Opening extract from

The Children of Green Knowe

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A little boy was sitting in the corner of a railway carriage looking out at the rain, which was splashing against the windows and blotching downward in an ugly, dirty way. He was not the only person in the carriage, but the others were strangers to him. He was alone as usual. There were two women opposite him, a fat one and a thin one, and they talked without stopping, smacking their lips in between sentences and seeming to enjoy what they said as much as if it were something to eat. They were knitting all the time, and whenever the train stopped the click-clack of their needles was loud and clear like two clocks. It was a stopping train – more stop than go – and it had been crawling along through flat flooded country for a long time. Everywhere there was water – not sea or rivers or lakes, but just senseless flood water with the rain splashing into it. Sometimes the railway lines were covered by it, and then the train-noise was quite different, softer than a boat.

'I wish it was *the* Flood,' thought the boy, 'and that I was going to the Ark. That would be fun! Like the circus. Perhaps Noah had a whip and made all the animals go round and round for exercise. What a noise there would be, with the lions roaring, elephants trumpeting, pigs squealing, donkeys braying, horses whinnying, bulls bellowing, and cocks and hens always thinking they were going to be trodden on but unable to fly up on to the roof where all the other birds were singing, screaming, twittering, squawking and cooing. What must it have sounded like, coming along on the tide? And did Mrs Noah just knit, knit and take no notice?'

The two women opposite him were getting ready for the next station. They packed up their knitting and collected their parcels and then sat staring at the little boy. He had a thin face and very large eyes; he looked patient and rather sad. They seemed to notice him for the first time.

'What's your name, son?' asked the fat woman suddenly. 'I've never seen you on this train before.' This was always a question he dreaded. Was he to say his unexpected real name or his silly pet names?

'Toseland,' he said.

'Toseland! That's a real old-fashioned name in these parts. There's Fen Toseland, and Toseland St Agnes and Toseland Gunning. What's your Christian name?'

'That is it – Toseland.'

'Do your mum and dad live round here, son?'

'No, they live in Burma.'

'Fancy that now! That's a long way away. Where are you going, then?'

'I don't know. That is, I'm going to my great-grandmother Oldknow at Green Noah. The station is Penny Soaky.'

'That's the next station after this. We get out here. Don't forget – the next station. And make sure there's some dry land before you get out of the train. The floods are bad there. Bye-bye, cheerio.'

They got out, shouting and joking with the porters and kissing the people who had come to meet them. They started off into the hissing rain as if they loved it. Toseland heard the fat woman's loud voice saying, 'Oh, I don't mind this. I like it, it's our home-rain, not like that dirty London water.'

The train jogged on again and now Toseland was quite alone. He wished he had a family like other people – brothers and sisters, even if his father were away. His mother was dead. He had a stepmother but he hardly knew her and was miserably shy of her. He had been at a boarding-school, and for the last holidays he had been left behind to stay with the head mistress, Miss Spudd, and her old father. They meant

to be kind to him, but they never spoke to him without saying 'dear'. It was 'Finish up your porridge, dear, we don't want you to get thin,' or 'Put on your coat, dear, we don't want you to catch cold,' or 'Get ready for church, dear, we don't want you to grow up a heathen.' And every day after breakfast, 'Run along to your room, dear, we want to read the papers.'

But now his great-grandmother Oldknow had written that he was to come and live with her. He had never seen her, but she was his own great-grandmother, and that was something. Of course she would be very old. He thought of some old people he had seen who were so old that it frightened him. He wondered if she would be frighteningly old. He began to feel afraid already, and to shake it off he thought about Green Noah and Penny Soaky. What queer names! Green Noah was pure mystery, but Penny Soaky was friendly like a joke.

Suddenly the train stopped, and the porters were shouting 'Penny Soaky! Penny Soaky!' Toseland had no sooner got the door open than a man wearing a taxi-driver's hat came along calling:

'Anybody here for Green Noah? Are you Master Toseland for Green Noah?'

'Oh yes, please. It's me.'

'This your luggage? Two more in the van? You stand here out of the rain while I get it.'

There were a few houses to be seen on one side of the line, and on the other nothing but flooded fields with hedges standing in the water.

'Come along,' said the taxi-man. 'I've put all your luggage in the car. It'll be dark before we get there and we've got to go through a lot of water.'

'Is it deep?'

'Not so deep, I hope, that we can't get through.'

'If it rains forty days and forty nights will it be a real flood?'

'Sure enough it would.'

Toseland sat by the driver and they set off. The windscreen wipers made two clear fans on the windscreen through which he could see the road half covered with water, with ditches brimming on either side. When they came near the bridge that crossed the river, the road disappeared under water altogether and they seemed to drive into the side of the river with a great splash that flew up against the windows; but it was only a few inches deep and then they reached the humpbacked bridge and went up and over it, and down again into deeper water on the other side. This time they drove very carefully like bathers walking out into cold water. The car crept along making wide ripples.

'We don't want to stick here,' said the driver, 'this car don't float.'

They came safely through that side too, and now the headlights were turned on, for it was growing dark, and Toseland could see nothing but rain and dazzle.

'Is it far?' he asked.

'Not very, but we have to go a long way round to get past the floods. Green Noah stands almost in the middle of it now, because the river runs alongside the garden. Once you get there you won't be able to get out again till the flood goes down.'

'How will I get in, then?'

'Can you swim?'

'Yes, I did twenty strokes last summer. Will that be enough?'

'You'll have to do better than that. Perhaps if you felt yourself sinking you could manage a few more?'

'But it's quite dark. How will I know where to swim to?'

The driver laughed. 'Don't you worry. Mrs Oldknow will never let you drown. She'll see you get there all right. Now here we are. At least, I can't go any further.' Toseland pushed the car door open and looked out. It had stopped raining. The car was standing in a lane of shallow water that

stretched out into the dark in front and behind. The driver was wearing Wellington boots, and he got out and paddled round the car. Toseland was afraid that he would be left now to go on as best he could by himself. He did not like to show that he was afraid, so he tried another way of finding out.

'If I am going to swim,' he said, 'what will you do with my luggage?'

'You haven't got no gum boots, have you?' said the driver. 'Come on, get on my shoulders and we'll have a look round to see if anyone's coming to meet you.' Toseland climbed on to his shoulders and they set off, but almost at once they heard the sound of oars, and a lantern came round the corner of the lane rocking on the bows of a rowing boat. A man called out, 'Is that Master Toseland?' The driver shouted back, 'Is that Mr Boggis?' but Toseland was speechless with relief and delight.

'Good evening, Master Toseland,' said Mr Boggis, holding up the lantern to look at him, while Toseland looked too, and saw a nice old cherry-red face with bright blue eyes. 'Pleased to meet you. I knew your mother when she was your size. I bet you were wondering how you were going to get home?' It was nice to hear somebody talking about 'home' in that way. Toseland felt much happier, and now he knew that the driver had been teasing him, so he grinned and said: 'I was going to swim.'

The boat was moored to somebody's garden gate while the two men put the trunk and tuck-box into it.

'You'll be all right now,' said the taxi-man. 'Good night to you both.'

'Good night, and thank you,' said Toseland.

Mr Boggis handed him the lantern and told him to kneel up in the bows with it and shout if they were likely to bump into anything. They rowed round two corners in the road and then in at a big white gate. Toseland waved the lantern about and saw trees and bushes standing in the water, and

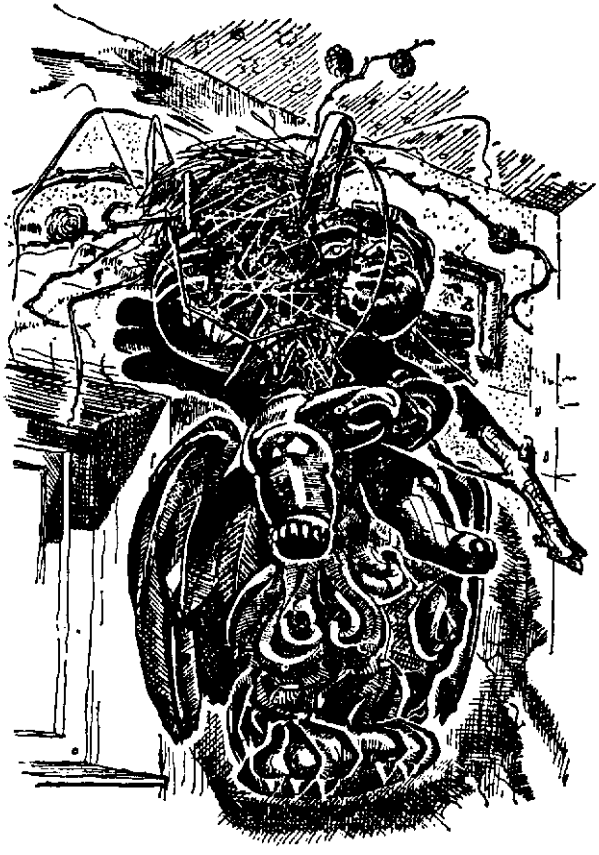
presently the boat was rocked by quite a strong current and the reflection of the lantern streamed away in elastic jigsaw shapes and made gold rings round the tree trunks. At last they came to a still pool reaching to the steps of the house, and the keel of the boat grated on gravel. The windows were all lit up, but it was too dark to see what kind of a house it was, only that it was high and narrow like a tower.

'Come along in,' said Mr Boggis. 'I'll show you in. I'd like to see Mrs Oldknow's face when she sees you.'

The entrance hall was a strange place. As they stepped in, a similar door opened at the far end of the house and another man and boy entered there. Then Toseland saw that it was only themselves in a big mirror. The walls round him were partly rough stone and partly plaster, but hung all over with mirrors and pictures and china. There were three big old mirrors all reflecting each other so that at first Toseland was puzzled to find what was real, and which door one could go through straight, the way one wanted to, not sideways somewhere else. He almost wondered which was really himself.

There were vases everywhere filled with queer flowers – branches of dry winter twigs out of which little tassels and rosettes of flower petals were bursting, some yellow, some white, some purple. They had an exciting smell, almost like something to eat, and they looked as if they had been produced by magic, as if someone had said 'Abracadabra! Let these sticks burst into flower.' 'What if my great-grandmother is a witch!' he thought. Above the vases, wherever there was a beam or an odd corner or a door-post out of which they could, as it were, grow, there were children carved in dark oak, leaning out over the flowers. Most of them had wings, one had a real bird's nest on its head, and all of them had such round polished cheeks they seemed to be laughing and welcoming him.

While he was looking round him, Boggis had taken his coat and cap from him and hung them up. 'Your great-



grandmother will be in here,' he said, and led him to a little old stone doorway such as you might find in a belfry. He knocked on the door. 'Come in,' said a clear voice. Boggis gave Toseland a shove, and he found himself inside.

The room seemed to be the ground floor of a castle, much like the ruined castles that he had explored on school picnics, only this was not a ruin. It looked as if it never possibly could be. Its thick stone walls were strong, warm and lively. It was furnished with comfortable polished old-fashioned things as though living in castles was quite ordinary. Tose-

land stood just inside the door and felt it must be a dream.

His great-grandmother was sitting by a huge open fireplace where logs and peat were burning. The room smelled of woods and wood-smoke. He forgot about her being frighteningly old. She had short silver curls and her face had so many wrinkles it looked as if someone had been trying to draw her for a very long time and every line put in had made the face more like her. She was wearing a soft dress of folded velvet that was as black as a hole in darkness. The room was full of candles in glass candlesticks, and there was candlelight in her ring when she held out her hand to him.

'So you've come back!' she said, smiling, as he came forward, and he found himself leaning against her shoulder as if he knew her quite well.

'Why do you say "come back"?' he asked, not at all shy.

'I wondered whose face it would be of all the faces I knew,' she said. 'They always come back. You are like another Toseland, your grandfather. What a good thing you have the right name, because I should always be calling you Tolly anyway. I used to call him Tolly. Have you got a pet name? I'm sure they don't call you Toseland at school.'

'No, I get called Towser.'

'And at home?'

'My stepmother calls me Toto, but I hate it. It's worse than Towser.'

'I think I agree with you. Here we are all used to Toseland, it's the family name and doesn't seem queer to us. So you shan't be Toto here. Do you mind Tolly?'

'I like it. It's what my mother used to call me. What shall I call you?'

'Granny,' she said. 'What does one generation more or less matter? I'm glad you have come. It will seem lovely to me. How many years of you have I wasted?'

'Seven,' said Tolly, watching the flames tugging loose from the logs and leaping up the black chimney. They

reminded him of bonfire flames wrestling and tearing and whistling in the sky on the fifth of November. Those had been frightening, but these were wonderful.

'Are these our flames?' he asked. 'I mean, are they our own?'

'The blue ones are yours and the orange ones are mine.'

'And the candle-flames?'

'All yours.'

Tolly hesitated, then asked in a very little voice because he hardly dared, 'Is it my house – I mean, partly?'

'Of course it is – partly, as you say. Well, now that you are here what shall we do first? Are you hungry?'

She rose and, standing, looked much older. Her figure was bent and shrunken, her face no higher than Tolly's own. The folds of her dress seemed both to weigh her down and hold her up. She brought a tray that was laid ready for him on the sideboard, and put it on a low table in front of the fire. There were egg sandwiches and chicken sandwiches and iced orange cake and jelly and chocolate finger biscuits. Toseland ate happily and tried not to make crumbs.

'I came in a boat with a lantern,' he said. 'I played the house was Noah's Ark.'

'Oh, the Ark! So you played it was the Ark.'

'Yes, Do you think Noah had a whip like a circus man and made the animals run round and round for exercise?'

'Yes. And Ham juggled with clubs and plates to pass the time away, and Shem and Japhet were clowns and tried to make Mrs Noah laugh. But she never did, because if she had done, all her buttons would have burst off. She was done up very tight.'

At that moment the fire went *pop*! and shot a piece of wood out into the room. *Pop*! again.

'Buttons! Who said buttons? Poor Mrs Noah.' Tolly chased the sparks and trod on them to put them out.

'Why do you live in a castle?' he said, looking round.

'Why not? Castles were meant to live in.'

'I thought that was only in fairy-tales. Is it a real castle?'

'Of course.'

'I mean, do things happen in it, like the castles in books?'

'Oh, yes, things happen in it.'

'What sort of things?'

'Wait and see! I'm waiting too, to see what happens now that you are here. Something will, I'm sure. Tomorrow you can explore the inside of the house up and down, and learn your way about and to feel at home in it, because you won't be able to go outside until the floods go down. And now you must come and see your own room, and you must go to bed early tonight.'

She led him up winding stairs and through a high, arched room like a knight's hall, that she called the Music Room, and up more stairs to the very top of the house. Here there was a room under the roof, with a ceiling the shape of the roof and all the beams showing. It was a long room with a triangle of wall at each end and no walls at the sides, because the sloping ceiling came down to the floor, like a tent. There were windows on three sides, and a little low wooden bed in the middle covered with a patchwork quilt, as unlike a school bed as anything could be. There was a low table, a chest of drawers and lots of smooth, polished, empty floor. At one side there was a beautiful old rocking-horse – not a 'safety' rocking-horse hanging on iron swings from a centre shaft, but a horse whose legs were stretched to full gallop, fixed to long rockers so that it could, if you rode it violently, both rear and kick. On the other side was a doll's house. By the bed was a wooden box painted vermilion with bright patterns all over it, and next to it all Tolly's luggage piled up, making the room look really his. A wicker bird-cage hung from one of the beams. On the only side that had no window there hung a big mirror reflecting all the rest – the rafters, the wicker cage, the rocking-horse, the doll's house, the painted box, the bed.

'In this house,' said Tolly, 'everything is twice!' He tried

the lid of the painted box, but could not open it.

'The key is lost,' said Mrs Oldknow. 'I don't know what's in it. It used to be the children's toy-box.'

He put his hand on the rocking-horse's mane, which was real horse-hair. Its tail was real hair too, black and soft and long. He started it rocking. It made a nice creaky sound, like a rocking-chair. He opened the front of the doll's house. 'Why, it's this house!' he said. 'Look, here's the Knight's Hall, and here's the stairs, and here's my room! Here's the rocking-horse and here's the red box, and here's the tiny bird-cage! But it's got four beds in it. Are there sometimes other children here?'

Mrs Oldknow looked at him as if she would like to know everything about him before she answered.

'Yes,' she said, 'sometimes.'

'Who are they?'

'You'll see when they come, if they come.'

'When do they come?'

'When they like. Now let's unpack. Here are your pyjamas. Is there anything you want to have in bed with you – any books or photos that you put under your pillow?'

On the chest of drawers Tolly had seen two curly white china dogs, an old clock, and an ebony mouse, life-sized with shiny black eyes. It was so cleverly carved that you could see every hair, and it felt like fur to stroke. As he pulled the sheets up to his nose he said, 'Can I have the mouse in bed?'

Mrs Oldknow smiled. 'You want Toby's Japanese mouse? Here it is.'

'Who's Toby?'

'Well, really another Toseland. Toby for short. Now sleep well. I'll light the night-light for you. Oh, the clock's not going.'

She picked up the old clock, which had a sun and moon painted on its face, and started it ticking. It had a very slow tick-tock, comforting and sleepy. 'There,' she said. 'Now,

good night. My room is underneath yours – you can knock on the floor if you want me.'

She went away, and Tolly lay happily looking at the surprising shadows made by the little night-light – the beams, the big shadow of the rocking-horse, the low one of the doll's house on the floor, the elongated wandering criss-crosses of the bird-cage on the ceiling. The mirror repeated it all in the opposite direction, distant and slightly tilted. How could such a little light do it all? Never in his life had he lain in such a room, yet it did not feel strange. He felt with all his heart that he was at home. He held the mouse in his hand under the pillow and soon fell asleep.

He slept long and well. In his dreams he was swimming towards the house in the dark when he heard the creak of oars coming to meet him. He tried to shout, but it was too difficult to do while swimming. In the effort he woke up. The funny thing was, that lying there with his eyes closed he could still hear the creak-croak. No, it couldn't be oars, it must be the rocking-horse. He sat up in bed, and it seemed to him that the horse had just that minute stopped rocking.