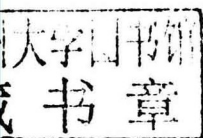


RABBIT HILL

By Robert Lawson

Read by Laura Estelles



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For T.
who loves
Little Georgie

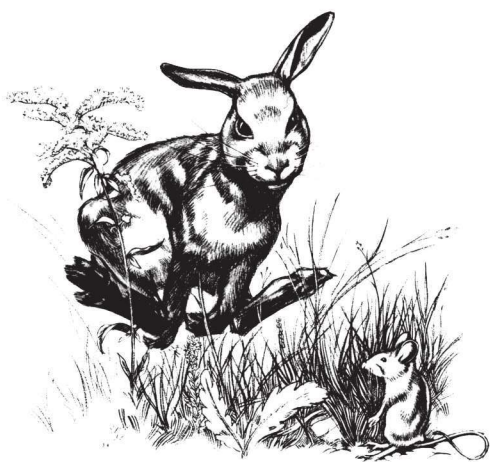
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CHAPTER I

New Folks Coming



ALL THE Hill was boiling with excitement. On every side there rose a continual chattering and squeaking, whispering and whistling, as the Animals discussed the great news. Through it all could be heard again and again the words, "New Folks coming."

Little Georgie came tumbling down the Rabbit burrow, panting out the tidings. "New Folks coming," he shouted. "New Folks coming, Mother—Father, new Folks coming into the Big House!"

Mother looked up from the very thin soup that she was stirring. "Well, it's high time there were new Folks in the Big House, *high* time, and I do hope they're



planting Folks, not shiftless like the last ones. Three years now since there's been a good garden on this place. Never enough to put anything up for the winters and last winter the worst in years. I don't know how we ever got through it and I don't know how we'll ever make out if they're not planting Folks, I just don't know, with food getting scarcer all the time and no place to get a vegetable except the Fat-Man's-at-the-Cross-roads, and him with his Dogs and all, and crossing the Black Road twice a day to get there. I just don't know, I just don't know—" Mother was quite a worrier.

"Now, my dear," said Father, "do try to adopt a more optimistic attitude. This news of Georgie's may promise the approach of a more felicitous and bountiful era. Perhaps it would be well if I were to indulge in a short stroll about the neighborhood and seek confirmation of this most auspicious rumor." Father was a Southern Gentleman and always talked like that.

As he picked his way through the long neglected garden the big brick house loomed up dark and lonely in the twilight. It looked very gloomy, no lights in the windows, no Folks about. The roof shingles were curled and rotting, blinds hung crookedly. In the walks

and driveway tall, dried weeds rattled and scraped whenever a breeze stirred. Now that all the earth was stirring with spring it seemed even more depressing.

There had been a time, he remembered it wistfully, when things had been quite different here on the Hill. The lawns then had been thick carpets of delicious grass, the fields heavy with clover. Garden vegetables had been plentiful; he and Mother and all their numerous offspring had lived well, all the Little Animals had lived well.



There had been good Folks there in those days, children too, who had played tag with them evenings, who had squealed with delight when mother Skunks,



their little ones strung out behind in solemn Indian file, had paraded across the lawn. There had been a Dog, a lady Spaniel, old and fat, who carried on endless noisy arguments with the Woodchucks, but had never been known to harm anyone. In fact she had once found a lost Fox cub and nursed it and raised it with her own puppies. Let's see, that cub would be Foxy's uncle, or was it his father? He couldn't remember, it seemed so long ago.

Then evil days had fallen upon the Hill. The good Folks had moved away and their successors had been mean, shiftless, inconsiderate. Sumac, bayberry, and poison ivy had taken over the fields, the lawns had gone to crab grass and weeds, and there was no garden. Last autumn even they had gone, leaving the empty house with its desolate black windows and its shutters flapping through the winter storms.

He passed the tool-house where in the old days bags of seed and chicken feed had always rewarded the hungry field mice. It had been empty for years; every grain of food had been searched out during the cold, hard winters. None of the Animals ever went there any more.



Porkey the Woodchuck was on the side lawn, hungrily snatching at the straggly patches of grass. His fur looked moth-eaten and he was quite thin—a very different animal from the fat, waddling Porkey who last fall had squeezed himself down his burrow to sleep away the winter. Now he was trying to make up for lost time. After each mouthful he would raise his head, look all around and grumble, then snatch another mouthful. It made his grumbling come in short bursts. “Look at this lawn,” he growled, “just *look* at it—gulp-gulp—not a leaf of clover in it, nothing but crab grass and chickweed—gulp-gulp—*time* new Folks was coming—gulp-gulp—*high* time—” He paused and sat up as Father courteously greeted him.

“Good evening, Porkey, *good* evening. It is indeed a pleasure to see you about again. I trust you passed a comfortable winter and that this pleasant spring evening finds you in the best of health.”

“Dunno,” grumbled Porkey. “Health’s all right, I guess, but I’m thin as all get out and how in tarnation’s



a fellow going to put any fat on his ribs with this stuff?" He waved disgustedly at the weed-choked fields, the patchy lawn. "Them last Folks were slops, that's what they were, slops. Never done nothing, never planted nothing, never took care of nothing, let everything run down. Time they were gone, good riddance, *I* say, time there was new Folks coming, *high* time."

"That is precisely the subject on which I wished to consult you," said Father. "I have heard certain talk concerning the possibility of new arrivals and wondered if you had any definite knowledge of the facts of the case. Is there any clear proof of this most desirable addition to our neighborhood, or is it mere hearsay?"

"Hearsay, hearsay?" said Porkey a little doubtfully. He scratched his ear and spat thoughtfully. "Well now, I'll tell you. I hear say as how that real-estate fellow was up to the house two-three days ago with a couple of people, going all around inside and outside. I hear say as Bill Hickey, the carpenter fellow, was up here yesterday a-poking at the roof and at the tool-house and the chicken house and figgerin' figgers on a bit of paper. I hear say as Louie Kernstawk, the mason, was up here today kicking and poking around them old

stone walls and them tumble-down steps and figgerin' figgers too. And I hear say this, and this is important." He hitched himself closer and banged the ground with his paw. "This is *real* important. I hear say as Tim McGrath—you know, the fellow in the cottage down to the fork, does plowing and planting and such—I hear say as he was up here this afternoon looking over the old garden and the lawn and the North Field here, and he was figgerin' figgers too. Now what do you think of that?"

"I think," said Father, "that it all sounds extremely auspicious. There seems no doubt that new Folks are coming, and all signs seem to indicate that they are planting Folk. We could well do with some good planting Folk hereabout. A nice field of bluegrass now—" Father had come from Kentucky many years ago, and his talk of the bluegrass had become just a trifle tiresome.

"'Twon't grow good here," Porkey interrupted, "'twon't grow good here in Connecticut at all. Myself I could do with a good field of clover and timothy, though, I could do fine. Timothy and clover and maybe some decent lawn grass—*and* a garden." His eyes



grew watery at the thought. “Some beet tops, now, and maybe some green peas and a mouthful of verberna to top off with—” He suddenly went back to his frantic tearing at the sparse grass patches.



Father continued his stroll in a happier frame of mind. After all, times *had* been pretty hard these last few years. Many of their friends had deserted the Hill; all their married children had sought other homes; Mother really was looking peaked and seemed to worry more and more. New Folks in the house might bring back the good old days—

“Good evening, sir, and good luck to you,” said the Gray Fox politely. “New Folks coming, I understand.”

“A pleasant good evening to *you*, sir,” answered Father. “All indications seem to point to that happy event.”

“I must thank you,” the Fox went on, “for taking those Dogs off my trail yesterday morning. I wasn’t in very good condition to deal with them. You see, I had been away up Weston way to bring home a hen—

