

Chapter 5

The Footprints in the Dew

There is a time between night and day when landscapes sleep. Only the earliest riser sees that hour; or the all-night traveller, letting up the blind of his railway-carriage window, will look out on a rushing landscape of stillness, in which trees and bushes and plants stand immobile and breathless in sleep - wrapped in sleep, as the traveller himself wrapped his body in his great-coat or his rug the night before.

This grey, still hour before morning was the time in which Tom walked into his garden. He had come down the stairs and along the hall to the garden door at midnight; but when he opened that door and stepped out into the garden, the time was much later. All night - moonlit or swathed in darkness - the garden had stayed awake; now, after that night-long vigil, it had dozed off.

The green of the garden was greyed over with dew; indeed, all its colours were gone until the touch of sun-rise. The air was still, and the tree-shapes crouched down upon themselves. One bird spoke; and there was a movement when an awkward parcel of feathers dislodged itself from the tall fir-tree at the corner of the lawn, seemed for a second to fall and then at once swept up and along, outspread, on a wind that never blew, to another, farther tree: an owl. It wore the ruffled, dazed appearance of one who has been up all night.

Tom began to walk around the garden, on tiptoe. At first he took the outermost paths, gravelled and box-edged, intending to map for himself their farthest extent. Then he broke away impatiently on a cross-path. It tunnelled through the gloom of yew-trees arching overhead from one side, and hazel nut stubs from the other: ahead was a grey-green triangle of light where the path must come out into

the open again. Underfoot the earth was soft with the humus of last year's rotted leaves. As he slipped along, like a ghost, Tom noticed, through gaps in the yew: dark-light-dark-light-dark... The lighter colour, he realized, was the back of the house that he was glimpsing, and he must be passing behind the line of yew-trees that faced it across the lawn.

His path came out by the asparagus beds of the kitchen-garden - so he found them later to be. Beyond their long, grave-like mounds was a dark oblong - a pond. At one end of the pond, and overlooking it, stood an octagonal summer-house with an arched base and stone steps up to its door. The summer-house, like the rest of the garden, was asleep on its feet. Beyond the pond and the summer-house was another path, meandering in idle curves. On the other side of this path was a stretch of wilderness, and then a hedge.

Of the four sides of the garden, Tom had already observed that here were walled: one by the back of the house itself, another by a very high south wall, built of clunch blocks and brick; and another by a lower wall that might well prove climbable. A hedge, however, is almost always more easily passed than any wall; and Tom had no sooner got into his garden than he was curious to see outside it. Sharp-eyed, he searched the hedge for a way through: he only needed such a little hole for a push and a wriggle. Here was a narrow gap, at last; but, to his surprise, it led into the hedge instead of directly through it. From this entry a passage - about a foot wide and three feet high - had been worn along in the heart of a the hedge. Tom crept along it.

The tunnel came to an end where there was another bolder gap into the open, this time out onto the far side of the hedge. Tom crept along it. The tunnel came to an end where there was another bolder gap into the open, this time out onto the far side of the hedge. Tom found himself looking out onto a meadow. There were cows in the meadow: some still at their nights rest; one getting up, hindlegs

first; and one already at the day's work of eating. This last cow stopped to stare at Tom, as though she thought she must still be dreaming. Stalks of grass hung from the sides of her mouth, and a long trickle of saliva descended from her lip and swung slightly in the little morning breeze that was getting up.

At the far side of the meadow a long, grey goose-neck rose from among the grasses, and Tom could see the bird's head turn sideways so that an eye could fix itself upon the gap in the hedge and the movement there. As a matter of fact, the look-out was a gander, although Tom did not know it; a moment later, the white necks of his wives rose around him, watching too. Then the gander strained his neck and breast upwards, and stretched his wings out into a splendid double curve - every pinion apart - and clapped them to and fro. First one goose and then another did the same, saluting the new morning.

Tom, made easily unaware of the passage of time, crept back by the way he had come - back into the garden. He began to make himself familiar with it - its paths and alleys and archways, its bushes and trees. He noted some of its landmarks. At a corner of the lawn, a fir-tree towered up above all the other trees of the garden; it was wound about with ivy, through which its boughs stuck out like a child's arms through the wrappings of a shawl. On the high south wall, half covered by the sporting of a vine, there was a sundial; it was surrounded by a stone sun with stone rays, and its chin was buried in curly stone clouds - looking like his father's chin covered with shaving lather, Tom thought. To one side of the sundial, under a honeysuckle archway, was a door: Tom might have tried it, but the sight of the sundial, even without the sun upon it yet, had reminded him again of the passing of time. He hurried.

At the greenhouse, he did no more than look through the glass at the plants inside, and at the water tank, where a gleam came and went - perhaps a goldfish waking. The raised cucumber frames by

the greenhouse were walked round in less than a minute. He passed hastily along beside the aviary, where fan-tailed pigeons were beginning to pick their way across the brick floor.

He criss-crossed the kitchen-garden beyond the asparagus beds: fruit trees and strawberry beds and bean poles and a chicken-wire enclosure where raspberry canes and gooseberry bushes and currant bushes lived sheltered from the attack of birds. Beside the gooseberry wire grew a row of rhubarb. Each clump was covered with the end of an old tub or pot drain-pipe with sacking over the top. Between the loose staves of one of the tub-ends was something white - a piece of paper. It was folded, and addressed in a childish hand - if one could call it an address: 'To Oberon, King of Fairies.' Tom certainly did not want to be mixed up with talk of fairies and that kind of thing; and he moved very quickly away from the rhubarb bed.

He came out upon the lawn again. Here were the flower-beds - the crescent-shaped corner-beds with the hyacinths, among which an early bee was already working. The hyacinths reminded Tom of his Aunt Gwen, but no longer with resentment. She knew nothing - poor thing! - and could be blamed for nothing, after all.

At the verge of the lawn, Tom stopped abruptly. On the grey-green of the dewed grass were two clearly defined patches of darker green: footprints. Feet had walked on to the lawn and stood there; then they had turned back and walked off again. How long ago? Surely since Tom had entered the garden. "I'm sure they weren't here when I came out. Certain.

How long had whoever it was stood there, and why? He or she had faced the line of yew-trees opposite, and that thought made Tom uneasy. When he had passed behind those trees and seen the flick-flick-flick of the house between them, had someone stood on the lawn watching the flick-flick-flick of Tom as he went?

Tom looked at the house, letting his eye go from window to window. Had someone drawn out of sight at an upper window? No, no: now he was just imagining things.

Tom's nerves were on edge, and he actually jumped when he heard a noise from up the garden. It was the sound of a door opening. He took cover at once, and then worked his way towards the sound. Someone had come through the door in the sundial path - a man with a wheel barrow.

Tom took a moment to realize that this must be a gardener, and that he was doing nothing more sinister than beginning a day's work. He was whistling; and now Tom became aware that for some time the garden had been filling with sounds - the sound of birds, the sound of leaves moving in morning winds, and all the minute living, breathing sounds of trees and bushes and plants and insects. The sun's rays gleamed over all the garden, warming it to life and sucking up the drenching dew; the sundial's iron finger threw a shadow at last, and told the time. Day was beginning, and Tom was afraid of being caught in a daytime not his own. Once again he crossed the lawn, this time with intent to get back into the house and upstairs to bed - if, indeed, his own room and bed were still there. He could see that the hall of the house was furnished with all the objects he had seen last night: the morning sunshine lit them clearly. They looked forbiddingly real.

Fear made him hurry now; yet, even so, he paused on the threshold of the house and turned back to look at the footprints on the grass: they were still plainly visible, although the warmth of the rising sun was beginning to blur their edges. (It did not strike him as odd that his own footsteps, which had crossed the lawn again and again, had left no similar trace.)

He went inside and shut the garden door behind him and bolted it. He had shut himself into absolute darkness; but he could still hear the ticking of the grandfather clock, and that gave him his bearings.

He felt for a bracket to guide himself forward; unaccountably, he missed finding any bracket. He made for where the barometer should be: he found only a blank wall. Then he realized there was an emptiness all around him: the furniture had gone. Only the clock was left, but the clock was always there, time in, time out. It had been in the hall with the furniture and rugs and pictures; and now it was here in the bare hall of the daytime.

If the hall were as usual, then everything was as usual, and Tom was safely back in his own time, and his bed would be waiting for him upstairs. Yet now a lesser fear came to him, with a pang of conscience. The ticking of the grandfather clock reminded him. There was no thirteenth hour marked on the clock-face; he had not that excuse for being out of bed. Nor had he been right in thinking this little expedition would take only a few minutes, anyway. He dared not think how much time he had spent in the garden: he had gone there before dawn; he had come away when the sun was up.

He went back upstairs into the flat and straight into the kitchen to consult the clock there. It was an ugly little clock, but it always kept perfect time.

He found the kitchen matches and struck one, shielding both the sound of the striking and the flame - he had thought it wiser not to click on the electric light, lest even that might waken his uncle and aunt. He held the lighted match to the clock-face: the fingers pointed to only a few minutes past midnight.

Still only a few minutes past midnight!

Tom stared so long that the match burnt down, and he had to drop it. He was bewildered: but one thing he knew now: that he had not broken his promise to his uncle.

Tom tiptoed back to bed. He was right to make little noise, for his uncle was still only on the edge of sleep. Alan Kitson had just finished a one-sided conversation begun a few minutes earlier. "If

that grandfather clock strikes one in anything like the way it's just struck twelve - on and on and on - then I'll go upstairs and knock Mrs Bartholomew up and complain. She needn't think *I'm* frightened of her."