

In the Path of the Storm

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Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue

1. Owl is Discomfited

2. A Rendezvous

3. Familiar Terrain

4. Trey

5. Owl's Progress

6. Water Rights

7. Farthinghurst

8. Holly

9. A Rival in the Air

10. The Tainted Stream

11. The Animals Gather

12. A Royal Stag

13. The Hurricane

14. Dependency

15. No Contest

16. Storm Over the Park

17. Homeless

18. The Missing Ones

19. Home

About the Author
Also by Colin Dann
Copyright

About the Book

'I mean to be not only the leader of the deer herd but Lord of the Reserve. So you must stay in your corner of the Park, all of you . . . otherwise you'll be permitted here no longer.'

Trey, the new leader of the deer herd of White Deer Park, has decided that there is no room for the smaller animals in the reserve.

The future looks very bleak for Badger, Adder, Owl and the others – and then the night of the great storm brings more danger . . .

In the Path of the Storm

Colin Dann

Illustrations by Trevor Newton

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*In Memory of Frederick C. Brown,
friend and naturalist*

Prologue

WHISTLER THE HERON stood in the shallows of the stream in White Deer Park one early morning in March. It was late winter. Or was it early spring? It was difficult to tell, as there isn't much difference between a mild winter and a cold spring. And the weather seemed to have stayed in the same pattern for months. There had been no snow; no ice. But there had been many gales and a great deal of rain. It was raining now. Whistler was supposed to be fishing, but the disturbance caused by the raindrops on the surface of the water made his prey harder to detect. He had fallen into a semi-doze, his slate-grey back hunched in its usual attitude. He was motionless.

From the fringe of woodland near the stream bank a towering figure emerged, his white coat ghostlike in the murk of the slanting rain. The Great Stag stepped sedately forward to drink. He noticed the heron but didn't disturb him. He was an old, wise animal who respected all other creatures in the Nature Reserve and he knew when to leave well alone. He knew Whistler was catching fish and he paused to drink with caution, making sure any ripples caused by his lowered muzzle didn't interfere with the bird's occupation. He drank and slowly raised his head.

Whistler came out of his reverie as he saw movement. He turned his head to the stag. As he looked the deer's body was seized by a sort of spasm and, quite suddenly, the legs collapsed and the great beast crashed on to his side. The stag seemed to tremble; then all was still except that, almost imperceptibly, the body began to slide down the muddy bank towards the stream where it became lodged, half in and half out of the water. Whistler launched himself into the air and, with a few flaps of his wings, reached the

deer's side. The glassy look of the Great Stag's eyes and the beast's utter stillness confirmed the heron's fears. The leader of the White Deer Park herd was dead.

Whistler was so distressed he did not, at first, know what to do. The Great Stag had been so much a part of life in the Nature Reserve for the heron and for all his friends who had travelled there to seek sanctuary from their ruined birthplace, Farthing Wood, that he had epitomised the very name of their new home, White Deer Park. Not that it was such a new home to them now, for they would soon be entering their fourth season there. And now here was the lordly animal who had welcomed them into the Park on the first day of their arrival all that time ago, and whom all of them revered, lying lifeless at the heron's feet. It was just too much for Whistler to contemplate alone. He needed to share the burden. He took a last look at the sad sight of the great deer's carcass and flew hurriedly away.

His powerful wings took him quickly to that corner of the Park where his old friends had settled. The first creature he saw was Badger who was busy collecting fresh bedding for his set. Badger looked up as he heard the familiar whistle of the heron's damaged wing. The old animal's sight was very bad now but he knew Whistler so well by his sound that he didn't need to wait until he could see him properly. He called out a greeting in his gruff voice.

'Hallo, Whistler! More rain, more rain. Everything's sopping. My set's waterlogged and -' He broke off as the heron landed beside him and now even Badger could see the look of anguish in the great bird's eyes. 'Why, whatever's the matter, my friend?' he asked kindly. 'You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

'I - I have - almost,' Whistler stammered. He hadn't yet recovered from his shock. 'An awful thing, Badger. The Great Stag . . .'

His voice petered out.

'Well?' Badger prompted him.

'He - he's dead.'

‘Dead?’ cried Badger. ‘Are you sure? I saw him only recently and -’

‘He’s dead, Badger,’ Whistler repeated. His voice was hushed. ‘I saw him die. Just a moment ago. It was horribly sudden. He was drinking at the stream and then - he - he just keeled over and lay still.’

Badger was stunned. He could scarcely believe it. ‘How dreadful,’ he murmured.

For a while neither spoke, lost in their own thoughts. At last Whistler said, ‘I suppose he was a great age.’

Badger said, ‘Aren’t we all, Whistler?’ He was reminded of his own longevity. ‘I don’t know how I’ve survived when . . .’ He didn’t finish. The rain still beat down relentlessly. ‘I suppose I should get this bedding underground,’ he mumbled.

‘I’ll tell the others,’ Whistler informed him.

But Badger didn’t hear. His thoughts were full of the momentousness of the heron’s discovery. How would the Great Stag’s death change things? Would the Park become a different place? He dragged the damp bracken and leaves he had gathered backwards into his set entrance. ‘Never dry, never dry,’ he muttered as he reached his sleeping-chamber. ‘My old bones won’t stand this for ever. I’m not immortal either.’

Later the rain ceased for a while. The animals from Farthing Wood, together with their friends and relations, had collected to bid farewell to the Great Stag as a mark of respect to an old acquaintance.

‘It’s the end of the old order,’ said Fox. He looked about him. Vixen, his beloved partner, Weasel, Whistler, Tawny Owl and Badger met his eyes. They were all thinking the same thing. How long before they too would succumb? The stag’s death seemed to bring their own a little closer.

‘It’s so sad,’ said Vixen. There was a catch in her voice. ‘He was a good friend to us all.’

‘Who’ll take his place?’ Leveret asked. The young hare’s question dispelled the older animals’ gloomy thoughts. ‘There will be a new leader, won’t there?’

‘There’ll be a battle first,’ Tawny Owl asserted. ‘There’s no obvious successor.’

‘Someone will win through,’ Weasel remarked. ‘One of the younger stags.’

‘Of *course* he’ll be younger,’ Tawny Owl said impatiently. ‘That goes without saying, doesn’t it?’

‘I wonder who it’ll be?’ Mossy said anxiously. He didn’t like change.

‘We won’t know that, Mole,’ Badger said to him, ‘until their breeding season. And that’s a long way off.’

The body of the aged leader of the deer herd rocked gently in the rush of the swollen stream.



Owl is Discomfited

THE WEATHER CONTINUED very wet. Toad and Adder emerged from hibernation to see the Park wreathed in damp mists and the low-lying ground turned marshy. Toad was in his element. He loved such conditions and his warty skin glistened in harmony. But Adder grumbled. He craved warmth.

‘We’ve come out too soon,’ he moaned to his companion.

‘Nonsense,’ returned Toad, jumping up and down in his glee. ‘Things couldn’t be better.’ Adder turned his back on him with a contemptuous hiss.

Toad leapt away to White Deer Pond and found it brimming over. The Edible Frogs were calling lustily to each other. One of them spied Toad and soon told him of the sad demise of the Great Stag. Like his friends from Farthing Wood, Toad was shocked. He remembered how the leader of the herd had befriended them all and Toad felt he wanted to be amongst his close companions now to share his sadness. He left the Pond without a word and travelled to the corner of the Reserve where he knew he would find his old friends. On the way he overtook Adder who was slithering through the mire with an expression of the utmost distaste on his face.

Toad broke the news to him. Adder halted. Never one to give vent to his emotions, the snake was nonetheless unable to prevent his expression wavering. And there was an unusually long pause before he replied simply, 'I see.' Toad knew Adder better than anyone and he guessed the news had had the same impact on the snake as on all the community. They continued their journey in silence.

They reached the area where their animal friends had settled, near the Hollow. It was a while before any of them put in an appearance. Tawny Owl was the first to see them from his perch in an oak tree where he was alternately dozing and watching. He flew down to greet them after their winter absence.

'Another season,' he remarked.

'Yes, and a sad start to it,' Toad replied.

Tawny Owl blinked sleepily. It was a while since the Great Stag had died. The deer carcass had been removed by the Warden and Owl had almost forgotten about it.

'He means the deceased beast,' Adder lisped.

Tawny Owl stared. Then, 'Ah! Yes,' he nodded. 'The Stag. It was by the stream, you know.'

Toad said with concern: 'There have been no other deaths? I mean -'

'No, no,' Owl cut in. 'None of us old 'uns. Badger's still around. And - well, so am I.'

'Evidently,' Adder drawled.

'And Fox?' prompted Toad.

'Oh yes. Fox and Vixen. And Weasel. And Whistler. It was Whistler who saw the Stag die.'

'He was a noble beast,' Toad said.

'Yes.' Even Adder concurred with that.

'There's another thing about the stream,' Tawny Owl resumed. 'There appears to be a dearth of food in it at present, according to Whistler. He has to go outside the Park to fish.'

The three creatures contemplated this but could come to no conclusions. Tawny Owl decided to return to his roost. He always slept a lot during the day.

‘I’m going to find myself a dry spot – if there is such a thing,’ Adder said. His red eyes glinted. ‘But that won’t do for you,’ he addressed Toad. ‘So I’ll leave you to your own devices.’

‘All right. I understand,’ Toad answered. ‘I’ll stay around for a bit until I’ve seen some of the others. I’ll give them your good wishes, shall I?’

‘Do as you please,’ Adder hissed under his breath as he slid away. He headed for Badger’s set. ‘*That’ll* be dry,’ he told himself.

There were many births that spring amongst the Farthing Wood community and their descendants. The Farthing Wood Fox and his mate Vixen had lived to see their lineage reach the fourth generation. A grandson of Bold (their cub who had left the Park and not survived) was born whom Vixen swore was the image of his grandfather at that age. She and Fox watched his progress with great interest. He was named Plucky.

Spring turned into summer and everywhere there were rabbits, hedgehogs, squirrels, mice and voles who were White Deer Park animals through and through, but who owed their existence to their doughty forefathers who had travelled across countryside and Man’s terrain to reach the Reserve. There were moles and weasels and hares. And toads, kestrels and herons. Soon there would be adders. Only Badger and Tawny Owl remained solitary. Badger was ancient now and didn’t always know what he was about. He had become very forgetful. The younger animals loved and respected him.

But sometimes they teased Tawny Owl who had not yet entered real old age. Weasel, too, could not resist a gibe now and then.

‘Well, Owl,’ he said, ‘when will you muster up the courage to go a-courting?’

‘When I choose to,’ replied the bird loftily.

‘It seems to me you don’t choose to,’ Weasel continued. ‘At least, not on the evidence of three seasons in the Park.’

‘How would you know? Can you fly?’ Tawny Owl retorted.

‘I don’t need to,’ answered Weasel. ‘Everyone knows you’ve never been seen in the company of a female.’

Tawny Owl didn’t remain to hear any more insults. He flew away in a huff. But there was no relief for him. Pace and Rusty, two of the younger foxes now parents themselves, found his shelter and goaded him cheekily.

‘Here’s the only old bachelor left of the originals,’ Pace remarked to his cousin.

‘Poor old Owl – he can’t find a mate,’ Rusty added provocatively.

Tawny Owl tried to maintain his calm, moving to a higher perch.

‘Have all the females been snapped up, Owl?’ Pace persisted, raising his voice.

‘Stop chaffing me,’ Tawny Owl called down irritably. He was becoming ruffled. ‘Haven’t you got anything better to do?’

‘Haven’t you?’ Rusty gibed.

‘Perhaps not.’

‘But think of all those lady owls dying for a word from you, the famous Owl from Farthing Wood,’ Pace taunted him.

‘They’ll have to wait then, won’t they?’ Tawny Owl answered. He knew he was foolish to take any notice but their raillery was impossible to ignore.

‘Wait for what?’

‘For me to choose to visit them,’ Owl said superciliously.

‘Oh – oh. Hark at that, Rusty. Don’t you think it might be *they* who haven’t chosen Tawny Owl?’

‘Must be,’ agreed Rusty. ‘After all, he *is* the only bachelor.’

‘I’m NOT the only bachelor,’ Tawny Owl screeched furiously. ‘What about Badger?’

‘Poor old Badger? He’s almost senile,’ declared Rusty. ‘You can’t count –’ He broke off as he saw his mother, Charmer, approaching.

‘What’s going on?’ she enquired. She sensed the young foxes were up to some mischief.

‘They’re baiting me,’ Tawny Owl complained querulously.

‘Why – whatever for?’

‘It’s only about his bachelorhood,’ Pace explained.

‘Whatever business is that of yours?’ Charmer demanded angrily. ‘Haven’t you got responsibilities of your own now that are more important than being disrespectful to your elders? You leave Tawny Owl in peace. He deserves all the quiet he can get.’ She lowered her voice. ‘And why should you want to scoff at another’s misfortune?’

The young foxes looked contrite. They hadn’t really meant any harm. Unfortunately Tawny Owl had heard Charmer’s last remark and was mortified. Misfortune? What did they take him for? He – Tawny Owl, one of the most revered inhabitants of the Reserve? *He’d* show them! He was seething. He flapped up from his perch so impulsively he almost banged his head on the branch above. But he extricated himself and, trying hard to recover his usual dignity, sailed away across the treetops. When he finally perched again he was a long way from where any of his unkind persecutors could get at him. His anger eventually subsided. But, though he could never have owned up to it, he had been well and truly hurt. And now he knew he had to do something to prove them wrong.

The trouble was, he knew most, if not all, of the female owls would already have paired off. However, he needed to find out for sure. So, in rather a half-hearted way, he began

to make a tour of the Park and its nesting sites. He soon discovered that the other male owls were very jealous of their territory and would drive him off if he attempted to approach too close. It was a demoralizing experience for him. At night he concentrated on catching his prey and, while he ate, pondered on his next move.

‘Nothing else for it,’ he told himself. ‘I’ll have to extend my search outside the Park.’ In a way he was quite relieved at this state of affairs. There would be a wider area to roam, with the likelihood of better opportunities of finding what he sought. And, best of all, none of his old companions – or new ones – would have any way of following his progress.

One night he flew out, over the downland, skimming effortlessly through the air on his silent wings. He looked back at the boundary fence of White Deer Park and the dark silhouettes of its trees. Although he often flew beyond the bounds of the Park, the significance of his flight this time made him feel just a mite apprehensive, since he didn’t know for sure how long it might be before he would return there. But he turned his head resolutely and set a course for the nearest patch of woodland.