

The Fox Cub Bold

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Random House Children's Publishers UK

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About the Book

Bold veered sharply in mortal fear. He saw the man raise his weapon . . . the next instant he felt a fierce sear of pain in his right thigh.

The fox club Bold has left the nature reserve in search of adventure. Now he lies badly wounded by a hunter's bullet.

Can Bold survive - lame and unable to hunt - in the harshness of the world outside White Deer Park? Winter is coming and friends are hard to find . . .

Another gripping adventure of the animals of Farthing Wood by award-winning author Colin Dann.

The Fox Cub Bold

Colin Dann

Illustrated by Terry Riley

RHCP DIGITAL



— 1 —

The Real World

The summer sun shone, wide and warm, on the countryside. The fox cub Bold saw the broad horizon lit by its golden rays and narrowed his eyes against the glare. He felt he stood in the midst of a new world. The rolling downland and its scattered coverings of woodland and bracken were spread before him and around him.

‘This is the real world,’ he whispered to himself. ‘The wide, wild natural world.’ In all the expanse the only movement to be detected was the restless flight of a bird here and there or the lazy waving of greenery caused by the slightest of breezes. The cub repeated his phrase to himself in a delighted murmur – ‘the real world, the real world . . .’ The spirit of adventure that had filled him as he had stepped outside the limits of the Nature Reserve where his family lived sharpened to a new pitch. He leapt forward and raced across the turf, glorying in his own health and vigour. His eyes sparkled, the blood sang in his veins – he felt as free as the air.

From a tree-top a solitary magpie was watching. ‘Here’s a topsy-turvy creature,’ it muttered. ‘A fox out parading in

the daytime for all to see, and a young-one too. His parents didn't teach *him* stealth. Humph!' he rasped. 'He'll learn the hard way, I suppose.'

Bold was not fooled by the temporarily empty landscape. His father had told him enough about life outside the haven of the Park for him to appreciate its dangers. And who knew more of such things than his father, the fox from Farthing Wood? For he had travelled across this country, leading his assorted band of animals and birds from the destruction of their old woodland home to a new future in the protected Reserve. On the journey all the creatures, strong and weak alike, had been bound by a sworn oath – a pledge to help and defend each other. This had continued after their arrival in the Reserve and had been maintained by them all ever since. But Bold relished his feeling of complete independence. He had confidence in the strength of his body and, as for his character, well, his parents had not chosen his name for nothing. The narrow limits of White Deer Park were not for him. He had decided to live the True Wild Life – accepting its thrills and its perils alike.

A bank vole started in his path and went scurrying away through the grass stems. Bold checked his headlong career. But it was some moments before he reminded himself that any game, big or small, was now prey to his hunting skill. He owed no loyalties, no allegiances here. No animals in the real world were bound by the oath. By the time he set off again the little beast had disappeared from sight. Bold made no attempt to hunt for it, deciding it was probably already cowering inside its bolt-hole. He went on now at a slower pace, sniffing the pungent air and carefully scanning the terrain for any sign of life.

The magpie continued to view his progress, noting the vole's escape. 'Not a great hunter, it seems,' it had said to itself. 'Well, he'll have to do better than that or *he* won't survive long.' It flew away to another tree, chack-chacking loudly as it went.

Bold looked up at the sound. The startling black and white of the bird's wings flashed like a signal against the sky's hazy blue. It landed on a branch, its long tail dipping and rising to maintain its balance. As Bold trotted on, the bird flew off again to investigate something that interested it on the ground. The cub saw it begin to peck at the object of interest, tugging with its bill this way and that in its efforts to free a morsel.

Bold recalled his own empty stomach. He had not eaten since leaving White Deer Park, and now here, perhaps, was a mouthful or two for the taking. He was more than a match for any bird. He had only to run forward . . .

As he dashed up, the magpie rose awkwardly into the air, uttering a scolding, irritated cry. Bold discovered the mutilated remains of a long-dead wood pigeon. As he was by no means averse to a meal of carrion, whatever its rankness, he snapped at the skin and bone eagerly.

The angry magpie eyed him from a nearby vantage point, wondering if he would leave anything. In the end it could not contain its frustration. 'Is this your idea of hunting?' it screeched down at him. 'The foxes in this area prefer to rely on their skill in stalking *live* quarry. They roam at night when we birds have long since tucked our heads under our wings. Any real fox would turn up its nose at a poor scrap like that.'

Bold looked up in astonishment. The reference to a 'real fox' certainly jarred on him. 'Where I come from I was taught not to ignore any source of food that might mean the difference between eating and going hungry,' he returned. 'But I can assure you I know all about night foraging.'

'Really?' said the magpie sarcastically. 'But I suppose it's easier for you to snatch a meal from a being weaker than yourself?'

'I'm not in the habit of doing such a thing,' Bold replied, 'though I'm certain most creatures would accept it as one

of the laws of nature – unfair as it seems to you.’

‘Unfair and greedy,’ remarked the magpie.

‘Well, you’ve made your point,’ said Bold. ‘As it happens, there’s really nothing but feathers left on this carcass anyway. So I’ll gladly relinquish the morsel.’

The magpie, somewhat mollified, said: ‘Is it your habit to be abroad in the daytime?’

‘Habit? No. I’m no different from other foxes in enjoying the greater security of the dark. I’ve been exploring my new domain.’

‘*Domain?*’ echoed the magpie. ‘If you see this area as your domain you’re in for a few surprises, my youngster.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Bold confidently. ‘I have as much right to roam here as any other creature. I accept their rights so they should accept mine.’

‘Oh, they should, should they?’ said the magpie, letting out a cynical chuckle. ‘Well, we shall see. I wasn’t only referring to other beats, I might tell you.’

‘Of course, you mean humans,’ Bold answered, quite unperturbed. ‘Well, they’re not exactly unfamiliar to me, either.’

The magpie shook its head. ‘I don’t know where you have travelled from,’ it said, ‘but your over-confidence makes me think it must be somewhere a lot less fraught with danger than this quarter. If I’m right in my view, you’d do well not to stay around here too long.’

Bold laughed. ‘My very motive for coming here was a quest for adventure,’ he said naively. ‘I want to be a part of the real world.’

The magpie was scornful. ‘Then you might get more than you bargain for,’ he retorted. ‘You obviously know nothing of what you speak about.’ And he flew away, impatient with the cub’s presumption.

Bold was amused. ‘Well, I must have upset him,’ he murmured. ‘Perhaps we’ll meet again some time when he might have changed his tune. I’m a creature of *quite* a

different stamp from the one he takes me for.' He ran on, dauntless as ever. He looked back once, and was quick to notice that the bird had returned to the disputed remains of the pigeon.



— 2 —

The Bold Young Fox

That night, after a short nap, Bold did indeed go hunting. The air was warm and still as he entered a small wood. He came to a spot where there was a thick covering of ground-ivy. Amongst this vegetation the rustlings and scurryings of small animals could clearly be heard. Bold set himself to catch his supper.

Half in sport and half in earnest, he spent a good part of the night tracking and pouncing on the less lucky of those shrews and mice who were engaged on their own urgent quests for food. His hunger finally satisfied, the cub curled himself up under a holly bush, his head on his paws, and fell gratefully asleep.

Although he was well concealed from human scrutiny, Bold's presence in the wood was well noted by the wild night creatures, large and small, as they ambled amongst the trees or flew overhead on their particular errands. To some, he represented a competitor, to others, an additional danger to heed. Certainly, by daybreak the existence of a strange young fox in the neighbourhood was common knowledge to the wood's population. Bold, of course,

remained blissfully unaware of the interest he had attracted.

He awoke late in the day. He got up and stretched elaborately. A pool of water on a patch of ground dotted with sedges attracted his attention. Bold quenched his thirst, lapping the water slowly while his eyes took in his surroundings. Already his old home was forgotten. There was so much to explore, so many new sensations awaiting him. Eagerly he trotted off towards the boundaries of the wood, feeling strong and refreshed.

Another bright, sunny August day greeted him as he emerged into the open downland. On the threshold of this gloriously wide expanse he paused briefly to look about him. Again, empty countryside met his gaze. Joyfully, confidently, he went loping along. The warnings of the magpie on the previous day seemed meaningless in such a landscape.

Later a sole human figure appeared on the horizon, accompanied by a dog no bigger than Bold himself. The fox did not even change his direction. His easy, even lope brought him within fifty metres of the two. The man watched him pass. The dog, intent on a particularly rich mix of scents on the ground, ignored him completely. Bold was exhilarated. He felt invincible; equal to any challenge.

He encountered no more human figures but, as he ran through some long grass, he flushed a skylark from its vulnerable nest on the open ground. The mother bird soared high into the air, uttering its cry of alarm. Bold had not yet tasted eggs so, fortunately for the lark, he did not know that they were good to eat. He ran on with an excited yap and the speckled, white eggs were soon once more covered by the warm breast feathers of their parent.

Everywhere he ran, birds would fly up out of his path. Rabbits, browsing close to their burrows, would bolt instantly at his approach. Bold came to feel the stature of being the most powerful member of the indigenous wildlife,

feared and respected by all others. Only another fox or, perhaps, a badger could rival his position of supremacy. Small wonder that his self-confidence was unbounded. Should he see that magpie again he would laugh in its face!

By dusk he had travelled a considerable distance. He looked forward to the night's hunt and hoped for more exciting prey than before to test his skills. But first he must rest. There was a tiny stream running across country at this point – just a ribbon of water over which he could easily leap. An ancient, solitary hawthorn stood on one bank, its lower boughs almost dipping themselves into the rivulet. Bold made straight for this tree and settled himself comfortably under its umbrella of foliage.

He did not sleep at once but remained watchful. The evening song of birds preparing to go to roost pierced the still air. The metallic cough of a pheasant rang out periodically. No thought of his friends, his brother and sister cubs, nor even of his redoubtable father, entered Bold's thoughts. Only the vaguest picture of Vixen, his mother, flitted across his mind's eye. He remembered the way she had taught him to stalk his quarry in the Nature Reserve as he remembered her lithe, supple motion.

He was startled from his drowsy state (though hoped he hadn't shown it) by the sound of what was obviously a large bird making its landing in the crown of the hawthorn. Bold barked warningly but, to his surprise, the bird stayed where it was. It let out an answering 'caw', safe in the knowledge that it was well out of reach, and peered through the interlocking branches.

'Oh-ho!' it cried. 'So here's the bold young fox. I've seen you off and on today.'

Bold looked up, but the darkness of the bird's body was almost totally obscured by the gathering night. He realized his companion was a Carrion Crow, as black as soot from its beak-tip to its feet.

'You flatter me by your interest,' replied Bold bluntly.

'A large creature like you could hardly be missed in the daylight,' returned the crow, 'and I must express my gratitude to you.'

'Gratitude? Whatever for?'

'Finding a meal for me. The lark's eggs you spurned soon filled *my* stomach.'

'Each to his own habits,' said Bold and yawned.

'And *your* habits seem to be unique among foxes,' remarked the crow.

Bold sighed. 'You mean my daytime activity?' he asked patiently.

'Exactly.'

'What's so unusual about it?' protested the fox cub. 'It's not unknown for foxes to be about in the daylight.'

'Round here it is,' said the crow succinctly.

'Well, it isn't where *I* come from,' Bold persisted, 'and I can see no reason why I shouldn't continue to explore my surroundings whenever I feel like it. You birds are a nervous lot – always on the move, never still for more than a moment. You seem to read danger into everything.'

The crow ignored Bold's last remarks. 'Where *do* you come from?' it inquired.

Bold hesitated. If he mentioned the Nature Reserve, he would only be inviting a sarcastic comment from the bird. 'Oh – er – a good distance away,' he said vaguely.

'Things may be different there,' said the crow. 'There *are* places, I believe, where human beings are not allowed to intrude on the freedom of wild creatures. But I've never been in any.'

Bold did not know if the crow was making a clever guess at his origins. In any case he disregarded it. 'Well, I've seen nothing to fear in these parts in the way of human presence,' he boasted.

'Then you've been very fortunate,' the crow observed. 'But I warn you – there are some days when the whole countryside is full of them.'

‘I’m grateful for your warning,’ said Bold. ‘But I’m quite able to look after myself. And now, if you have no objection, I’ll compose myself to sleep.’

‘Don’t mind me,’ said the crow. ‘I’m about to settle down as well.’

The next few days seemed to support Bold’s assertion that there was nothing to fear. As before, human appearances on the downland were restricted to infrequent sightings by the cub. Single figures, a couple or, at the most, three together. He kept well clear of those and on these times did not range so far. He had found a good hunting territory to which he returned again and again. The fine weather continued.

Then one day, while the cub was actually lying among some bracken sunning himself, his safe empty world suddenly took on a new character. He was at the top of a small rise of ground, and up this rise, coming straight towards him, was a large party of people, about thirty in number. They were a party of ramblers and they advanced quickly. Bold had no time to hide himself, and anyway the ferns thereabouts were neither thick enough nor tall enough to have served as a screen. For the first time the young fox knew himself to be frightened. He had never before in his life seen such a large number of people together.

As he jumped up to run, the first among the group spotted him and immediately pointed him out to all the rest, with enthusiastic cries and gestures. Of course they meant him no harm. He was merely an object of interest. The sound of their raised voices alarmed Bold even more and he dashed blindly hither and thither in panic, getting amongst their feet and almost succeeding in tripping some of them up. At last he saw a clear space ahead and raced towards it, expecting every moment that the terrifying mass of people would give chase. In his ignorance of