



CHAPTER 32

THE SURPRISE



*Surprises sometimes are so great
You're tempted to believe in fate.
—Whitefoot.*

One never-to-be forgotten evening Whitefoot met Mrs. Whitefoot and she invited him to come back to their home. Of course Whitefoot was delighted.

“Sh-h-h,” said little Mrs. Whitefoot, as Whitefoot entered the snug little room of the house they had built in the old nest of Melody the Wood Thrush. Whitefoot hesitated. In the first place, it was dark in there. In the second place, he had the feeling that somehow that little bedroom seemed crowded. It hadn’t been that way the last time he was there. Mrs. Whitefoot was right in front of him, and she seemed very much excited about something.

Presently she crowded to one side. “Come here and look,” said she.

Whitefoot looked. In the middle of a soft bed of moss was a squirming mass of legs and funny little heads. At first that was all Whitefoot could make out.

“Don’t you think this is the most wonderful surprise that ever was?” whispered little Mrs. Whitefoot. “Aren’t they darlings? Aren’t you proud of them?”

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By this time Whitefoot had made out that that squirming mass of legs and heads was composed of baby Mice. He counted them. There were four. "Whose are they, and what are they doing here?" Whitefoot asked in a queer voice.

"Why, you old stupid, they are yours,—yours and mine," declared little Mrs. Whitefoot. "Did you ever, ever see such beautiful babies? Now I guess you understand why I kept you away from here."

Whitefoot shook his head. "No," said he, "I don't understand at all. I don't see yet what you drove me away for."

"Why, you blessed old dear, there wasn't room for you when those babies came; I had to have all the room there was. It wouldn't have done to have had you running in and out and disturbing them when they were so tiny. I had to be alone with them, and that is why I made you go off and live by yourself. I am so proud of them, I don't know what to do. Aren't you proud, Whitefoot? Aren't you the proudest Woodmouse in all the Green Forest?"

Of course Whitefoot should have promptly said that he was, but the truth is, Whitefoot wasn't proud at all. You see, he was so surprised that he hadn't yet had time to feel that they were really his. In fact, just then he felt a wee bit jealous of them. It came over him that they would take all the time and attention of little Mrs. Whitefoot. So Whitefoot didn't answer that question. He simply sat and stared at those four squirming babies.

Finally little Mrs. Whitefoot gently pushed him out and followed him. "Of course," said she, "there isn't room for you to stay here now. You will have to sleep in your old home because there isn't room in here for both of us and the babies too."

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Whitefoot's heart sank. He had thought that he was to stay and that everything would be just as it had been before. "Can't I come over here any more?" he asked rather timidly.

"What a foolish question!" cried little Mrs. Whitefoot. "Of course you can. You will have to help take care of these babies. Just as soon as they are big enough, you will have to help teach them how to hunt for food and how to watch out for danger, and all the things that a wise Woodmouse knows. Why, they couldn't get along without you. Neither could I," she added softly.

At that Whitefoot felt better. And suddenly there was a queer swelling in his heart. It was the beginning of pride, pride in those wonderful babies.

"You have given me the best surprise that ever was, my dear," said Whitefoot softly. "Now I think I will go and look for some supper."

So now we will leave Whitefoot and his family. You see there are two very lively little people of the Green Forest who demand attention and insist on having it. They are Buster Bear's Twins, and this is to be the title of the next book.