

A Dangerous Encounter with a Blackbird

by Liz Pitman



Illustrated by Jim Torrance

One fine summer morning, a long time after breakfast, William and Wendy Woodlouse were walking with their children, Wallace, Wanda and Winifred (or Winnie for short), amongst the leaves on Cholesbury Common, under the trees just behind the cricket field.

Looking about him, Wallace spotted a particularly tasty looking bit of fallen wood lying a little way off into the bushes. Seeing this piece of wood reminded Wallace that he was actually quite peckish. Being a generous sort of woodlouse, he called over to his sisters.

"Hey, Wanda, Winnie. Look at that bit of wood. Don't you fancy a mouthful of that?"

"Oo, yum," cried Winnie, as she started to move towards it.

"Shouldn't we tell Mummy and Daddy first, before going over there?" asked the cautious Wanda.

"Oh, no," said Wallace, "we won't be long. We'll just have a little nibble then run and catch up before they even notice we've gone."

Persuaded by their rumbling tummies, the girls joined Wallace in his snack.



Up ahead, William and Wendy chatted about boring things, as adults do. They discussed this, they debated that, they contemplated the other. The one subject they did not talk about for many minutes, however, was their children. After a while, though, William turned to Wendy and remarked,

"The children are being quiet for a change, aren't they dear?"

"Yes, aren't they," Wendy smiled in reply. Her smile soon vanished, though, as she turned round to see that the children were being so quiet because they were not, in fact, there.

"Oh," she cried in great alarm, "they've gone! My dear, the children have disappeared!"

Frantically, William and Wendy started searching for Wallace, Wanda and Winnie. They searched high, they searched low but to no avail.



"What's all this fuss about?" asked Billy Beetle, as he scuttled past on his way to somewhere very important. William explained how they had lost the children as Wendy wept loudly into her handkerchief.

"What bad luck," exclaimed Billy. "I was in the middle of going somewhere very important but clearly that will have to wait. I must help you look."

So the three of them carried on looking. They searched in the bushes, they searched behind trees, they even searched amongst the fungus, although Wendy insisted her children had been taught how dangerous fungus can be, and so not to touch it.

As they searched among the leaves, they came across the 1st Armoured Division (Red) of the Cholesbury Light Infantry Ants, on their daily patrol of their territory.

"Company, halt," commanded Major Marchwell. The ranks behind him halted as one ant.

"Company, stand at ease." Company stood at ease while Major Marchwell approached the search party.

"Gentlemen and Madam," he greeted them with a formal salute. "Unless I am very much mistaken, an event which I feel to be unlikely, I believe you to be in a state of distress. Kindly inform me of the cause of this distress."



"Indeed we are, Major Marchwell," replied the sobbing Wendy, "for we have lost our three dear children and have no idea how to find them. I fear they may be in danger, all alone in the woods."

"Danger, you say?" Major Marchwell appeared almost pleased at the thought of danger in his territory. "Men, did you hear that? Lives are in danger in our woods. We must act at once." He drew himself up to his full height. "Company, attention!"

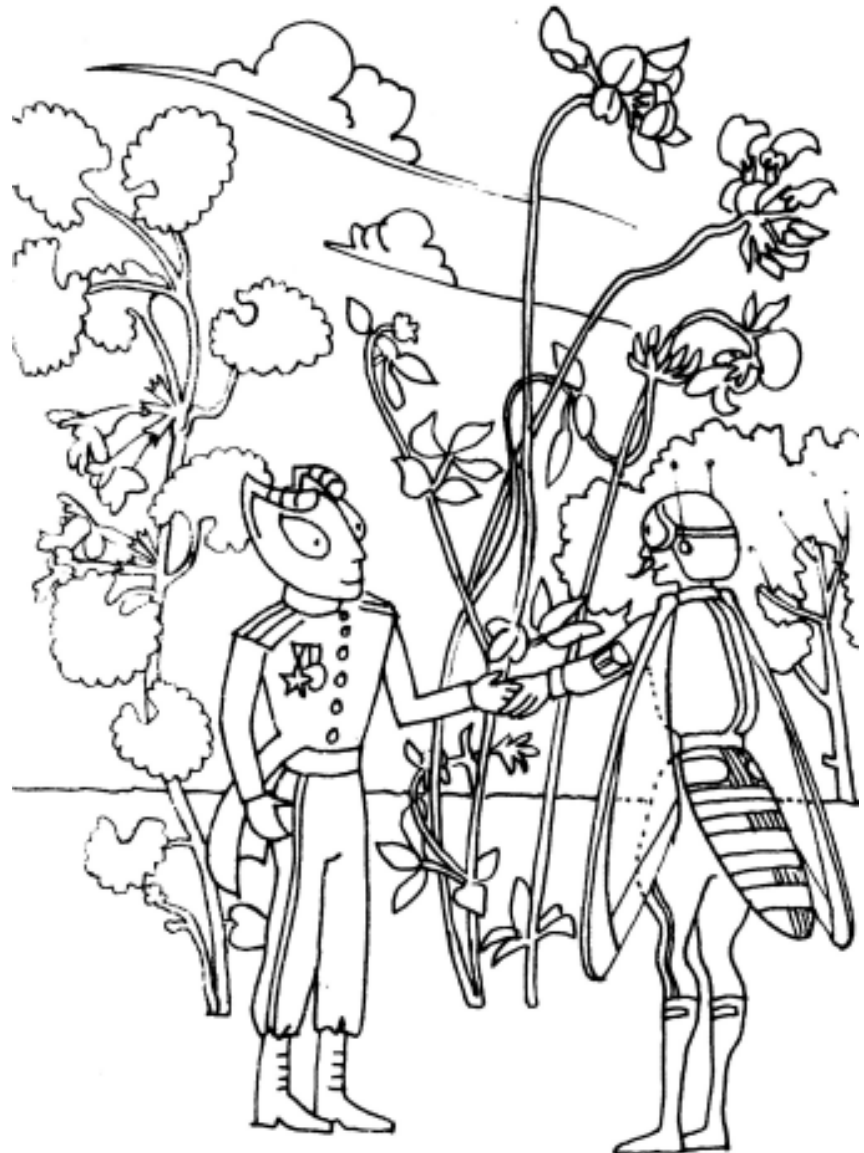
The ranks of ants stomped many of their feet to attention. "Men, our strategy will be to spread out, keeping strict formation, covering the whole area down to Cholesbury Bottom." The Major then turned to the now outranked parental search party. "Leave this to the experts. And never fear, we shall not fail."

Just as Major Marchwell was finishing his sentence, a buzzing was heard overhead. The buzzing got louder and louder as ants, woodlice and, of course, beetle, gazed up to see what the noise was. Over the tops of the trees came its cause.

"Aha!" exclaimed Major Marchwell, "the flying brigade."

And indeed it was. The group of several hoverflies approached and landed nearby. The largest of these, a rather good looking chap wearing a fetching silk scarf, sauntered up. This was the famous Flight Lieutenant Harry "Hurricane" Hover.

"Morning Major," he said, "Got ourselves a spot of bother, have we?"



"Indeed we have old chap," replied the Major, and explained what that spot of bother was.

"Airborne reconnaissance," said Hurricane. "That's what you need. That and a few million more eyes."

"Exactly," the Major agreed. "My troops will leave no leaf unturned on the ground while your men can monitor any unusual movements from the air."

And with that the real search began, with the ant forces stretching out in a long, long line and the hoverflies taking off in formation.

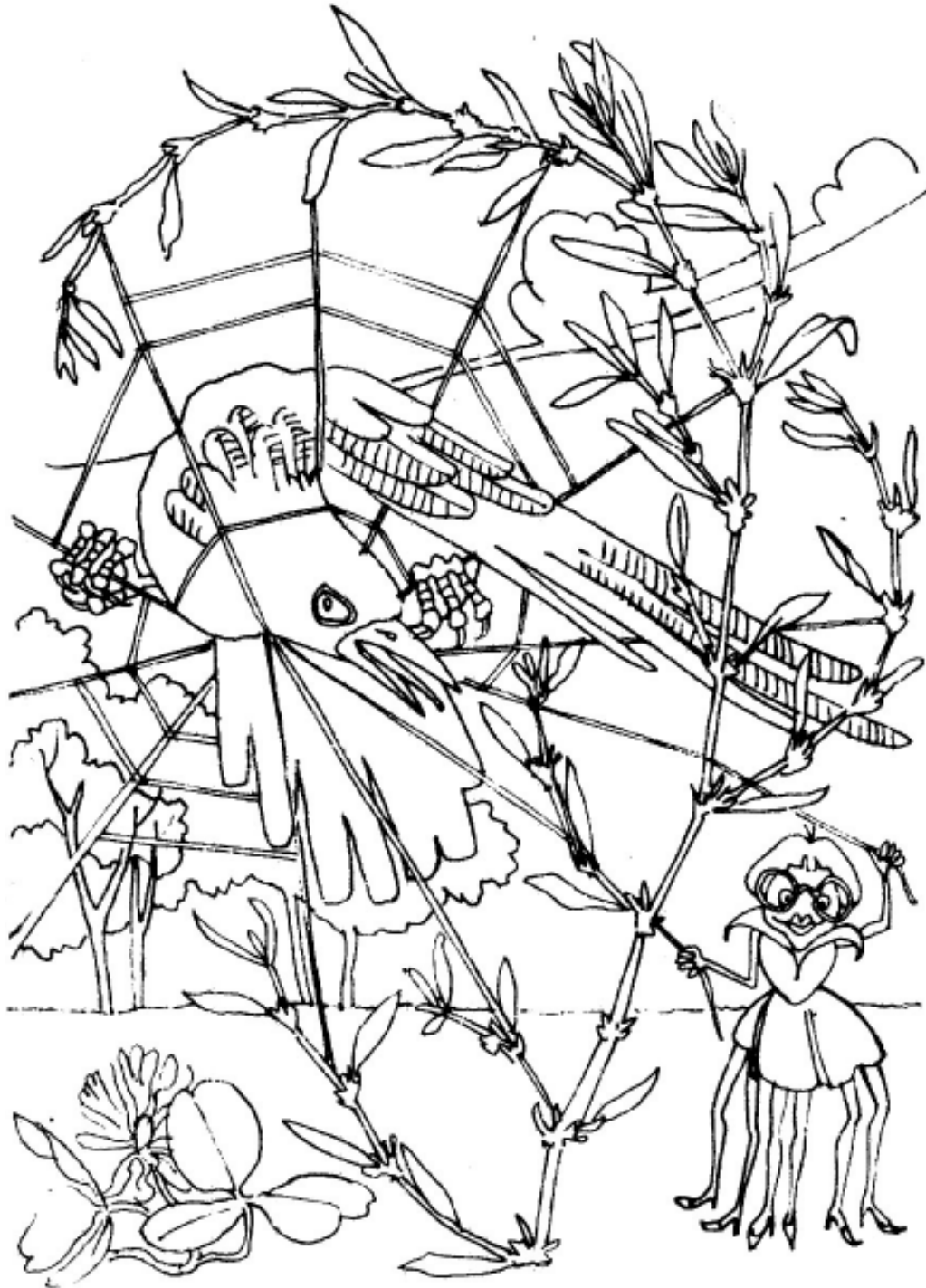
Meanwhile, at the fallen log, Wallace, Wanda and Winnie munched away with no idea of how worried their parents were. What Wallace had called "a little nibble" was turning into a big feast. Not only were the three unaware of the trouble they were causing, they were also unaware of the trouble they were in. For just off to the right lurked a big, fat blackbird, also looking for a tasty morsel to tide him through until lunchtime. A tasty morsel such as a woodlouse, or three. So the three children munched on as the blackbird hopped nearer.

Just at that moment, the air became filled with the loudest of buzzing sounds, together with a cry of "There they are!" from above. The sound caught the attention not only of the searchers but also of the children who looked up with full mouths to see what all the noise was about. But what they saw first was not the hoverflies coming to their rescue but the big, fat blackbird, licking its beak.

"Quick," squealed Wanda "run and save yourselves!"

But try as they might, they couldn't run. They had eaten so much wood they could hardly move. All they could do was stand and stare as the blackbird hopped towards them.

Then suddenly it stopped, unable to take the final step it needed to reach Winnie. Struggle though it did to reach her, it simply could not, for Sybil Spider who had also heard the cry of Harry "Hurricane" Hoverfly, had quickly spun a web between the blackbird and the children. (Of course, not many spiders would help a woodlouse but Sybil was a very special and kind spider). Sybil knew, however, that her web could not hold the blackbird for long, though.



It was, however, long enough for the main troops to arrive. As the children started to escape as fast as their fat tummies would allow, Major Marchwell appeared through the trees. His troops had soon swarmed all over the blackbird's feet and up its legs, stinging them until the blackbird was forced to flee.

William and Wendy, and not forgetting Billy Beetle, arrived just in time to see the predator fly off, far away into the distant trees. They were so relieved to see Wallace, Wanda and Winnie safe that they completely forgot to tell them off for straying. Not that they needed to, for the children had truly learned their lesson.

"Come along home now, all of you," said Wendy, "and I'll find you something nice for lunch."

Strangely enough, though, none of them were very hungry.