

Chapter 6

Kith and Kin

The nights were dark now; blue-black velvet pricked only with the diamond-hard light of a scatter of stars overhead. Behind a pen-and-ink frieze of houses on the distant skyline, a soft yellow glow from street-lamps tinged the sky. Hitch made his way through the numerous little house-lined streets, along miniature highways, across small bridges and over diminutive fields stocked with Lilliputian cattle and sheep, manikins played cricket on the greens. Outside a church stood a crowd of guests at a dolls' wedding. Everywhere he found the puppet-populace scattered about as though working at every-day tasks. Day and night they were there, fixed in their customary poses, without need of rest. They made his



journey difficult. As the crow flies it was not far. Being without a strong pair of wings Hitch could only plod over each obstacle, keeping his temper and pressing onward. After resting the day at a farmhouse he started out again. Twilight slipped towards darkness and now he felt stirrings of excitement. He was nearly there. Turning the last corner he peered, recognizing Holly in the little garden before the house.

She was surprised of course but truly delighted to see him. Inviting him in, she was pleased to show him how comfortably they were settled and fairly prattled away:

“We have been made so welcome, shown every kindness and encouraged to stay. That’s more than can be said of that rag tag and bobtailed lot of mice that have moved into parts of Mouldy Moorings, to say nothing of those at Blinkers Wink and one or two other places. Well ... if far from bobtailed, rag tag they certainly are: living on top of each other, lying in bed ’til all hours, stealing when they’re not and up to all manner of other things that would stand your quills on end, I’m told. But there now, tell me how you are. It’s been so long. Did you find us easily? A lot of folk will be so pleased to see you here. I know the children will. I’ve told



them all about you, so you won't be a stranger."

"Tell me about them," answered Hitch, "for I know so little of them. Are they out now?"

"Yes; they are just that little bit independent now," owned Holly.

She spoke with the pride that comes of knowing that her children would be strong and able to look after themselves. This must come before everything in the wild. They would grow up and go their different ways, even the youngest and frailest. Every mother knew that must be.

"There are four of them," she went on. "Three boys and a girl. They are called: Teasel, Thistle, Willow-White and Wait-for-me."

As she said each name, Hitch nodded, tucking them into the corners of his memory for the moment when he would need them. The first two did not surprise him. It was the custom to use the names of spiky plants. He blinked a little at 'Willow-White'. Holly quickly explained:

"So soon after she was born she had long silky soft white spines like the hairs on the White Willow leaves. She has such pale colouring, it suits her well, though she's forever asking me why I chose it— but there, she asks 'why' about everything, all the time."

When it came to 'Wait-for-me', however, Hitch shook his head with wry amusement and asked for that to be explained too. It was Holly's turn to laugh.

"Well I know it sounds odd," she started; but at this point there was a scuffling of little feet outside and a murmur of thin small voices.

"There they are now," she exclaimed. "Come in, Granddad is here," she called.

Murmur grew to a clamour of birdlike twitterings. The door opened suddenly and an avalanche of young hedgehogs burst into the room to come to a sudden stop in a shy silence. Into this a heartfelt plea broke, as the smallest hedgehog panted some way behind the others:

"Wait for me!"

Holly smiled fondly and put forward the leader of the group:



“This is Teasel.” She laid a coaxing hand on the next small figure who it could be seen plainly by the way he put down his head, was rather shy. “This is Thistle. Here is Willow-White and...” Before she could say anything further however, the last of her little family piped again:

“Wait for me!”

“There,” continued Holly, “he’s introduced himself. He does have a name but he’s always known as Wait-for-me. Being the smallest he has a hard time of it, keeping up.”

“They’re real taking little things,” Hitch told Holly.

She looked pleased.

“On the whole they are very good, though I am cross with them sometimes,” she confided. “Teasel’s a great help. Thistle has his good points too, ’though he’s very shy and Willow-White...”

“That name!” put in Hitch. “Sort of quaint,” he added.

“Some think too fancy,” said Holly. “She did, still does, look a bit different though and where’s the harm? The boys were the usual ‘cotton white’, then dark. She was primrose pale and hardly changes...but enough about the children. You must have something to eat and I’ll make up a bed for you. You will stay a while won’t you?”

He agreed he would.

Others had seen him arrive and when he had had some time with his daughter and grandchildren, they began to ‘drop in’.

Soon they were making a party of it and everyone enjoying it to the full. Such a gathering of hedgehogs had not been seen in those parts for many a moon. Wait-for-me sitting snuggled close to his mother felt not in the least left out of things as he so often did. At one particular time great was his importance. Grandfather telling of his own childhood had said:— “I was no bigger than Wait-for-me, there...” and all eyes had turned upon him. It was a moment he would never forget.

The small urchins drank in every word as the old tales were retold.

“Remember the time when Hickey Burr was chased up a tree by a dog snapping at his heels, at least, as far as the bottom branch?”



“Oh yes. He climbed a short way along the branch. Then he lost his balance, quick as lightning curled up to take the fall and landed in the middle of the dog’s back. Never saw a dog move so fast or yelp so loudly before or since. Probably gave him a healthy respect for us urchins.”

“That reminds me, met Hickey Burr just a while back. Doesn’t go far now.” They all nodded.

“What about the time we dared Porky Prickle to climb that old scarecrow’s trousers? It was up on those allotments beyond Cowslip Down. Funny thing, he didn’t realise at first, he was going to have to jump several inches from the ground. He did it though and climbed right up. Trouble was he always overdid things and coming down he showed off. Pretended he was having a good look round when really it was to keep us waiting on him. Got caught up, head-first in the trouser pocket and couldn’t get out.”

Above the laughter one said, “There was that tale your Granny used to tell, Hitch, about a great uncle of yours I think it was.”

Hitch spent so much time alone that he too was thoroughly enjoying the company. The flood gates were opened and the torrents of memories rushed out.

“You mean the one about old Cleaver? Bad tempered he was. Couldn’t ever tell him anything either. He was looking for winter quarters at this particular time. None of this park or the terraces were here at that time, my Granny would always point out. Used to be a bit of a hedge ran along the top of the steep bank that went all the way down to the level of the lake. Folks lived closely off the land then and fetched up where they could for living quarters. Now Cleaver built himself a winter retreat in a cleft of the bank under the hedge, despite he was warned that it was always raked clear of dead leaves along there around February. Closed up his doors he did and retired for the winter. He woke one morning in spring to hear the lapping of water quite near. Looking out he was dumbfounded. Couldn’t make out where he was at all. Stuck in the fork of a branch of an old fallen tree, that’s where, right out over the water. Lucky he wasn’t drowned. By the time he was able to reach firm ground he was in a right old ‘tis-woz’. Later he found out that he must have been raked up and

rolled like a ball, house and all stranded with ivy, to the bottom of the hill and bounced into that maze of broken branches.”

So well was this tale received that he went on to describe his own adventures on the railway. There was much laughter at these. One wag put in;

“Well if you will hob-nob with ants, you must expect an ‘anty-climax’.

Hitch grinned, but defended himself.

“I didn’t expect that engine, that was the trouble. ‘Train Robber’ that it was. Fair upset me. I was a numbskull, lost my head completely, but there I was beside myself. Finest bit of homespun stinging-nettle cloth gone in a flash. Difficult to get, though it was around before flax or hemp was discovered. Good old-fashioned hook-bristled goosegrass fastenings, too. Man’s discovered the trick of it now and calls it ‘The Touch and Close Fastener’. Goes to show— nothin’ new under the sun.”

There came a lull and Holly thought the young ones might like to do a party-piece. They agreed but weren’t sure what to do.

“What about a recitation,” suggested Grandfather, “know any?”

Teasel said that he and Thistle did and he looked at Thistle, who nodded but moved from one foot to the other. The two brothers stood side by side before the company.

“Puzzlin’,” they solemnly announced the title together, Teasel piping in a full high treble and Thistle’s voice small and thin.

“So many things I want to know
Like, when bubbles burst, where do they go?
And, what’s an echo, where does it dwell?
Why does it answer, I wonder as well?”

Teasel recited with head well back and short legs braced. Then he looked encouragingly at Thistle, who began in an even smaller voice than he had said ‘Puzzlin’:

“When I’m in a huff, then people say,
You got out of bed, the wong side today.”

At this he was entirely overcome and could not go on. Teasel went quickly to his rescue:

“But as my bed’s against the wall
How can I get out that side at all?

Where do I go, when I go to sleep?
I’m here, then there, with no chance to peep,
And in the mirror I’m there quite plain
But I look behind, and I’m gone again.

Sand in a bucket I can easily lift,
Water’s no problem, easy to shift,
But if I’m in the bucket, why have I found
Not a mite can I lift it up off the ground?

A match rubbed on a box, will make a fire,
The result, for a hedgehog would be dire,
How can we tell a bed’s safe in a pile?
Is it best to assume not, and run a mile?

I have to grow and learn to find
Answers to questions of this kind.
Still as I grow, I must puzzle and try
To find the answers by asking...”

“Why?” finished Willow-White, with her favourite word and:

“Wait for me,” said you know who!

A burst of applause rewarded them and Hitch was visibly moved by this little scene. So much so that he took a quick dab at each eye as he blew and polished at his nose with vigour. Feeling that now everyone must be looking at him, he said with wry amusement:

“I do have trouble with this olfactory organ of mine.”

“Don’t we all,” said his neighbour. “Couldn’t do without them though, even if they do put the damper on things sometimes.”

Bubbles of merriment broke at the brim of each cup of happiness and well being, to make an atmosphere that was light, warm and mellow.

It was by this time, however, that Holly realised it was growing light and the youngsters should be in bed:

“Now off you go and to sleep quickly,” she urged.

They said their Good-mornings to the company who would stay a little while yet and were soon nestled down, all drowsiness and contentment. All that is, save for a question that niggled at Willow-White.

“What’s Granddad’s ‘old factory organ’?”

“His nose of course, and its ‘ol’ not ‘old’,” answered Teasel.

“Bet she thinks it ought to be ‘old factowy hooter’,” said Thistle and giggled so much he was plunged into an attack of hiccoughs.

“But he does say such funny things sometimes,” insisted Willow-White defensively. “like he said, ‘he was beside himself’ and...what was it...‘he lost his head’? Now go on woolly-head,” a nickname which any hog called Thistle, hated, “say, why didn’t I ask him where he found it again?”

Thistle however was too busy with his hiccoughs. Wait-for-me added nothing at all not even his usual plea, but not for the usual reason. This time he was fast asleep.

During the nights that followed they grew to know their grandfather well. Teasel looked up to him and did everything the way he did. He copied the way Hitch clicked his teeth with appreciation after a meal. Privately he practised the two expressions ‘Well shake my spines’ and ‘Sharpen my spikes’. His growing up was not quick enough when it came to managing his food though. Never could he escape Holly’s cry ‘Chuwit, chuwit’, as she scolded all her little family.

“I whistle like a nuthatch at times,” she confided to her father; the way humans feeling guilty, say, ‘I sound like a fishwife’.

“I understand,” he assured her. “So many things are different and worrying especially with a family to bring up.”

By now they had been joined by the family who were quiet after a game of ‘leaping on all fours’, that they played sometimes. Holly, whose thoughts still ran on caring for them was reminded of a journey they had made a short time ago.

“We had stopped for me to lift Wait-for-me by his scruff...some steps were too difficult for him...when Teasel said look and we saw something very odd,” she said.

Teasel feeling very important, burst in:

“Yes, we were up by Holly Hocks Halt and we saw all these lights strung out and they disappeared into Bentwhistle Tunnel.”

“That’s right,” said Holly. “Now why would a train be travelling on the line at that time? They are all put away before sundown and as they are never run in the dark I did not think they would have lights.”



Thistle nudged Teasel and whispered.

Teasel spoke up again. "A starling told us that his wife told him and she had it from a Yellow-Wagtail, that a lot of mice have been seen carrying things. Only of course it may not have anything to do with anything," he tailed off.

"Of course it hasn't," put in Willow-White. "Why doesn't that bird mind his own business? He mimics me when I tell Wait-for-me to hurry. I wonder why," she added!

"Because you shrill so. I expect you remind him of his nest full of fledglings waiting to be fed. He means no harm," chided Holly. "He's a born clown."

While this had been going on Hitch had put two and two together but couldn't make the answer four. Trains, or at least a train was seen when and where it ought not to have been; rumours were flying about; things were disappearing; mice were carrying things and an illegal immigrant mouse was about. It was all very puzzling. Of this much he was certain though; SOMETHING WAS GOING ON. MICE WERE AT THE BOTTOM OF IT. THEY SHOULD BE PUT IN THEIR PLACE AND KEPT THERE!