

THE CHILDREN OF GREEN KNOWE

Lucy M. Boston

When he woke Mrs Oldknow was standing by his bed smiling at him.

‘It’s time to get up. Look, the floods have all gone in the night. Come and see.’ She opened the window to lean out. ‘Tony! Quick! Quick!’

Under the high window all the lawns were emerald green. Beyond them the river flowed obediently in its own course, and beyond that again were miles of green meadow. Right in front of the window where the last pool was draining away from a hollow in the grass, a large silvery thing was twisting and jumping violently in the sun.

‘It’s a great big fish.’

‘It’s one of Toby’s carp from the moat. Silly thing – it got left behind when the water went away. Run, Tolly, put on your coat and your wellingtons and throw it back into the moat.’

Tolly ran as fast as he could, slithering down the steep winding stairs in his socks and pulling on his wellingtons by the front door. He reached the fish before anyone else, but it was nearly as big as himself, and flapped so wildly when he picked it up that he was afraid and let it fall again. Then it gasped horribly and lay still, and now he was afraid to touch it in case it was dying. Just then Boggis arrived with a wheelbarrow.

‘Quick, quick, Mr Boggis! It’s Toby’s fish. It’s dying! It’s Toby’s! Mr Boggis, quick!’

Boggis came without any hurry and bent his bright red face down to look.

‘Ay, it’s one of Master Toby’s sure enough. What a size it have grown to! Must be hundreds of years old.’

He put the fish in his barrow and led Tolly to the moat, which was a ring of deep water all round the garden. There he tipped the barrow up and the fish plopped in and disappeared. They stood and looked at the place where it had fallen.

‘Was it still alive?’ asked Tolly. As he spoke, a fish face was poked above the surface, then there was a swirl of water, a flip of a tail, and it was gone.

‘Sure enough it was!’ said Boggis.

‘It was a very ugly fish,’ said Toseland.

‘T’aint no beauty. No more will you be when you’re a hundred years old! Master Toby used to feed it with bread.’

‘It came when he called it,’ added Mrs Oldknow, joining them. ‘Its name is Neptune. Toby used to tell Linnet that it understood Latin. He always talked to it in Latin. She was very much impressed.’

‘What did he say to it?’

‘He said “Veni Neptune. Panem dabo tibi et vermes”.’

‘I don’t know any Latin.’

‘Neither did Linnet. It means “Come Neptune. I will give you bread and worms”. In the garden you will find a platform over a pool where he fed them.’

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They fed the birds together. Tolly wanted his hands to be buttered again, but was told that that was only for the introduction ceremony, not for every day.

`Do the birds understand Latin?'