

The White Robin

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THE SPRING THAT THE WHITE ROBIN was seen was the year of the great drought. No one marked it at the time, for no one knew what the time ahead was to bring. But as the weeks passed and the sky was cloudless day after day after day, and the sun became a merciless enemy instead of a life-giving friend, people remembered, and the muttering began. Though who began it, no one knew.

The white robin was seen in the early days of March, on the hillside where the sheep grazed. It flitted from small dark cedar, to maple sapling, to clump of sumac, to the tall old hickory, down to the golden dried grasses, and up again to the tip of a white pine, where it sang and then flew away into the woods. Seth, the shepherd's boy, whose small house stood by the side of the road that skirted the pasture hill, was the first to see it. He ran home to tell his mother, and dragged her forth from her baking, and they stood in the road, he pointing and exclaiming, but all she saw was a glimmer of white as it flew in among the trees. But later that day, as evening settled down, warm for March, Seth crept up the hill again, bringing Ned and Jamie, and Robert and Gerrit and Jack. They sat in a thicket, and a little wind riffled in their ears, and the first querulous song of the peepers rose from the marsh below. The white robin flew along the hill, and perched in the old hickory. It flicked its tail and sang its evening song over and over. The boys watched it, amazed and staring.

“‘Tis a robin, sure enough!” whispered Jamie.

“‘Tis a wonder, that's what it is!”

“Wish I could get my hands on it,” hissed Ned.

“And I!”

“Nay, nay!” gasped Seth. “‘Twould be a sin! To touch a feather of it would be evil!”

“Why for, little fool?”

“Just look at it,” said Seth. “White as snow, as no other robin ever was! And God made it, and it came to our pasture, and we dare not touch it!”

They all were silent, watching. And then Ned spoke again, jeeringly.

“It is as white as Solomon is black!”

And they all fell to laughing and rolling around, and when they looked up the robin was gone, just a glimmer vanishing among the trees at the forest's edge. So they rose and trooped down the hill to home, and the word spread in the village and among the farms. Solomon, the black boy, heard of it, as he went to work at the mill; and he heard the jest, too, whispered behind his back.

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“It was as white as Solomon is black!”

“Truly?”

“Aye, truly, as white as Solomon is black.”



BUT IT WAS A FAIR SPRING, with soft rain by night and warm sun by day. The grass greened in the hollows, the berry vines thickened, the ferns pushed up curled and furry fiddleheads; the hepatica shone blue on the wooded hillsides, the moss was velvety and thick, and the saxifrage starred white among the rocks. The women went out to gather dandelion for salad, and early lamb's quarters. The men ploughed and seeded. The new lambs frisked on the hill. The mill was busy, and along the river road the wagons lumbered, bringing great logs to be sawn. The boys cut saplings for poles and fished by the river banks in their idle hours, and brought home long strings of perch and bluegill and sunny, to sizzle over the fires for supper.

The other robins, the ordinary ones, came back with the other birds, the redwings and bluebirds, the grackles and swamp sparrows, the kingfishers that flashed, rattling, along the river, and the slow, patient heron. But the white robin was still seen here and there, by the woods, along the hill. And of an evening the boys went to look for it, and grown-ups too, and little children, clinging to a parent's hand.

“Hush, I hear it—yonder, in that tall tree.”

“No, see, there it flies! See that flash of white!”

“See, see! I told you it was white!”

“As white as Solomon is black!”

The schoolmaster heard of it, from the boys. He explained to them how sometimes a creature, any kind of creature, was born white, though otherwise like its fellows, and he had a fancy name for it. He'd seen a white toad, he said, once, and a white deer, years ago, and this white robin he'd like to see, too. So one evening he went out with them to look for it, and there it was, perched on a fence post near the pasture gate, preening itself. There it stayed for a long time, while they stood in a row in the road, silent, watching, the schoolmaster in their midst.

Seth touched his arm at last.

“ 'Tis truly a robin, sir?”

“Aye, truly, and no mistake.”

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“ ‘Twould fetch a price, no doubt, in that place in the city you told us of, where they keep such things, stuffed?” asked Ned.

“What if it would,” said the man, frowning. “I like it better there as it is, preening itself, peaceful, in the evening.”

They all sighed and stood, silent again.

Then Jamie spoke. “Will it stay, do you think? Will it nest?”

The schoolmaster shook his head. “Who knows? The birds are not settled yet. Some are still moving north. It may go on. It may stay. But leastways, you can say in later years, you’ve seen a robin white as white.”

“White as Solomon it black!” laughed Jack.

And then they saw him, Solomon himself. He’d come along the road, the other way, to fetch water from the village well, for he and his mother lived up on the mountain side, where they had scratched a small patch of garden from the stony soil, and there was no spring. He had a yoke over his shoulders and two wooden pails. Now he stood a little way from them, watching the robin, his black face set and his eyes dark.

“Hush!” said the schoolmaster. “‘Tis an unseemly jest. Solomon was a wise and ancient king. He knew God made black and white alike, just as that robin is a robin still, despite its color.”

But Ned persisted. “Was that Solomon black, too?”

“Blacker than you,” said the man, “and far wiser.” And he turned and strode away, back along the road toward the village, with a troubled face, the boys at his heels.

The robin fluttered up and flew off, but Solomon still stood, staring after it, hatred in his face.



THAT WAS THE LAST TIME they saw the white robin, alive. Seth, coming home from school one afternoon, saw a spot of white in the grass by the fence and, running over, found it huddled and stiff, a wound on its ruffled breast, and a bit of blood by its beak. By it he found a smooth round pebble, such as they used in slingshots. He stared at the stone before he picked it up and slipped it in his pocket. Then with trembling hands he gathered up the white bird and carried it home. He met his father coming from the sheepfold, and he stood still, woebegone, while his father came up and put out a gnarled forefinger, parting the feathers on the soft breast.

“It’s been shot,” he said.

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Seth nodded, wordless with misery.

“Who could ha’ done it? Who would ha’ done it? ‘Tis a boy’s mischief.”

Seth shook his head.

“That Solomon’s the best aim hereabouts,” said his father, “and hatred enough too. Best bury the thing and have done with it.”

Seth buried it, under the lilac hedge. He said nothing of it to anyone—but his father let it out, and the word went round.

It was then the drought began, as they remembered later.



APRIL CAME IN warm and sunny. The river ran quiet and cool between its banks. The maples leafed out early, and the oak, and the silvery little birch clumps here and there. Children went barefoot far too soon, according to their mothers. It was lovely, but too lovely, with none of April’s fitfulness and sudden storms, just a steady, relentless, uneventful spell of good weather. In the fields where the wheat and barley showed green and sturdy, by May the blades, that had come up so fast, seemed to pause, waiting; and many a farmer stopped and glanced a dozen times a day at the sky, where a few little fluffs of clouds hung motionless. The road was thick with dust and the wayside choked with it. Dustdevils whirled and danced in the school yard. By now the weather was the first thought in the minds of each one old enough to know that all was not aright.

And it was quite evident that they were in the midst of trouble. A good spell of rain could fix all in no time, it was true. But no rain came—except a spattering of drops that made the dust leap and left little imprints in the dry road. But it must come. This was unheard of—no rain in all those weeks. Summer brought a dry spell now and again—but to set in so early and keep hold so long—unheard of!

But what was to be done? Would the well hold out? The men sat together and considered. It had been dug deep and had never been known to fail. Nevertheless, word went out that as much as could be, water should be fetched from the river, for most uses.

It was then that they noticed Solomon coming, two or three times a day, down the road, past the cluster of dwellings, the school, the store, the smithy, with his yoke on his shoulders, to fetch water and trudge back up the mountain side. He went, a silent black figure, through their midst and back again, and the boys, if they were idle, would stop their whittling and watch uneasily as he passed.

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Seth asked the schoolmaster, "What does he get his water for, so often?"

"I expect for their garden. Where they live, it must be dry as bone. Where else would they grow their food, except in that patch up there?"

"Was his father a slave, sir?"

"So I have heard. But there are no slaves now."

"Does he get paid for his work at the mill?"

"Such as it is, yes. But he should have his chance at school, like you lads."

"Solomon at school, like us?" scoffed the boys. "Not he! Have you seen the looks he gives us? Think you we'd have him there, killing our birds? He'd strangle a toad with his bare hands, I'll wager!"

"Remember what he did to the white robin? Remember?"

"Yes, it was he—back in the spring, before the drought began."

"Before? Nay—it was when the drought began. No rain since, no rain since."

"'Tis a fact, 'tis true! No rain since, not from that time."



BY JULY the river was running low. Stones and boulders the boys had never seen before appeared, and for a little while they played along the newly-revealed shore, when they were sent to fetch water, and were admonished for it. But then in the yellow heat of day, when haze and dust settled on the land and the fields cracked, such a heaviness descended over all that the boys had no heart for play. They toiled with their elders as best they could, and then sat in the shade, weary and listless, and uneasy fear began to haunt them. When Solomon came down the road each day their mutterings and their abuse were all but audible—though Solomon gave no sign of hearing. To the boys, day followed day in an endless dazzle of dust and sun, and windless, warm nights brought only uneasy sleep and no rest.

Before August the crops had failed beyond recall. In the timber lots the trees were brown. The sheep pasture had long been seared and barren, and Seth had helped his father take the flock to the river meadows where a little grass remained, and there was water for them. But they were sickly and many died. In the orchards the apples withered and dropped. The mills had been closed for weeks, the river ran so low and the millrace was dry. Ruin stared them in the face—and ever-present was the fear of fire.



FIRE CAME, for all their caution and their fear. Jamie's mother, baking bread with the last of their wheat, in their outdoor oven, pulled out the coals, and one rolled unbeknownst to her into the dead grass and a puff of wind did the rest. When she saw it and cried out, the little flames ran outward already in great spreading circles, and the wind came along with a whoosh and drove sparks into the shed and along the road. The cry went up, and from everywhere they came running, with spades and brooms and sacks and axes. Seth, down by the river meadow, heard the bell and saw the smoke billowing. He shouted to his father, and ran. The fire was traveling fast toward the highroad. They might stop it there, but it would spread along to the school—and one house at least lay in its path, and an orchard and meadow, and beyond, the woods—the dry tinder woods that stretched for miles.

Seth met the schoolmaster, running, rake in hand. "To the road," he shouted. "Stop it at the road. Tell all the boys you meet!"

Seth found Gerrit and Jack, and ran with them. Jamie and Ned and Robert were already there. They spread out along the road and watched the advance of the licking flames through the dead weeds and dried brambles. They beat down the underbrush and the smoke blew chokingly into their faces, but the fire was held.

The schoolmaster came by, shouting, "Robert, there, you watch no spark leaps the road. Sing out if it does. The rest—come to the school. The fire will reach it but maybe we can make it go around—either side. The men plough a wide lane beyond the Jennings orchard. That may stop it."

Unquestioning and numb, they obeyed. Running up the road, with the wind veering the smoke off to their left, they ran beyond the leaping edge of the fire to where the schoolhouse stood, bleak and vulnerable in its dusty yard, smoke already swirling toward it.

"Trench, trench!" barked the schoolmaster over the crackle of flame and the thudding of their hearts. Seth found a spade thrust into his hands and he began to dig, Jamie on one side of him, Gerrit on the other. The schoolmaster leaped in front, beating down the undergrowth, and others joined him, hacking and flailing, turning the dry sod under. Clouds of smoke billowed into them and for a moment they were blinded and choking, then the wind shifted a little and the smoke rolled away. The schoolmaster leaped back across the trench and ran along it calling, "Are you all right? Here, down here, on this side! Dig the trench on along here! Seth, watch this point and beat it down as it comes. And here, you!" he called to another, unrecognizable for soot and smoke smears, "Stand by him here and do likewise."

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Seth beat at the little half-starved flames crawling toward the trench. His companion did the same.

“It’s done for there, and there, and there,” croaked Seth in triumph, pounding with his spade, but his companion struggled on wordlessly. Seth glanced at him, whoever he was, for he was blackened with the smoke and grime. Then, “Watch that bush!” he yelled, as a shriveled shrub suddenly flared up. Both boys leaped for it, fearing that roaring sparks would fly across the yard to the schoolhouse.

“Hack it down, then we can trample it!”

The boy leaped back over the trench, seized an axe, leaped across again, and leaning down, swung sure and strong under the bush, bringing it down in a flaming shower. Seth heard a little moan, but he himself was already beating at the scattered boughs, and the other soon joined him, until the bush was harmless, smoking embers.

“Come!” called Seth. “They need us down here.”

And the two ran to join the rest,—dim forms in the haze and smoke. But the crackle and roar were quieter, and the hungry orange flares flickering down, winking out, sputtering away.

“We’ve held it here,” gasped the schoolmaster. “But we’d best go down and give a hand at the front. Walk it, boys, and save your wind. You’re fair spent, all of you. Done a man’s work, each one of you. Come.”

They set off down the road, carrying their tools, to where the advancing edge of fire roared and billowed with diminishing fury. There they all fell in with the men, beating with methodical deliberateness and exhaustion at the little tongues of flame on the fringes, while the heart of the fire leaped up to the wide-furrowed trench and halted. At length the schoolmaster came by, touching each one on the shoulder.

“Come, lads, the worst is over now. Come to my place, for a drink and a bit of rest. Then home to supper. Unbeknownst to us, evening is here.”

They dropped their tools and trailed after him, down the road, across his little yard, up to his stoop. There, with deep sighs, they sank on the benches beside the door; all save one, who stood there queerly, holding his two hands in front of him, swaying a little. The schoolmaster, coming from the springhouse, set his jug down suddenly and sprang forward.

“Let’s see those hands, lad. Nay, there are burns, real ones, blistered deep. You should have stopped a while back and gone home for help.” He peered in the boy’s face. “But it’s Solomon! Solomon, good lad, poor lad, those hands! Wife! Here’s work for you. Wife! Come inside, boy. We’ll bind those up with some salve she has, and fix you up fair in no time.

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Now, lads, there's the jug. Have a drink and rest. I'll tend this fellow." And with his arm around Solomon's shoulder he went inside.

It was suddenly quiet. No one made a move for the jug. They sat silent, heads bent, hands clasped between their knees. Inside they could hear a bit of stir, and the schoolmaster's wife murmuring.

Then Jamie muttered, "I never knew he was there, working with us."

"Look at us, all of us as black as he," said Ned shakily.

"I think 'twas he hacked down that flaming bush, back by the school, and then was when he got the burns. And that was long ago and he worked on, and said not a word, and I knew not even who it was. I thought him one of us," whispered Seth.

"He was one of us," said Gerrit, half weeping.

They were all silent again, till Robert got up and fetched the jug.

"Master bid us drink," he said, handing it to Ned. They all drank and the precious water ran down their throats and flowed into their veins. Then they sat wordless again, listening.

The schoolmaster came out, his arm about Solomon, who stood with his head down, his bandaged hands glimmering white in the dusk, and held awkwardly against his breast.

"I'm taking him home, lads. He'll do, in a few weeks—but a scar or two to remember our fire by. Don't rest too long. Your families will be wanting to know you are still in one piece. I'll be standing watch down by the fire this evening. Come by if you need me for aught."

And they were gone in the shadows of the road.

But the boys still sat, waiting, pent, exhausted, ashamed. Then Seth straightened up and spoke in a clear voice.

"'Tis we killed the white robin, not he. We killed it with our jest."

And all around the circle ran the sigh, "Aye, aye, aye."

Then Ned spoke, "How can he carry water now, with those hands?"

They all sat up, thinking. Here was something needed doing.

"That rain barrel by our shed—let's take that up. And fill it enough for two-three days. And see that it stays filled till his hands heal."

"When will we do it?"

"Now, now of course."

"'Tis still light enough."

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“I’ll fetch the stoneboat from our barn, to help haul the barrel.”

“I’ll help haul. ‘Twill take two all that way uphill.”

“We’ll get buckets. Two trips anyways, if we think to fill it enough.”

So they set off, scattering, to meet again on the steep, worn track going up to the little holding on the mountain side. Smoke still hung in the valley, but the air was fresher here. The stars glimmered faintly as the golden light drew down into the west. The forest edge was dark, and there was no wind, and no bird singing— only the sound of their feet in the dry leaves, and the rattle of stones sent rolling down the slope.

By the door of the little hut they set the barrel down. At the unaccustomed noise, Solomon’s mother had come forth, amazed, as the boys drew up in an awkward row and stood silently.

Seth stepped forward. “Mam,” he said, “As Solomon burned his hands and all, helping with the fire, we knew you’d be hard put to it to get water, so we wanted to help.”

“We brought up the barrel,” explained Ned, “and we’ll keep it filled till he’s well again at least.”

“If that’s all right with you, Mam,” finished Jamie.

In the dusk one could not see her face, only her eyes. She put her hand up suddenly and covered them. Then she put her hand down again and her voice was husky.

“It takes a mighty load off of my heart, a mighty load.”

“We’ll fill it now, mam, if you don’t mind.”

They emptied their buckets into the barrel one by one and went off down the slope, slipping and sliding on the loose rocks. Down, down to the river they went, and back up, laden, their breath labored in their throats. Solomon’s mother sat by the door, waiting, and behind her in the dusk stood Solomon, his bandaged hands white against his chest.

Again they emptied their buckets, and then they stood, silent, searching for some word of release.

“We are sorry, Solomon,” spoke Seth at last.

And the dark boy answered, his voice quiet and clear.

“That’s all right. We put out the fire, and the hands will soon mend.”

But that was not all that Seth had meant.

So they went off down the hill, calling softly good night, and the two by the house softly answering. They spoke no more to each other, and scattered to their homes, weary, but with a strange peace in their hearts.

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WHEN SETH CLIMBED to his little room and lay on his pallet by the square of window, he could not sleep, exhausted as he was. When he closed his eyes he saw dancing rings of flame, and when he opened them, he could see the pale stars winking down at him. Had it been one day, or an eternity—their bitter fight with the fire, and then—Solomon?

He lay a long time, staring out of the window. And then he knew, he suddenly realized, the stars were gone, were winking out even as he watched. He heaved himself up and knelt, his fingers clutching the frame, and thrust his head out. The air was sweet and cool, the smell of burning blown away, and overhead the stars indeed had gone. He caught his breath in disbelief. It could not be! Could it be?

But the soft wind blew, and with it came the rain, the blessed and forgiving rain.

