



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Summer

Arthur Ransome, Ririro

What are the things we know the Summer by? Summer clothes say little girls, and big straw hats say boys. Well, and what are those clothes good for during the heat? The Imp wears a huge straw hat and a loose overall when he walks around panting, and lies flat on the ground with the straw hat over his nose to keep the sun from burning his face. And the Elf wears an overall, too, and a pale blue calico sunbonnet over her curls. She is often too hot to enjoy anything except sitting in the swing in the orchard and listening to fairy tales. And I, well, I am often too hot to tell fairy tales.

"Yes, yes, yes," you say, "but what do you do? It can't always be too hot to do anything." I asked the Elf what we do do in Summer time, and her eyes grew bigger and bigger, and she clapped her hands and said, "Do? Why, everything." And now I am going to try to tell you a few of the things that make the everything so delightful.

First of all there are cowslip balls. We go, the three of us, to the field where the cowslips grow. Little cousins of the primroses the cowslips are, as you know already. Well, we take a long piece of string and fasten one end to a bush, and pick piles of flowers close to the top of the long stalk and hang them over the thread, so that some of the flowers hang on one side and some on the other. And when we have a great row hanging on the thread we take its two ends and tie them together. And all the cowslips tumble into the middle and crowd up against each other, and when the thread is tied they are packed so close that they make a beautiful ball, with nothing but cowslip faces to be seen all over it. And that is a cowslip ball.

Close under the moor, not so very far away from the house, there is a gate where the lane divides into three or four rough paths that run over the heather to the moorland farms. And just by the gate there is a hawthorn tree. The flowers of the hawthorn are not, like the catkins, over before the hazel shows its leaves. They wait till all the tree is vivid green, and then sparkle out all over it in brilliant white or coral colour. We call the hawthorn, May. And a long time ago all over England on May-Day people used to pick the May and make a crown of it and decorate a high pole in the middle of each village. And then they danced round the pole, and crowned the prettiest of the girls and called her the Queen of the May. She had a sprig of hawthorn blossom for a sceptre, and everybody

did what she told them. It must have been rather nice for the little girl who was chosen Queen.

But now nearly everybody has forgotten about May-Day fun. Perhaps they would not enjoy it even if they remembered. But here, when the May is out, the country children from the farms over the moorland and from this end of the valley choose a fine day and come to the tree. The Imp and the Elf always take care to find out when they are coming. Then they bang on the study door for me and away we go, with plenty of buns and sandwiches in our pockets. And always when we get to the tree we find that some of the country children are there before us. And soon the fun begins. They all dance round the tree, and after eating all the buns and things they choose a King and Queen, and play Oranges and Lemons, the King and Queen leading off. This year they chose the Imp and the Elf, and you just can't imagine how proud they were, and how the Imp strutted about with his hawthorn sceptre, and the Elf kept re-arranging her curls under her green and starry crown. The sun shone all day, and we were all as happy as anyone could wish to be.

Then, too, in Summer we go quietly and softly through the little wood at the back of the house and wait at the other side of it and peep over the hedge. There is a steep bank on the other side and then a row of little trees, the remains of an old hedge, and then another bank. And the other bank is full of holes, and the holes are full of rabbits. And in the Summer evening we go there and watch the little rabbits skipping about and nibbling the grass. And of course as the Summer goes on the grass grows very high, and when we walk through it we can sometimes see nothing but the ears of the little rabbits peeping up above it. You can't imagine how funny they look. Once the Imp fell right over the top of one of them that was hidden in the grass. It jumped out under his feet and he was so startled that he fell forward, and felt something warm and furry wriggling in his hands, and found that he had caught a baby rabbit. The Elf and the Imp patted and stroked it till it was not frightened any more, and then we put it on the ground and let it go. It hopped away through the grass and disappeared into its burrow in the bank. I do not wonder that it was a little afraid and trembly when the Imp, who must seem a giant to it though he only seems a boy to me, came bumping down on it out of the sky.

Besides the rabbits we find all sorts of other charming things in the long grass that swishes so happily round our ankles. Buttercups are there which send a golden light over your chin if you hold them near enough, buttercups, and dandelions, and purple thistles, and wild orchids. You know thistles and dandelions, of course, but I wonder if you know an orchid when you see one? They are quite common things, but lots of even country children do not bother to look for them. Next time you are in the fields in Summer just look about you for a spike of tiny purple flowers with speckled lips rising out of a little cluster of green

leaves with brown spots on them. Soon after these have begun to flower we often find another kind, with speckled flowers too, only far paler purple. And later still there is a meadow where we can usually discover just a very few Butterfly orchids. They have a spike of delicate fluttery flowers, not so close together as the purple kinds, and with green in the veins of their white petals. They are a great prize and the Elf always picks one, leaving the rest, and brings it very carefully home and keeps it in water for as long as she can for it is a treasure indeed.

In another bank, not so very far from the home of the rabbits, another little furry creature lives, a pretty little brown-coated, long-tailed person, a great hunter, and much feared by the rabbits. He has a long, thin body, and a sharp little head, and a wavy tail. He is a weasel. His bank is just by the side of a pleasant little trickling beck, and not very far from the wood where the pheasants live. Some day he will be shot by the keeper for I am afraid he is rather fond of pheasant. There are plenty of stories about him among the country people. They say that if you whistle near his hole he will come running out to see what is the matter; and if you go on whistling he will come nearer and nearer until you can catch him with your hands. I have never tried, so I do not know if this is true. But I should not like to catch him in my hands for his teeth are as sharp as a rat's. At any rate there is one thing that is far more certain to bring him out of his hole than any whistle, and that is want of rabbit. Once, as we walked through the fields in the Summer twilight, we heard a short squeal and saw a poor little rabbit hopping feebly away with Mr. Weasel running nimbly along after him. And the funny thing is that the rabbit instead of scampering away as fast as he could go, was going quite slowly, and in the end stopped altogether, when the weasel ran up and killed him. The Elf said it was cruel of the weasel and silly of the rabbit. The Imp said he did not know about the weasel, but the rabbit deserved to be killed for being so slow in getting away. But our old gardener, who is wisest of us all, says that the weasel has to kill rabbits to keep alive, and that it isn't the rabbit's fault that it cannot run fast. He says that when a rabbit is chased by a weasel it cannot help going slower and slower, and being terribly frightened because it knows that it cannot escape.

The sheep in the fields are just as interesting as the rabbits or the weasels. One of the most exciting of all the Summer things has to do with them. Towards the end of May the Elf and the Imp are always bothering the farmers round about, to find out when shearing and washing time is going to be. There is an old rhyme that the farmers' wives tell us, and it says:

"Wash in May,
Wash wool away.
Wash in June,
The wool's in tune."

What it means is that if the farmers wash the sheep in May the wool is not so strong and healthy as it is later, and comes off in the water. While, if they wash them in June the wool is quite crisp and stands on end, and so is very easy to cut. Usually the farmers wash the sheep in the beginning of June, and these two children always manage to find out the day before. They come and bang at my door as usual, but when they come in they bring my hat and walking-stick with them, for they know quite well that on sheep-washing day I am sure to want to come with them. And then off we go along the road that leads by the hawthorn tree, over the moor and down on the other side, to where a little river runs between two farms about a mile from each. The river widens into a broad shallow pool, and here the farmers bring the sheep. The Imp and the Elf and I have a fine seat in the boughs of a big oak that overhangs the water. Here we sit in a row and have a splendid view. The sheep are all crowded together in pens at each side of the water, and the farmers wade out into the stream taking the sheep between their legs, and wash them one after the other. I told you there were two farms who use this washing place. Well, every year they race in their sheep-washing, and see who can get most sheep washed in the shortest time. The Elf takes one side and the Imp takes the other, and it is really quite exciting.

When the sheep are all clean they are turned loose in the fields again for a whole week in which to get properly dry. Then they are driven into the farmyards or into pens in the fields, and the farmers clip the wool off them close to the skin. They only shear the old sheep and last year's lambs; and that is why, after shearing time, the new lambs have so much finer and longer coats than those of their mothers. We always wondered why that was, until we found out that the farmers only clip the tails of the lambs, but leave their coats on, while they take all the wool off the old sheep, and send it away to be made into nightgowns and things for Imps and Elves and you and me and everybody else.

After the sheep-shearing comes the haymaking, and that is the piece of Summer fun that the Imp loves best of all. We watch the grass growing taller and taller, till the buttercups no longer tower above it, and the orchids die away. We notice all the different grasses, the beautiful feathery ones that the fairy ladies use as fans in the warm midsummer nights, and those like spears, and those like swords, flat and green and horribly sharp at the edges. We see them all grow up and up, and change their colour under the Summer sun. And then at last comes the day when the farmers of the farm across the meadow harness old Susan, the big brown horse, to a scarlet clattering rattling mowing machine that glitters in the sunlight. And then we hear it singing down the field, making a noise like somebody beating two sticks together very fast indeed. As soon as we hear that, we climb through the hedge at the bottom of the garden or over it, and run round the field, because if we came straight across it, we should trample the grass, and then the farmer would not smile at us so pleasantly. And we shout for

Dick the labourer who sometimes lets the Imp or the Elf ride Susan home from the fields. We find him sitting on the little round seat at the back of the mowing machine holding the long ropes which do instead of reins. And Susan is tramping solidly ahead, and the machine drags after her, and the hay falls behind flat on the ground in great wisps. And the Imp runs along by the side of the machine, and tells Dick that he is going to be a farmer, too, when he is big enough. Do you know I never met a little boy yet, who did not want to be a farmer when the hay is being cut? I was quite certain that I was going to be a farmer myself, long ago when I was a little boy, and not an Ogre at all.

And then, when the hay is cut we toss it and dry it, and that is even jollier than the cutting. The farmer's daughters and Dick's wife come into the field and join in tossing the grass and turning it over with long wooden hayrakes, until it is quite dry. And they laugh at the Elf and the Imp, and throw great bundles of hay over the top of them. And the Imp and the Elf throw the hay back at them, and tease them until they are allowed to do a little raking and tossing for themselves. But they soon tire of that. Presently the Imp throws a wisp of hay over the Elf, and the Elf throws hay over the Imp, and then they throw hay over each other, as much and as fast as they can. And then they creep up to me, where I am sitting as a quiet comfortable Ogre should, smoking or reading. And suddenly it seems as if all the hay in all the world were being tumbled over my head and shoulders. The Imp and the Elf cover me all over with hay, and then sit on top of me, and pretend that I am a live mountain out of a fairy tale, and that they are giants, a giant and a giantess taking a rest. And suddenly the live mountain heaves itself up in the middle, and upsets the giant and the giantess one on each side. And then we all get up covered with hay and very warm, and laugh and laugh until we are too hot to laugh any longer.

When the sun falls lower in the sky, and the hedge throws a broad cool shadow over the clipped grass, we all sit under it out of the sunlight, the farmer's daughters in their bright pink blouses and blue skirts, the farmer and Dick and I smoking our pipes together, and the Elf and the Imp in their smocks. We all meet under the shadow of the hedge as soon as we see two figures leave the farmyard and come towards us over the fields. One of them is the maid who helps in the farm and the other is the farmer's wife. Each of them carries a big round basket. They come up to us blinking their eyes against the sun, red in the face, and smiling and jolly. And we help them to unload the baskets, which are full of food and drink. Great big slices of bunloaf, dark and full of soft, juicy raisins, and tea, the best tea you ever tasted, for tea never tastes so nice as when you drink it under a hedge and out of a ginger beer bottle.

Haymaking is better fun than sheep-washing and lasts longer. It is not all over in a day. There are such a lot of things to do. The hay has to be cut and tossed and dried and piled into haycocks before it is ready to be heaved high on pitchforks

on the top of a waggon that is to carry it away to the farm. And after all when you have made hay in one field you can go and make it another. And there are such a lot of fields about here.

But when the hay is dry and ready in big, lumpy haycocks, the Imp and the Elf shout for joy to see old Susan harnessed to the big waggon come lumbering into the field, and to see the men throw the huge bundles of hay into the cart. One man stands amid the hay in the waggon and takes each new bundle as soon as it is pitchforked up, and packs it neatly with the hay already there. The hay rises higher and higher in the waggon, and the Imp loves to be in the waggon with the man, and to climb higher with the hay until at last he is high above the hedges, for by the time the cart is fully loaded you would think it was a great house of hay, ready to topple over the next minute. But the men do not seem to be afraid of that. They just fling a rope across the top and fasten it to keep all safe. And the Imp lies flat on his stomach on the very top of everything, and hears the farmer below him sing out, "Gee hoa, Susan!" and Susan swings herself forward and with one great jerk starts the waggon, and the Elf waves her pocket-handkerchief as they go rumbling away across the rough field and out on the lane to the farm, taking the hay that is to keep the cows fat and healthy through the winter.

When the last of all the carts of hay has rumbled away like that, Dick's wife, who knows all the old songs, reminds the Elf and the Imp of this one;

"With the last load of hay
Light-heart Summer trips away,
When the cuckoo's double note
Chokes within his mottled throat,
Then we country children say,
Light-heart Summer trips away."

Though Summer does not go quite yet, there is a sad sound already in the woods, for the cuckoo who told us that Summer was coming, sings cuckoo no longer, but only a melancholy cuck, cuck, as if he were too hot and tired to finish his song. And that means that he is going soon.

"Cuckoo, cuckoo,
How do you?
In April
I open my bill;
In May
I sing by night and day;
In June
I change my tune;
In July

Away I fly;
In August
Away I must."

It is very hard to tell when Summer ends and Autumn begins. But as soon as we hear the cuckoo drop the last note of his song we know that we must soon expect the time of golden corn, and after that of crimson leaves and orange. And when we hear the cuckoo no more at all, the Imp and Elf and I take marmalade sandwiches and bottled tea for a picnic in the hazel wood that is now thick with leaves, and so thickly peopled with caterpillars that they tumble on the Imp's big hat and get entangled in the Elf's hair as we pick our way through the trees. We have our picnic on a bank there, the very bank where we find violets and primroses in the spring, and the Elf lying close to the warm ground whispers "Good-bye, Summer," and even the cheerful Imp feels a little sad.

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