

## Chapter 5

### Hubble– Bubble

By night, save for the odd settling creak of timber, bricks and mortar, no sound came from the house. Humans lay in their beds deep in sleep. There was little sleep in the garden around it. Bounded on the south side by the visitors' tea-shop and the outbuildings known as the Stores, to the east the garden wall and the north and west by hedges and trees, it was full of little scurrying, chattering, chirping sounds; much to do and all in the night's work. Shadows seemingly as solid as the objects that cast them, cut sharp black patterns on a silver ground. The simple day-time scene was lost in the romantic mystery of nocturnal fancy-dress.

Hitch mooched along the paths and by-ways. He inspected everything. Changes there were, but he was glad to find things mostly as he remembered them.

"Always liked this garden," he thought. Some he didn't like at all. A fellow couldn't be comfortable with not a weed in sight and flowers blooming always perfectly and to order. A withered flower-head left on its stalk was counted an outrage. There was little cover in a hedge clipped to within an inch of its life. As for the trees bound with stakes and bands, like Victorian misses corseted with whalebone, he felt sorry for them, poor things. He remembered visiting a particular vegetable garden, where the vegetables were dragooned in thin straight rows, staked, tied, counted, labelled, pruned and disinfected. At the time he had half expected an officer of the guard to stalk round the end of the row and all stiffen to attention to salute him. Come to think of it, he must have come round; in the guise of the gardener armed with a leaflet in one hand and a pesticide spray in the other. Hitch had not stayed to find out. There was no scope for his talents there.

Just as much he hated the vast stretches of concrete cheek-by-jowl with heaps of overgrown, broken pots and bottles and scattered rusted

toys, that he had come across. Litter that the wind had snatched in fun and left in idleness often added to the wretchedness. Hitch shuddered.

Now in this still green friendly place things were better, he mused; no meddling with odd corners and verges. No 'tidying up' destroyed the butterflies' nursery, so the gay little creatures would flutter and flirt with the flowers that bloomed each in its own way, shy or gay. The bold ladybird could go adventuring, leaving her children to learn the A B C of beetledom. Spiders at the weaving trade could practise their craft midst the tall grasses. Trees and hedges shaped according to their natures spread kindly shade and shelter. The fat vegetables squatting comfortably in homely compost and free of sprays threw out the odd runner and dared



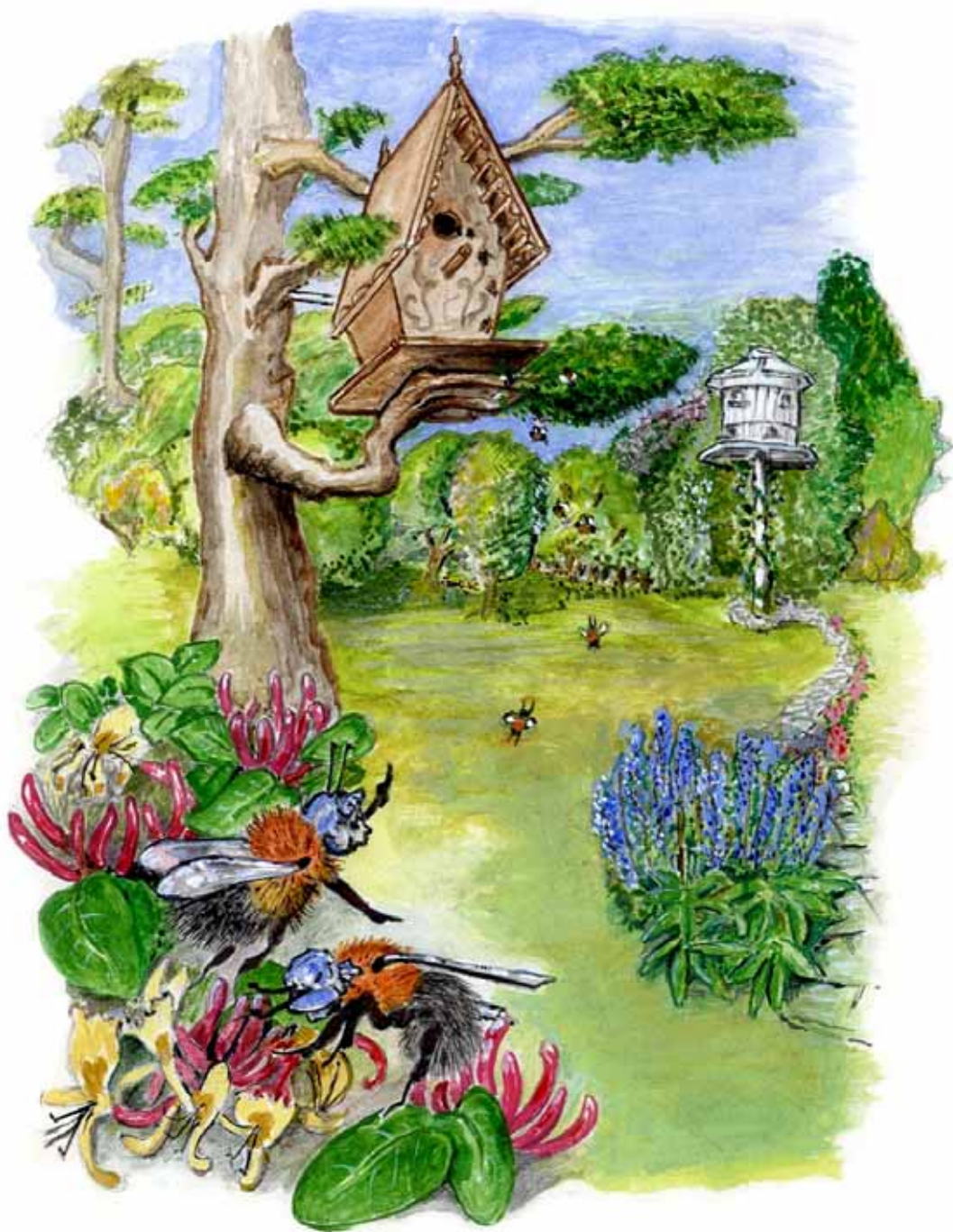
a blemish or two. Who minded when they had such good flavour in the pot?

Flattening himself like a pancake, Hitch had come in under the gate in the wall. Along the pathway at dusk he had been discovered and welcomed. Pet food was brought out, as he had hoped, rather than the misguided traditional bread and milk. As it happened, it was cat food, but hey, who could be 'picky'?

Given the freedom of the garden he had then started his tour among the flower beds where he found several clearing-up jobs to do. He did them thoroughly before moving on. The site used for the garden bonfire he sniffed but otherwise gave a wide berth. Many a one nosing about and thinking it to be a haven, took a nap. Lucky they'd been to escape with their lives when it was lit. They quit, headlong, hotfoot, and singed spine. It gave him the collywobbles to think of it.

Exploring the shrubbery he looked with interest at a bird-house, one of the nesting boxes carved by Old Harry in the shapes of quaint little steep-roofed cabins. The sounds that came from it, no bird had ever made. Old Harry, checking at the beginning of the nesting season whether it was in need of repair, found the entrance sealed with wax save for a tiny hole. A colony of wild bees had taken over and claimed squatters' rights. He had argued the matter at first but the bees had put their case with such force and penetration, driving the point home, that he decided it was best to withdraw and leave well alone. Hitch could hear the hum of conversation as the bees went about their chores or changed the night shifts. There must be some very hot gossip abroad for them to be waxing so lively after a long day spent collecting pollen. Calling as they did from flower to flower as the roundsman calls from door to door, they came in contact with all kinds of folk and heard all that was new and of note. He understood enough from their excited buzz to realise something was going on but precisely what he just could not make out.

At first he had meant to visit only a night or two, but when he found how much there was to do he stayed longer. He worked about the shrubbery and the flower garden methodically. Now and again he took himself to the out-door bedding-plants before they were transplanted to the park, or to the vegetables, by way of a change. On trips to do a bit of



small game hunting among the cabbages he passed the foot of the dove-cot. This was a pretty, white, barrel-shaped house with a pagoda-like roof all supported on a sturdy post overgrown with rambling rose. The downy, drowsy inmates snuggled together cooing contentedly. Punctuating that satisfaction with life in general there came again the mention of 'goings-

on' and a sort of hushed excitement to add a little spice to a pampered existence.

Each evening before the night's work began, he made his way to the back door of the house sheltered by the low pink-washed wall of the porch and white trellis-work overhung with violet-blue Wisteria. On the wide red flagstone doorstep warmed by the sun, he would find his wages. There too would be a glowing orange pom-pom of silky-furred kitten-cat who acted as if he owned the step at least, though he had arrived but a short time ago. Through widening gooseberry green eyes he stared at the world and blinked as he rolled over and stretched. Bright as a new penny he went by the name of Copper. Though he was half-grown he had much to learn. He still seemed to mix up his legs as he had when a kitten. On the odd occasions when he did sort them out he charged forward; forgot the pattern; lost his balance and landed upside-down, dazed, bewildered and whiskers askew. His mistress hoped however that he would soon gain some sense and when he was fully grown, police the park and outhouses. Her father complained often about the damage the mice did but thought a cat might do more, digging in the flower beds, clean though the habit might be. For his daughter's sake however, he was willing to accept Copper and give him the chance to prove his worth.

Anxious that Copper should understand, she held his face level with her own to make the point to him.

"You won't dig up his flower beds, will you? You will be good and just frighten away the mice, won't you?"

Copper blinked his eyes, wriggled, opened his little pink mouth and mewed. She put him down. He played with his tail, took a few side steps, climbed the twisting branches of wisteria and couldn't come down. She shook her head and sighed. He had a talent for becoming stuck or shut-in and meowing loudly to be rescued or let out and was generally in difficulty, but she loved him.

Privately Hitch had little time for a body that couldn't fend for itself. The odd meal or helping hand was one thing; to be 'kept' was another.



Sometimes they were joined by the small girl's brother. In this way Hitch had learned a thing or two that shed some light on the rumours flying about. His curiosity had been teased by many a passing bee weighted with pollen and self-importance; she obviously knew the inside story. Now he knew it had something to do with a mouse; a special mouse; a French mouse.

The boy had made a trip to France with a school party. It was an exchange visit with a school there. The French boy with whom he'd paired kept mice. At the school the biology teacher bred mice and gave one to their visitor. There was no doubt that at the end of the visit the French boy would keep the mouse along with his own. For the whole of the visit the mouse travelled about with its temporary owner. So used to each other did the two become that on the last day the mouse went in the usual way, in the boy's pocket, to the railway station. In the flurry of loading baggage, managing tickets and saying goodbyes, the mouse was forgotten. When it was remembered a very worried boy did not know what to do. The mouse was an 'illegal immigrant'. It might have to be killed: he couldn't bear that. Fear of this decided him and he arrived home with the mouse in his pocket. He would keep it. It couldn't harm anyone if he kept it safe. Only his sister shared his secret. All was well, they thought, until one day the mouse was not in its wooden box home. Two worried children would talk over their problem, on the flagstone step.

When they had gone Hitch took himself to his bed, a very comfortable place where he could lie outside the bedclothes instead of under them, stretching his limbs in the warmth of the sun. He roused at one time to hear voices from the potting shed nearby:

"You mean the painted figures from the platforms I take it?"

"Yes. I just can't understand what's happening to them. There are quite a few missing from around Holly Hocks Halt, Trampledon and Mouldy Moorings. My son noticed that they were gone from Mouldy Moorings because I let him arrange those. Queer business! It's not children from among the visitors who take them, 'though I could quite understand a child might be tempted. No, they disappear during the night. Shouldn't think it's that cat either. It usually spends its nights in the kitchen. Anyway it's more in a young dog's nature to take things. Then

again, they bury what they take like they bury their bones. There's no sign of earth dug up or any dog either. I hope it's not anything to do with that cat. It's an odd creature most of the time, so who knows? Can't afford to keep losing stock, that I do know. Time and labour spent on it costs so much."

Hitch gave a thoughtful rub at his whiskers. Life never stood still: it was always on the change and everybody, even the humans had problems. He had a new, small one of his own. The mention of Trampledon reminded him of Holly and that time was going by quickly. If he did not make a move soon he would be too late to know his grandchildren. They would be grown and making their own way in the world. Summer Solstice, that primal, brief, magical night, was very near and he would like to spend it with them. So he must go soon.

Knowing he'd be missed, he did a little extra cleaning along the rows of brassicas: cabbage, cauliflower and kale, brussels sprouts and broccoli, all had his expert attention. Old Harry was especially pleased. As he put it:

"Them bugs in them brassicas 'ave 'ad a right shakin' up."

Hitch paid his last visit to the back door step. After a good sleep to be fresh for the journey he set out in the direction of Trampledon. He would go on foot by way of Blinkers Wink and Mouldy Moorings. It might take longer than train travel, though in his case he wasn't so sure of that, but he could have a good look round as he went. The trouble with high speed travelling was, your person arrived while your wits were just starting out.