

The Animals of Farthing Wood

Through Battle and Storm

Colin Dann

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About the Book

The animals of Farthing Wood had thought that their new home of White Deer Park would be a safe haven for them . . . a home where they would be well-protected and free from harm.

But the latest developments at White Deer Park promise none of the security and peace that the animals have been expecting. Trey, the new leader of the stags, is proving to be a frightening and tyrannical presence, a great hurricane threatens to destroy many of the animals' homes, and then, worst of all, an army of vicious rats decides to move in . . .

The
Animals
of
Farthing Wood

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Part I

IN THE PATH OF THE STORM

PROLOGUE

ONE EARLY MORNING in March Whistler the heron stood by the stream in White Deer Park looking for fish. It was raining. It had been raining for too long. The raindrops disturbed the water, making it hard for Whistler to see the fish. He had been standing so long he had begun to doze.

From the woodland near the stream the towering figure of the Great Stag came to drink. Ignoring Whistler, he bent his head to the water. Whistler noticed movement and turned to watch. The Great Stag finished drinking and stood upright. Suddenly his body began to shake violently. His legs gave way and he crashed on to his side. The stag's body twitched once or twice, then lay still. Whistler hurriedly flew to him. One close look told the heron the stag was dead.

Miserable, Whistler flew to find his companions from Farthing Wood. The Great Stag had been a friend to them all since their arrival in the Park and the heron needed to share his awful news. Eventually he saw Badger busy collecting fresh bedding for his sett. The familiar sound of Whistler's damaged wing made the old creature look up.

'Hallo, Whistler! More rain, more rain. Everything's waterlogged. It's difficult to find dry -' He broke off as he saw the bird's look of anguish. 'Why, whatever's the matter?' he asked.

'I have terrible news,' Whistler replied. 'The Great Stag is dead. I saw him die. It was horribly sudden.' He described what he had seen.

Badger was stunned, unable to find words. Finally he muttered, 'Dreadful. Quite dreadful.' He began to back away. 'I must get this bedding underground,' he murmured.

‘I’ll go,’ said Whistler. ‘I’ll tell the others.’

Badger’s thoughts were full of the sad event as he tried to make his sett comfortable. How would the Great Stag’s death change life in the Park?

The other animals wondered the same thing when they heard the news. They gathered to consider the loss of a much revered friend.

‘It’s the end of the old order,’ said Fox.

‘Who’ll take his place?’ asked Leveret the young hare. ‘There will be a new leader, won’t there?’

‘Only after a battle,’ Owl said. ‘There’s bound to be rivalry between the stags.’

They knew the fighting wouldn’t occur until the breeding season and that was months away. They took a final look at the body of the aged leader of the deer herd as it rocked gently with the current of the stream.

CHAPTER ONE

TOAD AND ADDER came out of hibernation to find the Park still soaked by the rain. This suited the water-loving Toad, but Adder wanted somewhere dry and warm. It wasn't long before they heard about the Great Stag's death. Owl told them. Toad and Adder looked glum.

'Whistler saw it happen by the stream,' Owl said. 'After the Stag had drunk from it. And there seem to be very few fish about at present. There's something odd about that stream.'

Adder and Toad parted, since Adder was eager to find a dry spot. She had a good idea where she might find one. 'Badger's sett,' she hissed to herself. 'That's bound to be warm and comfortable.'

There were many births that spring amongst the Farthing Wood animals. Fox and Vixen had their first great grandchildren. A male cub was born who reminded them vividly of their son Bold who had left White Deer Park and not survived. This cub was called Plucky.

'He's the image of Bold at that age,' Vixen breathed. 'It'll be such fun to see him grow up.'

Of the original members of the Farthing Wood band only Badger and Owl hadn't found mates. Badger was very old and forgetful but the younger animals loved him dearly. However, they sometimes teased Owl who had not yet reached old age and yet was still on her own. Two of the younger foxes, now parents themselves, couldn't resist winding her up.

‘Poor old Owl – she couldn’t find a mate,’ Rusty called beneath her roost.

‘Are there no single males left for you?’ Pace chuckled.

‘Stop annoying me,’ replied Owl, crossly. ‘Haven’t you got anything better to do?’

‘Haven’t *you?*’ Rusty teased.

‘Think of all those gentlemen owls dying to get to know the famous Owl from Farthing Wood,’ Pace continued.

‘They must be patient and wait then, mustn’t they?’ Owl snapped. She knew it was a mistake to react to the foxes’ taunts but it was impossible not to do so.

‘Wait for what?’

‘For me to choose to get acquainted,’ she answered pompously.

‘Oh. Listen to that, Rusty. I always thought it was they who had chosen not to become acquainted with Owl?’

‘Must be, Pace. After all, she is the only unmated one of the Farthing Wood elders.’

‘I am NOT!’ screeched Owl. ‘What about Badger?’

‘Poor old Badger?’ Rusty cried. ‘You can hardly count –’ He broke off as he saw his mother, Charmer, approaching.

‘What’s going on?’ Charmer demanded, sensing mischief.

‘They’re mocking me,’ Owl complained.

‘Whatever for?’

‘It’s only because she has no mate,’ Pace explained. ‘Just a bit of fun.’

‘It’s no business of yours whether Owl has a mate or not,’ Charmer scolded the youngsters. ‘You should be more respectful to your elders. Leave her in peace and tend to your own business.’ She lowered her voice. ‘It’s not nice to scoff at another creature’s bad luck.’

Pace and Rusty looked ashamed. They hadn’t intended any harm. But Owl had, unfortunately, heard Charmer’s last remark and was humiliated. Bad luck? Well, she’d show them! She was furious. In a temper she flapped away over the tree-tops, not perching again until she was well hidden

from any further cruel teasers. Her feelings were hurt badly and she knew she must do something to prove the young foxes wrong. The trouble was, it would be all but impossible to find another single owl in White Deer Park now. It was too late into the season.

‘Nothing else for it,’ she told herself. ‘I’ll have to go outside the Park.’ She felt some relief. At least then none of her old companions – or new ones – would be able to keep a check on her.