

An excerpt from  
**The Rose and Crown**  
by Meriol Trevor

1 The House in the Wood

THE first time Matt went to Woodhall it was June, it was midsummer and the sun shone all day long in the middle of the blue sky. All the fields were green with corn as he went through them, the meadows with long grass waving till the hay-cutter came, or short and emerald where the cows were grazing, for there had been days of rain, but now the rain was gone, cleared off as if it had never been and all the middle country of England lay bright around as he went through, going in the train.

It was half-term and Matt was going to visit his sister. He had no mother or father, but he had this stepsister who was fifteen years older and always looked after him. Her name was Caroline Rendal, but Matt called her Caro. He was just thirteen. In term time, now, he lived in Birmingham with Aunt Maud Baker, who was elderly and widowed and had never had any children. She thought it was her duty to help 'poor Caroline' with Matthew, as she always called him, so that he came almost to dislike the sound of his whole name. For Aunt Maud thought Matt a clumsy, untidy nuisance of a boy, and told him so several times a day. Luckily he was at school till tea-time most days. But now Birmingham and school and Aunt Maud's tiny tidy brick house were left behind, and Matt was going to visit his sister in the place where she was working.

It was something of a mystery to Matt, this place called Woodhall, because it seemed such a big house, and yet there were not many servants there to run it. Caro was doing the cooking, but she said nobody else lived in except an old French Mademoiselle who did the flowers and dusted the best china ornaments. The housework was done daily by women who came up from the village.

Caro's jobs were usually in schools, so that she could have holidays with Matt, but last term she had got engaged to be married to a man called Jasper Hartnoll. Jasper was tall and handsome and had a Jaguar and a good job in a Birmingham firm, and he did not like Caro working as cook in a school and so she gave it up.

"Just think, Matt," she said. "When I'm married we shall have a home of our own and you can have a room just as you like, just exactly as you like."

But Matt was gloomy. He did not like Jasper Hartnoll. He had a feeling Jasper would spoil any home for him. He also felt Jasper did not like him, thought he was stupid and a nuisance and wished Caro had no relations.

Suddenly one day Caro told Matt she was going to take a job again.

"What will Jasper say?" he asked, very surprised.

"I shan't tell him till I'm there," said Caro. She then explained that Jasper's father was a very rich man and not only director of his firm but a baronet as well, Sir Godfrey Hartnoll. It turned out that when Jasper had started to tell him he wanted to marry Caro, Sir Godfrey had got very angry indeed and had refused to listen at all. Jasper was his only son and would be Sir Jasper one day and inherit all his money, and Sir Godfrey was furious at the idea of his wanting to marry a girl who was nothing but a cook, because somehow he found out about her job and despised her at once because of it.

"So we have got to wait and get him used to the idea slowly," said Caro. "And I would rather go on earning my own living till it's all settled."

So she took this job doing the cooking in a big house near Bewdley in the country of the Wyre Forest, beyond Severn. Her letters for the first half of term had been very hurried and Matt only knew that her employer was an old lady called Mrs. Ayre, who was French by birth, and was known as “Madame” and who lived alone in the big house with her granddaughter Alix.

Now, on this hot bright afternoon, Matt arrived in Bewdley, beautiful in its warm red brick against the dark wooded hills, hanging above the great deep sliding Severn, the most mysterious of all the rivers in England.

Caro had come to meet him. There she was, in a white blouse and a bright yellow skirt, with her gold hair coiled in a high knot at the back of her head like a girl of ancient Greece, and her brown eyes smiling at him out of her golden face. Matt thought Caro was beautiful: so did a great many other people. Perhaps if Jasper’s father had seen her he would have decided it didn’t matter that she had no money and had worked as a cook in schools for most of her life since she grew up, and her father died. Mr. Rendal had been a schoolmaster; Matt could just remember him, tall and grey-haired, a man whose frequent chuckles often turned into fits of coughing.

Caro and Matt had tea together in Bewdley and then they lugged Matt’s case to a bus and went hurtling away along narrow country roads. They got out of the bus outside some great gates, miles from anywhere it seemed to Matt. Tall trees stood up all round. Leaves hung in green murmuring clouds high over their heads. They were in the forest country. The posts of the gates were lichened, the brick and stone crumbling. On top of each post was a stone eagle with wings half-spread and beak raised.

“The eagle is the Ayre family crest,” said Caro, as they went through a little gate beside the big ones. The iron was rusty on all of them, the paint flaking off in big bubbles and blisters. Grass was growing in places along the middle of the gravel drive.

“No money left,” said Caro.

“But no one could live here without any money,” said Matt.

“It would be a lot to us,” Caro agreed. “But not enough to keep up a great place like this. Most of the garden has gone wild.”

Matt stared up the straight drive. Each side tall lime trees stood, lacing overhead their smooth shadows of leaves. Far away at the end of the avenue he saw the front of a house, looking small because it was so remote, red brick with long rows of windows.

“I thought only Dukes and people lived in places like this,” Matt said. “They’re not Dukes, are they? She’s not even Lady Somebody.”

“No,” said Caro. “But they are an old family.”

“Everybody’s family must be old,” Matt pointed out. He was rather given to pedantic considerations of this kind.

Caro laughed. “Well, long established in the ruling class, then,” she said. “They were probably fighting in the Wars of the Roses for all I know. As for Madame, it’s a continual surprise to me that her family survived the French Revolution. She still behaves as if it had not happened.”

“Don’t you like her?”

Caro made a face. “She is very particular. And listen, Matt, she says on no account are you to go into their part of the house, or the garden.”

“Why on earth not?”

She's a queer old creature. She says she hates men. She doesn't really, of course. But she is very fussy and thinks a boy about the place would upset everything. She nearly did not engage me when she heard about you, but I think she Wnds it hard to get a cook who will stay here, so far from the town and so lonely. Anyway, she doesn't want her precious little Alix contaminated by a rough boy. I daresay she's afraid Alix would get rough herself for she has plenty of spirit, that child, from what I've seen of her. Too much, even."

"How old is she?"

"Thirteen, like you."

"Well, I don't want to meet her particularly," said Matt, but he was offended all the same at not being considered fit to associate with the child of this ancient house.

Caro took him down a side walk through trees and more trees and shrubberies, so that they came out at the side of the house instead of at the front. Front and back were both grand and formal, but here at the side was a small rambling town of utilitarian buildings, a big paved yard and long stables with a clock tower. The hands of the clock stood at twelve.

"Stopped," said Matt, squinting up in the sun. It was warm here, now that they were out of the shade of the trees.

"It stopped years ago," said Caro.

They were both very tired of lugging Matt's case by now, and put it down with a crash inside the back door. The kitchens and sculleries were enormous regions, but there was no one in them, only a tabby cat asleep in the old basket-chair near the shining black kitchen range.

Caro took Matt up the uncarpeted back stairs, two flights of them, to his high room, small and bare, looking out on the stable yard.

"Mine's here," she said, showing him. "The bathroom's on the floor below, built over the old wash-house."

Caro had made her room look like herself by filling it with flowers and pinning up her favorite postcards from the National Gallery. On the window-sill stood her little porcelain Madonna and Child which came from Italy, and a big curled shell which she had found on the Norfolk sands last summer. Matt picked it up at once and held it to his ear and immediately he heard the long slow breathing of the sea, the soft roar, the echoing sigh of the waters that flow all round England, washing up and down her shores always till the end of the world.

"How strange to listen to the sea here in the very middle of England," he said.

"There's no sea here, not for miles and miles. It's all ground."

He put the shell down again and heard instead a soft croodling and cooing outside. From the window he could see two white birds sidling and pecking in the yard.

"Doves," said Caro. "Pigeons, really. Price gave them to me."

"Who's Price?"

"He's an old man who lives in a cottage by the other gate of the park," said Caro. "He does all the odd jobs about the place, the last of all the servants who used to live here when Madame first came, before the First World War."

What a long time ago!" Matt said, looking down at the empty yard, and the clock that had stopped one long-ago noon, or had it stopped at midnight?

"I must start getting the dinner now," said Caro.

“Do they have dinner in the evening?”

“Do they not!” said Caro. “Madame eats very little, but she has to have all the courses presented just the same. It’s good for my cooking after so many boys’ meals!”

“Does Alix have dinner?”

“Yes, she does now that she’s thirteen.”

But Matt did not see either Madame or Alix. Instead he met Agnes Orchard, who came up from the village every day to wait at table and do parlor-maid’s jobs. She had once lived in the house, Caro told Matt, but now her mother was old and she went back to her cottage every night and bicycled up every morning in time to take Madame’s breakfast to her on a tray. Agnes was a heavy, creaky woman with a sallow face and sharp eyes. She knew everything about everyone at Woodhall and in the village too, and was full of gossip about all that went on, not that anything ever seemed to happen in the big house.

After they had washed up the supper things Matt went up with Caro to her room and talked, while the golden light lengthened outside, and slowly, slowly, the sun descended from his great height and darkness began to slide up out of the woods.

And when he lay at last in his small hard bed Matt thought how still it was, how very still. The house was full of silence, like a dark pond, the woods outside were still, unstirred by wind, the sky stood up above with all its lacepoint of stars, soundless as a dream. And when he heard, out of the night of trees, an owl hoot, far off, it only made the silence seem more intense when it closed in again.

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