

Chapter Three

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Timothy sat at the large arched window looking out through the panes onto the grass below; lawns stretched out in all directions as far as the eye could see; their emerald glow pearly by ice that had landed overnight.

He wondered what he was going to do today; the servant with whom he normally played shuttlecock had gone to see her ailing mother and he faced a day of emptiness with nothing to do; he had explored all the attics and wainscots in the eaves of the building and in the cellars he had wormed his way through the groins of rock storing racks of dusty wine bottles finding an exciting if tiny dark cell with walls decorated with a frieze of mushrooms.

The greatest excitement that day he decided would be provided by the woods that capped the fields he could see on the horizon; a magical kingdom populated by beasts unknown and trees like kings, whose size and ancientness he found a comfort.

Striding out across the fields, a stick in hand which he raked along the hedges, a baby rabbit sprung out and lolloped along ahead of him, zigzagging in terror before finally disappearing into a bush. Flocks of finches, gold ones and blue, exploded from the hedges like fireworks while a kite swooped in the air above, making its shrill, baby-like cry.

He could see his destination; a five barred gate that led into a gathering of ash trees, their black pointed, arrow-like tips swaying in the white sky above. He found his favourite spot; a mossy cushion at the bottom of an old chestnut tree which had an unequalled view of the drove way leading to a pond beyond. He found a stick and started grubbing around in the moist dark earth, unearthing woodlice and a pair of earwigs who had been making a home under a piece of corrugated bark.

Suddenly, he was surprised to find something alien there; a cluster of two or three unevenly formed spherical black forms, woody nuggets with skin as black and crinkled as tar.

He knew what they were; the winter before he had been tramping through the wood and came across some dogs scurrying amongst the brambles; panting and digging ferociously, spraying the grass with soil. Behind them stood a man, six-foot four at least wearing a hat that looked as if it had seen many moons - made of soft felt it was the amber colour of medlars. The man's eyes were shaded by the broad rim of the hat but he touched it in recognition of the superior status of the young stranger.

He knelt down beside his dogs a small trowel in hand and removed the glistening black nuggets and swiftly popped into a leather bag slung around his waist.

'What are you doing?' asked the boy.

'Collecting truffles,' replied Elijah in his deep and kindly tone, as Timothy stared quizzically at the dogs in wonder, watching their their curly tails flick to and fro like metronomes.

He had started his journey that day feeling isolated and lonely but meeting Elijah in the woods had sparked joy as had the dogs in their relentless cheerfulness as they bounded up to him and jumped up to lick his face.