

In the Grip Of Winter

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About the Book

In the depths of winter, with snow thick on the ground, Badger lies alone and injured. No one knows where he is, and the icy cold is tightening its grip every second.

What will happen to Badger? And can the other animals of Farthing Wood survive the harsh cold and piercing hunger that winter has brought?

In the Grip of Winter

Colin Dann

Illustrated by Terry Riley

RHCP DIGITAL

For Kathy



— 1 —

First Signs

IT WAS SOON time for the animals and birds to face their first winter in White Deer Park. They had moved in a group from their old homes in Farthing Wood when it was destroyed by Man, and the strong links of friendship and the spirit of community forged during their long journey had caused them to build their new homes close to one another. So a certain corner of the White Deer Park Nature Reserve became almost a new Farthing Wood for them, and every creature found conditions exactly right for his particular requirements.

In the centre of this area lay the Hollow which, from their earliest arrival in the Park, had formed their meeting-place. In the autumn months they met less often and, eventually, as the evenings grew colder, both Adder and Toad knew it was time for them to go underground for the winter.

It was late October when Adder ceased to lie in wait at the edge of the Edible Frogs' pond, a feat of patience that had not brought him its hoped-for reward. 'This cool

weather makes me feel so sleepy,' he remarked to Toad, whom he sometimes saw going for a swim.

'Me too,' replied Toad. 'I've been busy fattening up while food is still available. I must confess that now I really feel ready for a nice long snooze.'

'Where will you go?' Adder enquired.

'Oh, hereabouts. The earth is soft in this bank and I've noticed quite a few holes remaining that must have been dug in earlier years.'

'Mmm,' Adder mused. 'That would suit me admirably. Those frogs would then have the benefit of my presence in spirit throughout the winter.'

Toad chuckled. 'I'm sure they won't be aware of it,' he said. 'They're digging themselves into the mud on the pond bottom. Once they've settled, they'll be quite oblivious of everything.'

'I shall, too,' admitted the snake. 'My only interest at the moment is in sleep.'

'Er - have you made your farewells?' Toad asked him hesitantly.

'Farewells? Stuff and nonsense!' Adder rasped. 'No-one cares to seek me out when I'm around, so they'll hardly miss me when I'm not.'

Toad felt embarrassed. 'Oh, I don't know,' he said awkwardly. 'I think it's just that most of us feel you prefer to be alone.'

'I *do*,' said Adder a little too quickly, as if trying to dispel any doubts at all about the matter. 'However, Toad, I've no objection to your company,' he added not uncourteously.

'Thank you, Adder. Er - when do you plan to begin hibernation?'

'Straight away, of course. No point in hanging around above ground in these sort of temperatures.'

'If you can wait until tomorrow I'll join you,' Toad suggested. 'Just leave me time to call on Fox and Badger, and Owl, perhaps.'

‘Oh, I can’t sit here waiting for the frost to bite me while you go making social visits,’ said Adder impatiently. ‘I’m going underground tonight.’

‘Very well,’ said Toad. ‘As you wish. But I really don’t see what difference one more day would make.’

Adder made a gesture. ‘I’ll tell you what,’ he offered. ‘Let’s choose a comfortable hole now, and then you’ll know where to find me.’

Toad considered this was about the closest Adder was ever likely to come to being companionable, so he accepted readily.

Having chosen the best site, Adder promptly disappeared into the earth with a hastily lisped, ‘Try not to wake me.’ Toad wryly shook his head and set off to find his friends.

As he approached the Hollow, the sky was darkening fast, and a cold wind was whipping through the grass. Toad almost wished he had followed Adder into the shelter of the hole, but he felt he just could not have been so unfriendly. No movement could be discerned in or around the Hollow, so Toad sat down to wait, amusing himself by flicking up a stray beetle here and there. Presently a ghostly form could be seen lumbering towards him through the gloom. Toad made out Badger’s grey outline.

‘Hallo, my dear friend,’ said Badger warmly. ‘I’m surprised to see you out on a cold night like this.’

‘It’ll be the last time,’ commented Toad. ‘Before the Spring.’

‘I see, I see,’ Badger nodded. ‘You’ve come to say goodbye. Well, it could be for quite some time, you know.’ He paused and snuffled in the brisk air.

‘Do you think it will be a hard winter?’ Toad asked.

‘Every winter is hard for some,’ Badger answered. ‘The weakest among us always suffer the most. The small creatures: the mice, the shrews, the voles and, particularly, the small birds – every winter takes its toll of them. But yes

- I sense that this winter will be one to reckon with. There's something in that wind. . . .'

'I felt it, too,' Toad nodded. 'And Adder - he's already settled.'

'Just like him to disappear without trace,' Badger muttered. 'Well, at least it'll put an end to that nonsense of his with the Edible Frogs.'

'Yes, until next year,' Toad remarked drily. 'But, d'you know, Badger, he actually invited me to join him in his sleeping quarters - at least, in a roundabout sort of way.'

'Oh, he's all right really,' Badger granted. 'After all, you can't expect a great deal of warm feeling from a snake.'

While they were talking, they saw Fox and Vixen slip stealthily past in the moonlight, intent upon hunting. Toad was disappointed. 'They could have stopped for a word,' he complained, 'when I've made a point of coming to see you all. And in this wind, too.'

'Don't feel slighted, old friend,' Badger said earnestly. 'I'm sure they don't realize you're about to go underground. It wouldn't be like Fox.'

'No, I suppose not,' Toad assented. 'But he's not the close friend he used to be before Vixen came - at least not to me. Ah well, that's the feminine influence for you.'

Badger nodded his striped head, smiling gently. 'We old bachelors have little experience of such things, I'm afraid,' he said softly. 'We live out our solitary lives in rather a narrow way by comparison.'

Toad was touched by the note of wistfulness in Badger's voice. 'I - I never realized you felt that way about it, Badger,' he said in a low croak. 'But there are lady badgers in the park, surely?'

'Oh yes, it's different from Farthing Wood in that respect,' Badger agreed. 'But I've been living alone for too long now. I couldn't adjust.'

Toad was silent. He felt it was best not to add anything. There was a long pause and Toad shuffled a trifle

uncomfortably. 'Hallo,' he said suddenly, 'here's another old bachelor,' as Tawny Owl fluttered to the ground beside them.

Owl nodded to them both, then said, 'I hope you weren't speaking derisively, Toad. I can't answer for you two, but I'm single from choice alone.'

'*Your* choice - or the choice of the lady owls?' Toad asked innocently. Badger muffled a laugh.

'Very amusing, I'm sure,' Owl snorted. 'I'd better go. I didn't come here to be insulted.'

Badger, so often the peacemaker, stepped in. 'Now, Owl, don't be so hasty. No offence was intended. Toad's come to see us because he's going into hibernation soon.'

'Humph!' Tawny Owl grunted, ruffling his feathers. But he did not go.

'Yes, tomorrow to be exact,' Toad informed him. 'And I shan't be sorry. I sympathize with you fellows who have to face whatever comes: ice, frost or snow. It's marvellous just to fall asleep and forget all about it - and then, simply wake up as soon as it's warm again.'

'There's certainly a lot to be said for it,' Badger remarked.

'But it takes months off your life,' Tawny Owl pointed out. 'You may as well be dead for six months of the year.'

'Not quite as long as that,' Toad corrected him. 'Anyway, it depends on the weather. In a mild winter, I might be out again in February.'

'Mark my words, Toad,' Tawny Owl said with emphasis. 'This is going to be a difficult one.'

'Then my heartfelt good wishes go with you,' Toad said sincerely. 'I hope you all come through.'

The three friends remained talking a while longer, while the cold wind continued to blow. Finally Tawny Owl declared he was hungry and flew off in search of prey. Something struck Toad at his departure and he fell to musing.

‘You know, Badger,’ he said presently, ‘we shake our heads over old Adder and his designs on my cousins the frogs, but really he’s not so much a threat to the denizens of White Deer Park as Fox or Owl, who go hunting here every night.’

‘A thought that had also occurred to me,’ Badger acknowledged. ‘But there were foxes and owls – and other predators – in the park before we arrived. So in the same way the voles and fieldmice and rabbits of the Farthing Wood party run the same risk from the enemies already here.’

Toad nodded and sighed. ‘My idea of the Nature Reserve as a new and safe home for all has not proved quite true,’ he said ruefully.

‘Nowhere is completely safe,’ Badger assured him. ‘But the Park is about as safe as anywhere could be for wild creatures, for there is no presence of Man. And in that respect it is a veritable haven compared with Farthing Wood.’

Toad grinned. ‘You’ve soothed my mind as usual,’ he said. ‘Well, Badger, I shall not delay you any longer. Farewell till Spring.’ He turned to make his way back to the bank where Adder was already asleep. On his way he encountered Fox again. This time Fox stopped. Toad explained where he was going.

‘You could perhaps give a message to Adder for me,’ Fox requested. ‘Tell him to go down deep. And you too, Toad,’ he finished enigmatically.

‘How deep?’ queried Toad.

‘As deep as it takes to escape the frost.’ Fox shivered in the wind as if illustrating his warning.

‘We shall take heed, Fox,’ Toad answered. ‘Have no fear.’

They parted and Toad crawled on towards his objective. Fox stood and watched him a long time. Then he shook himself vigorously and went to rejoin Vixen. Winter, he

knew, was hovering just around the corner, waiting to pounce.



— 2 —

First Snow

DURING THE NEXT few weeks, as October passed into November and the leaves fell thick and fast in White Deer Park, the animals kept very much to themselves. Their main preoccupation was food.

Nature had provided an abundance of berries and nuts which, as all wild creatures know, is a sure sign of severe weather to come. So the squirrels and the voles and the fieldmice were able to feast themselves for a short period. There was a spell of heavy rain which brought out the slugs and worms, and Hedgehog and his friends fattened themselves up nicely before they made their winter homes under thick piles of leaves and brush in the undergrowth. As they disappeared to hibernate, the other animals knew that time was running out, and renewed their efforts. All ate well for a space.

The first heavy frost descended at the end of November and Mole, whose tremendous appetite was undimmed, found an abundance of earthworms deep underground. Their movements were restricted by the frozen ground near the surface and he amassed a large collection against

emergencies. He was so proud of his efforts that he was bursting to tell someone about them. So he tunnelled his way through to Badger's set which was close by, and woke him from a late afternoon snooze.

'It's me! Mole!' he cried unnecessarily. 'Wake up, Badger. I want to tell you what I've been doing.'

Badger sat up slowly and sniffed at his small friend. 'You smell of worms,' he said abruptly.

'Of course I do,' Mole replied importantly. 'I've been harvesting them.'

'Harvesting them?'

'Yes, you know, collecting - er - gathering them. I've never known it to be so easy to catch so many. They're all securely stowed away in a nice big pile of earth where my nest is.'

'I didn't realize it was possible to stow away slippery things like worms,' Badger remarked. 'By the time you get back they'll all have wriggled away.'

'Oh no, they won't,' declared Mole. 'They can't,' he added mysteriously.

'Why, what have you done to them?'

'I've tied them up in knots!' cried Mole excitedly. 'And they can't undo themselves.' He began to giggle as he saw Badger's stupefied expression, and he was still giggling when Badger received another guest, in the shape of Fox.

'Have you been outside?' he asked, after greeting them.

They shook their heads.

'It's snowing,' he stated.

They followed him up Badger's exit tunnel to look. It was dusk, but the sloping ground in the little copse Badger had favoured as his new home was gleaming white. The trees themselves glowed mysteriously in their soft new clothing. They watched the large flat flakes drift silently downward. There was no wind. Everything seemed completely still save what was dropping steadily from the sky.

‘It’s already quite thick,’ Fox told them. ‘I can’t see my tracks.’

‘I’ve never seen snow falling before,’ Mole said as he watched with fascination. His eyes, used to darkness, blinked rapidly in the brightness of the white carpet spread before them. ‘Will it cover everything?’

‘Not quite everything,’ answered Badger. ‘But it makes movement very difficult for small creatures. The birds don’t have to worry, of course. Except in so far as feeding is concerned.’

‘I can only remember one winter in Farthing Wood when it snowed,’ said Fox. ‘That was when I was very young. But there was only a light fall, and it didn’t really hamper anyone’s movements.’

‘Oh yes,’ nodded Badger. ‘Of latter years there’s not been a great deal of bad weather. But I recall the times when Winter meant Winter, and we had snow every year. Of course, my memory goes farther back than yours, Fox.’

Fox smiled slightly. He knew Badger loved to indulge in reminiscences, and he was aware of his proneness to exaggerate about ‘life in the old days’.

‘I remember one winter in particular,’ Badger continued, delighted to have an audience. ‘You hadn’t appeared on the scene then, either of you, and I’m pretty certain Tawny Owl wasn’t around at that time either. Anyway, the snow lay on the ground for months, and I had to dig a regular track through it for foraging purposes. Everything was frozen hard – the pond, the stream, every small puddle. My father was still alive then and he taught us how to munch the snow for water. Otherwise we couldn’t have drunk and we should have died.’

‘What does it taste like? What does it taste like?’ shrilled Mole.

‘Oh, well – er – like water, I suppose,’ replied Badger. ‘Yes, and I shall never forget the number of birds and small creatures who perished from the cold.’