – well, no one was quite sure about him . . .

It was dusk on one of the last days of February when the first signs of some strange influence in their lives appeared to one of the old comrades from Farthing Wood. Tawny Owl had been quartering the Park's boundaries where these

adjoined the open downland. He noticed an unusual number of rabbits converging on a hole scraped under part of the fencing. The timid animals were jostling and bumping each other in their attempts to reach this entrance to the Reserve before their fellows.

‘Hm,’ mused Owl. ‘This is odd. What’s their hurry, I wonder?’ He was not thinking of the possibilities for himself in this sudden abundance of food. His first thought was for the cause of their fright. He flew out of the Park a little way, following the rabbits’ trail backwards – all of the time expecting to discover what was driving them. But he saw nothing, however much his night eyes scanned the ground.

‘*Something* scared them,’ he murmured to himself. ‘Yet why haven’t they dived for their burrows?’ Tawny Owl knew all about the behaviour of rabbits.

He flew back and hooted a question at them. ‘What’s all the fuss about?’

Some of the animals looked up but, when they saw the owl, they scuttled ahead even faster. They were certainly not going to stop still to talk to a hunter! And, by the time Tawny Owl remembered his stomach, they had disappeared into the undergrowth.

He perched in an ash tree and pondered, his great round eyes staring unseeingly through the bare branches. He rustled his brown wings.

‘No point brooding on it,’ he muttered. ‘Things reveal themselves eventually.’ He flew off on his noiseless flight into the gathering darkness.

A few days later, again in the evening, Fox and Vixen were emerging from their den to go foraging. In the winter months there was often carrion to be found and recently they had been subsisting chiefly on that. Fox paused as a clatter of wings broke the stillness of their home wood.

‘Pigeons,’ he remarked.

But there were other noises. Birds' cries, and the sounds of sudden movements in the tree-tops as many took to flight, made the pair of foxes listen intently. There was a general disturbance that went on for some minutes.

'The whole wood's been alarmed,' said Vixen. She stayed close to her bolt-hole in case of trouble.

Fox gazed fixedly at the night sky. At last he said: 'I think I see what it is.'

Vixen waited for him to explain. He was still looking up through the fretwork of naked branches.

'Yes,' he said. 'I'm sure of it.'

'Well - what?' Vixen prompted, a little impatiently.

'There are a lot of birds flying in from beyond the Park. They seem to be wheeling about, uncertain where to go. They must have unsettled those at roost here.'

'They sound very panicky,' Vixen observed.

The foxes watched a while longer. Eventually many of the birds from outside found perches in the Reserve. Others flew onwards, and gradually quietness was restored. Fox and Vixen went on their way.

Occurrences such as these became more frequent in the ensuing weeks. All the inhabitants of the Park became aware that something, as yet unknown, was bringing change to their little world. Animals from all over the countryside came flooding into the Park. Sometimes the creatures stayed; sometimes they passed right through or overhead; sometimes they returned again whence they had come. But it was obvious that the wildlife around was in a state of real alarm, and these continual movements to and fro brought an atmosphere of disquiet to the Nature Reserve. Weasel, running through the carpet of Dog's Mercury under the beech trees, noticed a sudden increase in the numbers of wood mice. These mice appeared to have thrown their inbred caution to the winds - most of them were running about quite openly, inviting themselves to be

taken. Weasel was not one to refuse the offer and he had quite a field day or, rather, night. It was only later that he realized that the mice had been thrown into a state of panic by the arrival of dozens of hunting stoats and weasels like himself, who were closing in on their quarry from every direction. The poor mice simply did not know where to run next. But where had these hunting cousins of his suddenly appeared from? They were certainly not the ordinary inhabitants of White Deer Park.

Squirrel and his relatives found themselves competing for their hoards of autumn-buried acorns and beech mast with strangers from elsewhere who watched where they dug and stole where they could.

Hare's first-born, Leveret, who was still called so by his Farthing Wood friends from old association (though he had for long now been an adult) saw more of his own kind running through the dead grass and bracken than he had ever done since his arrival in White Deer Park.

Finally the friends began to gather to compare their opinions. It was now March and a shimmer of green was slowly spreading through the Park. New grass, tentative leaves on hawthorn and hazel, and ripening sycamore and chestnut buds gave glad signs to the animals that Winter was over. But they were puzzled and a little worried by the recent influxes.

'Where do they come from?' asked Squirrel.

'What's bringing them here?' asked Leveret.

Badger had no comment to make. He was only acquainted with the facts by hearsay. He had seen nothing himself.

'It's as if they've been driven here,' Tawny Owl said.

Fox had been doing a lot of thinking. 'You could be right, Owl,' he remarked. 'Birds and beasts are being driven here to the Reserve in the hope of shelter and then -'

'Finding themselves cornered?' Vixen broke in.

‘Exactly! Then they’d be ripe for rounding up. It’s like part of a deliberate plan by some clever creature.’

‘Or creatures,’ Weasel observed.

‘Yes,’ said Fox. ‘It couldn’t be just one. Unless . . .’

‘Unless of the human variety,’ finished Whistler the heron drily.

‘Wouldn’t make sense,’ Tawny Owl contradicted him. ‘What purpose could there be in this for Man?’

‘How should we know?’ asked Friendly, Fox’s son. ‘Who else is so clever?’

‘I don’t like this rounding up idea,’ Leveret said nervously. ‘It stands to reason – *we’d* be caught up in it too.’

They fell silent while they digested the implications of this.

‘From what you say, Fox,’ Badger wheezed, ‘it sounds as if some animal or other is planning to use the Park as a sort of larder.’

Fox looked at him. ‘You’ve gone straight to the point, Badger. But what sort of creature’ he muttered inconclusively.

‘A sort of creature *we* know nothing about,’ said Owl.

‘The deer are very uneasy,’ put in Vixen. ‘You can tell they sense something.’

‘It’s horrible waiting around,’ said Charmer, her daughter, ‘for this . . . this . . . *Something* to make an appearance. There are young to be born and looked after.’

‘We mustn’t get too jittery,’ said Fox. ‘Perhaps there *is* no “Something”. There might be a more simple explanation. And a less alarming one.’ But he could not convince himself.

Tawny Owl said, ‘We mustn’t fool ourselves either, Fox. We should prepare for the worst.’

‘That’s very helpful,’ remarked Weasel sarcastically.

‘I meant it for the best,’ Owl defended himself. ‘We don’t want to be caught napping, do we?’

'No, but there's a reasonable chance in your case,' Weasel murmured wickedly. It was well known that Tawny Owl spent most of the daylight hours dozing. Owl pretended not to hear.

'Oh!' exclaimed Fox. 'How I wish our brave Kestrel was still around to do some scouting for us!'

'Yes,' said Whistler the heron. 'If anyone could have spotted the danger he could have done. But can I be of any service? I don't have Kestrel's piercing vision, but I *do* have wings, and there's a deal to be seen from the air which you creatures would likely miss.'

'Of course,' said Fox. 'Thank you. Any help is most welcome.'

'You know long flights are awkward with your bad wing,' Tawny Owl pointed out to the heron. He referred to the bird's old wound from a badly aimed bullet, which had caused him more trouble as he grew older. 'It had better be me.'

Whistler, whose name derived from the noise this wing made as it flapped through the air, knew perfectly well that Owl felt he had lost face by not offering his services first. But he was too polite to mention it. 'That's all right,' he said. 'I know you night birds have to catch up on your sleep while my sort are active.'

His intended tact misfired. Tawny Owl's feelings were hurt. He was very conscious that his advancing age made him sleep longer than he used to. His feathers ruffled indignantly.

'Nonsense!' he said. 'I'm quite capable of flying by day. And more accurately than you, I might add.'

'As you say, old friend,' Whistler said readily with his constant good humour. He was quite unaffected by Owl's sharp retort.

'We'll share the search then.'

'Very well,' replied Owl huffily.

Weasel looked at Owl with distaste. 'He gets worse as he gets older,' he murmured to himself.



—2—

The Pond is Deserted

THE TWO BIRDS made long flights over the surrounding area; the heron by day, the owl by night. Neither was able to see anything that might explain the recent developments. But some of the creatures who had taken refuge within the Reserve talked to the animals they met there. Word spread of a large, fierce beast who made raids in the night. No animal had seen it and survived, so none of the refugees could give even the vaguest description of it. There were rumours of terrible slaughter. Tales of its unnerving hunting skills were rife. It could climb; it could swim; it could catch creatures underground. Some even suspected it could fly, since birds also suffered from its depredations. Soon the whole Park was in a state of suspense.

But it was Spring and, despite the suspense, the activities of Spring went on. Pairing and mating, nest-building and preparing dens for imminent births overrode any other consideration. For a while the threat of the unknown seemed to recede. Then, with startling suddenness, a change in the usual absorbing routine shocked the animals out of their preoccupation. In the midst of their mating season, the colony of Edible Frogs

made a mass exodus from their pond. They were not content to hide themselves in the waterside vegetation. They hopped away in all directions as far as they could go, apparently desperate to get right away from the pond. Other aquatic creatures such as newts were seen in great numbers leaving the pond, and the ducks, coots and moorhens who had built their nests on or near the water deserted them entirely. It was obvious that something very alarming had happened to drive them away. The animals and birds did not need to ask each other what this could be. They knew. The Beast had arrived in the Park.

Toad, who had acted as guide to the Farthing Wood animals on their long journey to White Deer Park, was eager to talk to Fox. He had not been in the water himself when the eruption of the Edible Frogs from the pond had occurred. But he had witnessed their panic.

‘It was pandemonium,’ he told Fox. ‘They couldn’t scramble away fast enough from that water. There was something *in* the pond.’

‘Did you see what it was?’ Fox asked quickly.

‘No, no. It was too dark for that,’ replied Toad. ‘But I didn’t want to stay around myself to find out!’

‘Of course not. I can well see why.’

‘I don’t know what the Frogs will do now,’ Toad croaked. ‘The pond is their gathering point. How can they carry on their lives now – and in the middle of the most important time of the year?’

‘I wonder how any of us will cope,’ Fox returned. ‘You can’t deal with something unseen.’

‘I’d like to stay around here for a while if I may?’ Toad murmured. ‘There’s comfort in company and I haven’t seen Badger in a long while.’

Fox spoke quietly: ‘I’m afraid he’s failing, Toad, little by little. We’re all much older than we were, but Badger

seems to live in his own little world. He only does what's necessary – can't be bothered with anything else.'

'I think Mole's sadly missed,' Toad murmured. 'And Kestrel too. What an acrobat *he* was in the sky! But our old life, back in the Wood, and the great trek here that seemed as if it would go on for ever– doesn't it seem so long ago?'

'An age,' Fox agreed. 'Vixen and I often talk about the past. A sign of *our* age, no doubt,' he mocked himself.

'Yes. We always overcame troubles together before, didn't we?' Toad went on. 'But, you know, this new menace – I have a feeling it may be too much for us.'

After this, life in the Reserve went on as if on tiptoe. The whole community held its breath – and waited. One morning the remains of three adult rabbits were found close together under some blackthorn. It was obvious this was not the work of a fox. The other rabbits spoke of a hint of soft footfalls around their burrows. As usual they had seen nothing. But each of them seemed to have been aware of a Presence.

At intervals other carcasses were discovered. Their killer had great stealth and cunning. It was never seen during the day, and at night, although every animal and bird stayed alert for it, nothing positive was heard.

The inhabitants of White Deer Park, many of whom were chiefly nocturnal in their habits, began to feel as if they were under siege. Yet they had to eat. They went about in fear and trepidation, trying to stay as close to their homes as possible. But deaths still occurred. The mystery continued to hang balefully over the Reserve.

The creature's amazing silence was a constant talking point. The hunters among the Park's population began to feel a sort of grudging respect for its expertise. Some of the young foxes harboured ideas of emulating its methods.

'That sort of skill would make any animal the most respected of predators,' remarked one youngster, a nephew of Friendly's called Husky.

‘Do you admire it?’ his uncle enquired.

‘Of course. Don’t you? If I were like that I’d be the envy of all.’

‘You’d have to learn a little more quietness then,’ Friendly chaffed him. The point was not lost on his young relative who was something of a chatterer. ‘And,’ he went on, ‘can you climb trees?’

‘I can climb a bit,’ the youngster declared. ‘I’m not sure about trees.’

While this conversation was proceeding, the elders of the Farthing Wood community were meeting specifically to discuss the threat from the super-predator. The talk seemed to go round and round in circles, without anything being resolved. At last Badger, who had held his peace for most of the time, murmured, ‘I can’t help thinking of cats.’

‘What? What did you say, Badger?’ Fox asked sharply.

‘Well, you see, Fox,’ Badger went on in his rather quavery voice, ‘I’m reminded of Ginger Cat. I spent a lot of time with him in the Warden’s home after my accident. You’ll remember that winter when I hurt my –’

‘Yes, yes,’ Fox cut in hurriedly. He knew how Badger was apt to wander off the point. ‘We all recall Ginger Cat. Now what about him?’

‘Well, the thing that struck me most about *him* was his stealth,’ Badger explained. ‘He could be so quiet in his movements, you wouldn’t know he was about. And . . . and . . . he could *climb* like anything. So I wonder if this stranger in our midst might be a cat?’

‘Oh, Badger, don’t be absurd!’ Tawny Owl scoffed. ‘How could a cat have slaughtered as this beast has done? It wouldn’t have the strength.’

‘I didn’t necessarily mean a cat like the Warden’s cat,’ Badger continued doggedly. ‘But – er – another sort of cat . . .’

Weasel said: ‘It makes sense, doesn’t it, Fox?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Fox. ‘What other sorts of cats are there?’

None of them had an answer to that.

‘It’s *not* a cat,’ Tawny Owl declared peremptorily. ‘It’s a larger animal altogether.’

‘But if it’s so large, Owl,’ Weasel said cheekily, ‘why haven’t you been able to spot it?’

Tawny Owl looked awkward. ‘I don’t know,’ he said, and shuffled his feet. ‘But Whistler looked too,’ he added quickly as if that helped his argument which, of course, it did not.

‘The fact is,’ said Toad, ‘we’re all completely in the dark. And we shall remain in the dark until one of us – or another animal – comes face to face with the creature.’

‘If that should happen, he won’t live to tell the tale,’ Fox reminded him.

‘He might – if he had wings,’ Toad suggested.

‘Wings haven’t been of much use so far,’ Whistler said. ‘Birds have been taken from their nests.’

‘Then the bird in question should remain in the air,’ Toad answered.

‘I think Toad has something,’ Vixen remarked. ‘Another search should be made. Tawny Owl and Whistler didn’t actually search the Reserve itself because the beast was believed to be outside it.’

‘Very true,’ said Fox. ‘No use looking by day, though. It keeps itself well hidden. Owl, if you were very clever and very quiet, you might catch a glimpse of it. It has to hunt.’

‘Oh, I can match the beast itself for quietness,’ Tawny Owl boasted. ‘No question of that. My flight is utterly noiseless. You see, my wing feathers –’

‘Yes, we’re all aware of your abilities,’ Weasel cut in, rather sourly.

‘Will you have another try?’ Fox asked hurriedly, before Owl reacted.

'I certainly will,' the bird answered at once. He was delighted to be relied upon, and flattered by Fox's confidence in him.

'I still think it's a creature of the feline type,' Badger muttered obstinately.

Tawny Owl stared at him. His hooked beak opened on a retort, but he closed it again without speaking. He would very soon prove Badger wrong about that.

The gathering began to break up, when Fox suddenly asked: 'Has anyone seen Adder?'

It appeared that none of them had. Toad was usually the first to set eyes on him in the spring, for they often hibernated together. But even he had no idea where he was.

'I don't like to leave him out of our discussion,' Fox remarked, 'But he knows where we are so it's easier for him to seek us out.'

'Perhaps now it's warmer he'll turn up soon?' suggested Whistler.

'Huh! I suppose he might deign to show himself,' Weasel retorted. 'But as time goes by Adder gets crustier and crustier or, perhaps I should say in his case, scali-er and scali-er.'

'He'll be around,' Toad affirmed. 'I think I know him better than you do, Weasel. You've always taken his offhand manner too much to heart. It's just his way. After all, he is a snake, not a warm-blooded mammal. And I can tell you, he's just as loyal as any of us.'

The little group split up and went about their own concerns. As it turned out, talking about Adder seemed, though quite by chance, to hasten his arrival. The very next day Vixen found him coiled up by the entrance to her earth.

'Ah, Vixen,' said the snake. 'Another spring and yet you look just the same.'

Compliments from Adder were few and far between. Vixen was conscious of the unusual distinction. 'How nice

to be greeted in such a charming way,' she said graciously. 'And how good to see you after all this time.'

Adder uncoiled himself and slid towards her. His thin body was blunt at the tail where some time ago he had lost about two centimetres of his length in a tussle with an enemy fox.

'The Reserve is alive with frogs, it seems,' he remarked with his infamous leer. 'I must try to work up an appetite and make the most of them.' His tongue flickered in and out as he tested the air.

'That won't be very difficult after your long fast, I should think.'

'Oh, my cold blood needs time to heat up properly,' he answered. 'I'm always a bit sluggish at first.'

Vixen explained what had happened at the pond.

'Yes, I've heard rumours,' the snake drawled. 'There seem to be all kinds of strange stories about. Some monster or other on the prowl, I believe?'

'I think that's an exaggeration,' Vixen said. 'But there *is* a fierce creature roaming the Park. None of us feels safe. And the worst of it is - we don't know what this creature *looks* like.'

Fox, hearing Adder's voice, had emerged from the earth. 'Tawny Owl is keeping a lookout on his night travels,' he added, after he and Adder had exchanged greetings.

'Hm. Well, I've seen nothing,' the snake said. 'Except -'

The foxes waited but Adder seemed to have forgotten what he was going to say.

'Except what?' Fox prompted.

'Oh, it's of no importance,' Adder hissed. He had quickly decided that something he had detected might alarm them further. 'Have you seen Toad?' he asked to divert them.

'Oh yes. He steers clear of the pond too,' Vixen told him.

'Mmm. I hope I come across him,' Adder murmured. 'Well, I'm off to sun myself,' he added abruptly. 'Then I'll be ready for those frogs.'

He disappeared rather hurriedly and Fox and Vixen looked at each other with wry expressions.

‘He doesn’t change,’ Vixen observed.

‘No, he doesn’t,’ Fox concurred. ‘And I wouldn’t want him to. But he’s keeping something from us. I know him.’

Adder was keeping something back. Before he would say more, he wanted his suspicions about what he had seen confirmed or allayed. Toad was the one to do that. So the snake went in search of him.

He had not been misleading the foxes about sunning himself. He needed the warmth from a long bask in the sun to get his muscles working properly in case there should be a bit of travelling for him to do. He found a patch of dead bracken which faced into the spring sunshine. The spot was dry and the ground felt quite warm. It was ideal for him. While he enjoyed his sunbath Adder reflected that it was just the opposite of the sort of place Toad would be seeking. Toad liked dampness and shelter from the sun’s rays, and preferred to move about after dark.

When Adder felt thoroughly warm and sufficiently lively, he moved off. He was still in the part of the Park originally colonized by the band of Farthing Wood animals, and so he hoped he might meet some old companions. As he rippled through the dry dead stalks of grass he saw an animal rise from the ground a few metres in front of him. It was Leveret who, in a typical attitude, was standing on hind legs to look about him. Adder hastened forward, calling in his rasping way. He knew that if Leveret bounded off there would be no hope of his catching him again. No animal in the Park could move so swiftly. Luckily Leveret detected the snake’s movement and dropped on all fours to await him.

‘I thought it must be you,’ he said when Adder came up. ‘Well, it’s a sign Spring has really and truly arrived when you are seen moving about.’

'I'm looking for Toad,' Adder stated bluntly, without offering a greeting.

'Yes. I see.'

'Well, can you help me?'

'I hope so, yes. What's the problem?' Leveret asked.

The snake's tongue flickered faster than ever, a sure sign of his exasperation. It was always the same with this maddening animal, he thought. Everything had to be said twice. 'Can you help me find Toad?' he hissed slowly and emphatically.

'If you wish it, Adder. Now where shall we begin?'

'Oh, don't bother!' said the snake angrily. 'Perhaps I'll manage better on my own.'

Leveret looked surprised. 'But I thought -' he began.

'Look,' said Adder. 'I'm going towards the pond. If you see Toad tell him to meet me there. I need his advice.' He slid away in a bad humour. 'Mammals!' he muttered.

Leveret watched his departure. 'Funny he should be going *to* the pond when everyone else has been moving away from it,' he said to himself.



—3—

Footprints and Eyes

ADDER TOOK A roundabout route to the pond. Always one of the most secretive creatures in his movements, he now used extra care in view of the new air of uncertainty in the Reserve. It was a while before he reached the pond and his progress had been arrested twice on the way by two plump frogs who had presented to him irresistible reasons for delay. But once near the water's edge in the early dusk, Adder was still able to see the strange signs he had detected before. He settled himself down amongst the reeds and sedges for what might prove to be a long wait. The surface of the pond was undisturbed in the evening calm and no sound - not a single croak or chirp - arose from the vegetation clothing its banks.

Toad had soon been rounded up by Leveret. He was puzzled by Adder's message but, since he well knew that the snake was not prone to seek another's company without a definite purpose, he agreed to set off for the rendezvous. It was with some considerable misgiving that Toad found himself returning to the scene of so much recent agitation. He decided to run no risks - even though he suspected a small creature like himself might be

beneath the notice of the mysterious fierce hunter. He covered most of the distance to the pond in daylight, but as soon as he got close to the danger area he hid himself in some thick moss to await darkness. Then, with the benefit of its screen, he continued rather more confidently. However, he was still wary, and he paused often to listen. He reached the pond without noticing any evidence of an unusual presence abroad that night.

Toad gave a muffled croak once or twice in the hope that only the waiting Adder would recognize it. The snake had expected him to arrive after dark and had remained alert, so the ploy worked.

'Well, you've taken a chance,' Toad said in a low voice as he pulled himself into the waterside screen from which Adder hissed his position.

'Only a slender one if there's no chance of discovery,' Adder observed wryly. 'I want you to look at something, Toad, I'm at a bit of a disadvantage.'

'What do you mean?'

'That patch of mud,' Adder indicated in front of them. 'What do you make of it?'

Toad looked where he was bidden. After a while he said, 'Nothing much. Unless you mean - oh!' a little croak of alarm escaped him involuntarily.

'You see them then?'

'Paw prints!'

'I thought as much,' hissed the snake. 'But, you understand, Toad, someone who relies on my sort of locomotion can't claim to be an expert in such matters.'

'I take your point,' said Toad. 'But there can be no doubt. The frightening thing is -'

'I know - the size of them. I suppose they've been made by a mammal?'

'Oh yes. No frog or toad in existence could make marks like that.'

‘I first saw them a day or so ago,’ Adder said, ‘and didn’t pay much attention. It’s only now I realize their significance.’

‘Do the others know?’

‘I’ve said nothing. I wasn’t sure. Well, Toad, this will put their fur into a bristle.’

‘I wonder if we should tell them? I mean, LOOK! What size must the creature be?’

‘Big enough to kill a deer. No, we can’t leave them in ignorance. They should be prepared.’

‘Prepared for what, Adder? What can they do?’

‘Nothing, I imagine,’ the snake answered bluntly, ‘except – keep their wits about them.’

Toad recalled the birds’ mission. ‘The animal might have been seen by now. Tawny Owl is combing the park.’

‘This creature’s too clever to be found by an owl,’ Adder remarked with a hint of contempt. ‘It’s a master of concealment.’

The notion entered Toad’s head that the Beast might be lying hidden nearby at that moment, and keeping them under observation. He became very nervous. ‘I – I – think we shouldn’t stay here,’ he chattered. ‘It might come back at any moment and – and – we know it’s active at night. Let’s separate.’

‘I think we’re safe enough,’ Adder drawled affectedly, ‘But all right, Toad. Thanks for your advice. My fears were well founded.’

Toad muttered something about seeing Adder again ‘in the usual place’ and hopped hurriedly away. The snake made up his mind to stay awhile in case he might be able to add some more evidence to the existing clues.

In the meantime Tawny Owl was on his second reconnaissance flight. He combed the park methodically, concentrating on the areas most fitted to an animal who wanted to hide itself. But, like the first, this second night of

searching produced nothing. Before dawn, Tawny Owl flew wearily to a favourite perch in a beech copse. He was very tired indeed, but was pleased with the way he had carried out his mission. He felt he had left, as it were, no stone unturned. He settled his wings sleepily and, little by little, his big round eyes closed.

The Moon shone brightly over the countryside. White Deer Park shimmered in its glow. Once or twice the owl shifted his grip on the beech bough. It was a bright night, and each branch of the tree was picked out sharply in the moonlight. Tawny Owl dozed. But something – some influence or other – prevented him from sleeping properly, despite his tiredness. He opened one eye and, from his high perch, looked down towards the ground. What he saw nearly caused him to fall from the branch. A huge face, with eyes glinting in the moonlight like live coals, stared up at him.

Tawny Owl lost his grip, overbalanced, flapped his wings frantically and just saved himself from plunging downwards head first. He let out a screech and fought his way awkwardly up through the branches, at last gaining sufficient height to feel safe. He veered away from the copse and steadied himself as he recovered from his sudden shock. The Beast!

As Tawny Owl calmed down he wondered if any other creature had seen his frightened reaction. He looked all round to see if he was watched and then alighted elsewhere, far enough away from his first spot to be comfortable. Now he wondered if he had imagined what he'd seen. It was so sudden – had he been dreaming? He did not think so, but he knew he ought to go back for a second look. After all, he was quite safe in the air. He thought about it for a while, trying to find valid reasons for not going back. But he could not think of any.

'Still. It's probably moved by now. Not much point,' he told himself unconvincingly. Then he thought of his friends.

He owed it to them to make a proper report. He hesitated. Tawny Owl was not lacking in courage, but he really had had a bad fright. The Beast had been so close! At last he stiffened his resolve and took to the air once more, flying on a circular course which eventually brought him back to the borders of the beech copse. He fluttered to and fro uncertainly. Actually to enter the little wood again was extraordinarily difficult.

When he finally did fly in, he went cautiously from one tree to another, stopping each time before moving on. When the tree from which he had seen the Beast came into view, of course there was no sign of any animal, large or small, in its branches. A feeling of great relief flooded over the owl and now he flew right up to the tree for a closer look. Nothing!

'I shouldn't have delayed,' he muttered. 'It was wrong of me. Two great eyes - *that's* not much to go on. Now I suppose the thing's got well away from this place.' He flew about the copse, examining everything that might yield a clue. But there were no clues, not even footprints, for last year's dry leaves were still thick on the ground. And not the slightest rustle disturbed them.

Tawny Owl left the copse and directed his flight towards Fox's earth. He began to feel quite proud of his news. He, alone of all the Park's inhabitants, had had a glimpse of the stranger who had come to dominate their lives. It made him very important.

Day broke as he arrived. He called to Fox and Vixen peremptorily. Already his mind was beginning to exaggerate the little he had seen. There were stirrings in the foxes' den. Vixen peered out.

'Oh, hallo, Owl,' she murmured and went promptly back inside again.

'Wait!' cried the bird. 'I've news that -'

But Vixen was not listening. Tawny Owl could hear voices inside the earth. He hooted with frustration. He was