Chapter 4
The Lost Girl

In May 1913 Ransome made his first visit to Russia, ostensibly to study folk stories in the original language (a language he had yet to acquire) and to write a guidebook on St Petersburg. In truth it was to secure at least temporary escape from married life with Ivy.[1] He had been married for four years but had long since realised he had married the wrong woman and married her for the wrong reason.[2] Drawn to the notion of falling in love, he had made coyly romantic proposals of marriage to almost all his close female friends, but seemed never to have experienced strong sexual attraction until he met Ivy Constance Walker. He was bowled over, the more so because the attraction seemed mutual. As ever, friends knew long before the obsessed couple came to acknowledge it themselves – they were fatally incompatible. Edward Thomas, himself no stranger to sexual demons, looked on with sardonic amusement as passion spent itself, writing to Gordon Bottomley, 'I should say Ransome is living emphatically with his wife – decidedly. We see little of one another, as the Two rise for breakfast (when they do rise) between 1 and 5 pm.'[3] Tabitha, their only child was born on 9 May 1910.

Ivy soon came to resent Arthur's efforts to turn her into an intellectual. Newly married, her disappointment on their first visit to Paris must have been acute. Haunting libraries for traces of Oscar Wilde and earnest discussions on narrative theory with well-oiled poets late into the night was probably not what she had anticipated. He roped her in as a kind of assistant-cum-secretary, organising extracts for the pot-boiler collection, *The Book of Love*, but she must have recognised the slightly patronising gesture for what it was. He allowed her no part in the serious critical work that filled most of his waking hours (studies of Poe and Wilde) and kept his study door firmly closed.

For his part, Arthur objected to her attempts to fashion him into a conventional middle-class husband. 'Refashion' might be more appropriate but, if she had known him better, and been less confident

in her own powers, Ivy would have realised he was long past changing. True, he claimed London bohemian life was 'only a stage in life,' but he had bitten the apple, nonetheless. Suburban domesticity was not even a choice – not for man who preferred a tent to a bedroom and thought nothing of walking 50 miles to visit friends. He delighted in his daughter but realised their time together had been little more than acting out a fantasy. His little family was not going to survive and Tabitha risked being torn apart. In the end, he simply ran away, choosing somewhere as remote as was reasonably possible. Over the next four years he returned to their house at Hatch in Wiltshire for a few months at a time taking up the threads of a limping kind of sham family life. Tabitha was allowed to believe her father was away at the war. She could see he was not a soldier but settled the matter to her own satisfaction by deciding he was working for the Secret Service.[4] Those were years in which countless fathers were more absent than not and his long absences were not too difficult to explain away. It was a subterfuge that did not survive a parcel sent from Petrograd in May 1918 for her eighth birthday. Included was the sort of letter any little girl might treasure, delightfully illustrated, whimsical and affectionate – apart, that is, from a single sentence slipped in towards the end: 'The drawing of the frog is done for a Baba by a big girl as big as DorDor who carries a revolver and a sword and is a fierce revolutionary.'[5] It was not long before Ivy was explaining to Tabitha that her father 'seems to love someone in Russia . . . and would never come home'. By Tabitha's account Ivy then asked: 'shall we divorce him?'[6] Had Ransome been there to hear it, he would have found that 'we' ominous indeed.

It took a long time, and here is not the place to set out all the acrimonious details,[7] but the terms for a divorce were finally agreed in 1923. Ransome settled a third of his present and future earnings on his wife for her lifetime. The settlement also confirmed Ivy's possession of the substantial collection of reference books he had left behind in the house at Hatch. Their agreement about his library did not prevent the books eventually becoming the final symbolic battleground on which father and daughter bitterly traded all the inevitable grievances of separation and loss.[8]

Ivy made it clear from the outset that she disapproved of the alien Evgenia, with or without her revolver. She began to monitor Tabitha's letters (she possibly wrote some of the more waspish ones) and discouraged contact with her father. Arthur was not the first man to discover that the price for losing a wife is, all too often, to lose a child. He held Ivy responsible for this enforced separation and, at least initially, greatly resented it. The somewhat unstable harridan who emerges as his

wife in his autobiography was possibly a kind of revenge.[9] What is more certain is that the creation of a magical substitute daughter served as potent source of consolation. In the real world he virtually never saw his daughter again. Even their correspondence, at first enthusiastic and engaging, rapidly dwindled to little more than ritual birthday exchanges. In another world altogether Titty Walker emerged as an increasingly satisfying fictional substitute.

'Tabitha' and The Blue Treacle

Before secretly acquiring a passport and abandoning home and family to take ship for Russia, Ransome wrote his daughter a story, presumably to be read when she was old enough. A strange allegorical fantasy, *The Blue Treacle* is subtitled *The Story of an Escape*. This might be taken as an allusion to his own impending flight but the story itself does not bear that interpretation: its heroine is a little girl named 'Tabitha' and clearly it is she who is meant to escape. The dragon in the story could not put it more clearly: 'all I have to do is give Tabitha a pass-port'.

Ransome intended *The Blue Treacle* as an allegory, a narrative form he came to reject. It is poor stuff as literature, clumsily edited, repetitious, and in places almost wilfully obscure. It is filled with philosophical allusions, some laboured, some clever and some far too clever. Perhaps he had *Crotchet Castle* in mind as a model. If so, it failed for the same reason that Peacock's novel is now so little known – most of the philosophers lampooned, however wittily, are no longer household names.[10] However, look more closely and the outline of something altogether more subtle can be seen. This short narrative is, in fact, Ransome's first attempt to weave allusion to fairy story invisibly into the fabric of a novel.

The fairy story alluded to is the simplest and most direct of the two versions of *The Goose Girl* collected by the Brothers Grimm, dealing with a girl's attainment of autonomy from her parents (or, more precisely, from her mother). Its themes provide the motive force for *The Blue Treacle* which, for all its many imperfections, becomes something relatively rare – an explicitly articulated statement of wish fulfilment. Ransome's odd little book is nothing less than a kind of promissory note left for his 'captive' Tabitha[11] – to be redeemed years later in far more significant fiction.

The Goose Girl opens dramatically:

> There once lived an old Queen whose husband had died many years ago, and she had a beautiful daughter . . . when the time came for her to be married and the child had to travel to the alien

> country . . . the Queen cuts her fingers and lets three drops of blood fall onto a white handkerchief, saying: 'Preserve this, dear child, it will be of service to you on your trip.'

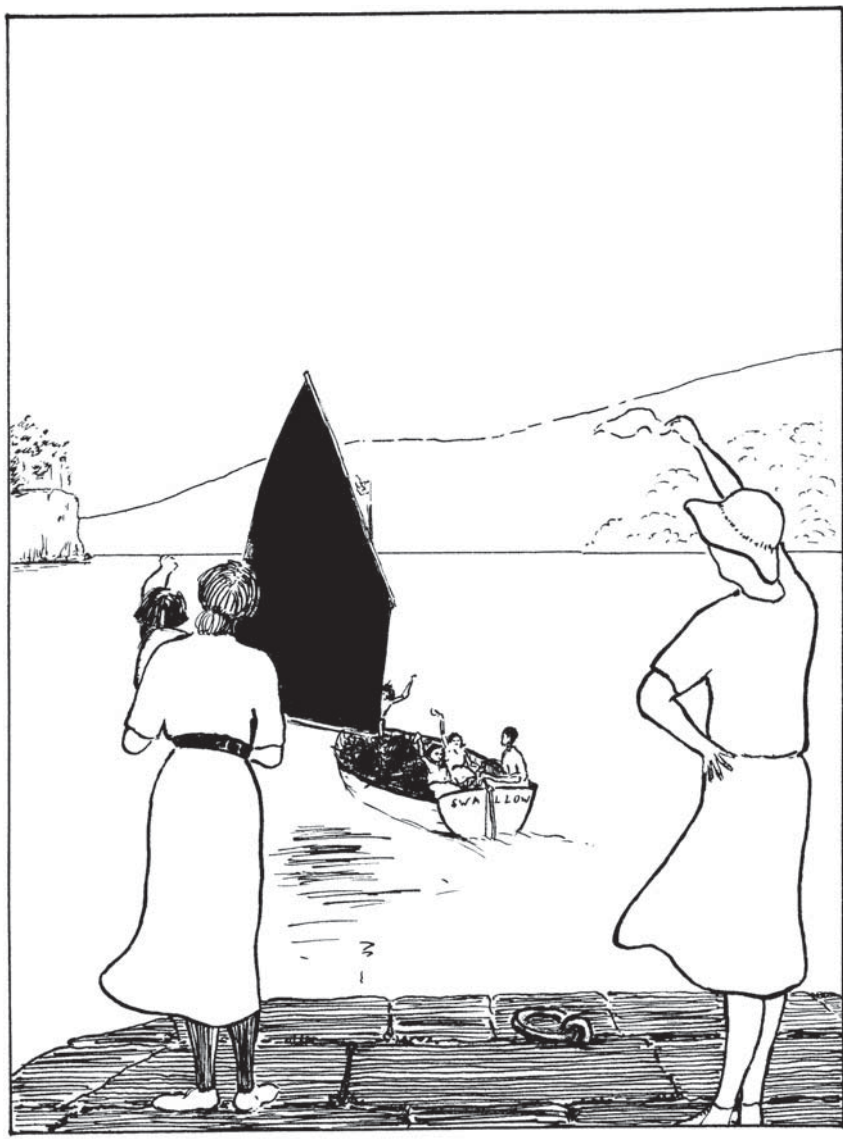
We are not to know why the princess must be married nor why she must go away, but on the journey she is overwhelmed by the servant sent with her who begins to impersonate her, forcing her into menial work helping a boy to tend geese. A theme repeated in the story concerns the efforts the princess takes to protect her hair from this boy, who repeatedly tries to tear it out. The story has a happy ending, with the true princess restored as a bride and the false imposter exposed and killed.

At the level of organising schema, parallels between *The Goose Girl* and *The Blue Treacle* are too many, and too explicitly contrived, to be coincidental. Both stories deal with an abandoned girl; both deal with her physical, emotional and sexual development; and in both the heroine's restoration to the abandoning parent forms the denouement. There are also three significant points of detail echoed in the two stories. First, impersonation is a significant element of the plot in both. In *The Goose Girl* a maid impersonates the princess, even marrying her intended husband to become a 'false bride'. *The Blue Treacle* draws on this same Oedipal theme – 'Tabitha's' complicated philosophical quest in the story being frustrated by the 'Baldheaded One', who succeeds in impersonating her. A second parallel concerns the numerous references to hair in both stories. Using the repeating idiom typical of Grimm,[12] the Goose Girl is observed three times by the little boy Conrad as she unplaits her hair. Each time, he tries to pull it out; each time, he fails, as the wind blows his hat off forcing him to chase after it. In *The Blue Treacle* the false 'Tabitha' repeatedly attempts to account for the fact that 'her' hair has been cut off or stolen. Finally, the blood-stained handkerchief bestowed by the Queen on the Goose Girl finds an obvious echo in *The Blue Treacle*. Having escaped along 'one of twenty little paths', 'Tabitha' notices that the Woolly Beasts accompanying her are getting slower:

> 'Are you tired, Woolly Beasts?' Tabitha asked. 'No,' they grunted and plunged along again. 'Stop a minute,' said Tabitha. 'Oh your poor noses! Why, there are drops of blood all the way behind us.' The Woolly Beasts stopped short, and turned round and looked along the path with their little red eyes. 'The Baldheaded One will be able to track us, they grunted woefully.' Tabitha pulled out her handkerchief and mopped their blunt black noses.[13]

You hardly need a psychiatrist to interpret *The Goose Girl* as dealing with the attainment of personal and sexual autonomy.[14] Which raises perplexing questions about the narrative ambitions of *The Blue Treacle*. Impersonation is a commonplace of European folklore but not to such a degree that Ransome would have felt bound to use it in a story for his little girl. Freud's account of an 'Oedipal' phase in the child's sexual development is possibly extravagant, but Ransome would have been well aware of the underlying psychosexual charge in *The Goose Girl*. (If there were serious doubts about the sexual connotations of the cutting, releasing and tying-up of hair, they are put to rest in the story with the symbolic castration of little Conrad, forced to chase after a hat lost to the wind.)[15] Ransome's daughter was very young: why bequeath her a story filled with allusions to sexuality? More pertinently, what are we to make of the Queen's bestowal of her blooded handkerchief, an obvious reference to the menarche?[16] And what has marriage to do with a three year-old? They are reasonable questions but only answered in *Swallows and Amazons*, a book which opens with a benign re-enactment of his own furtive departure all those years earlier. As the children set sail for their magical island, Titty articulates its author's wish, suggesting they sing, 'we hope that we one day may see you again' from 'Spanish Ladies'.[17] Ransome eventually illustrated the scene (p. 37). Abandoned on the quayside is a significant tableau: on one side, Mother waving an artful handkerchief; on the other, a babe in her nurse's arms.

Ransome never managed to publish *The Blue Treacle*,[18] prompting the question as to whether Ivy ever read it. A self-deprecating nod in her direction on the very first page suggests his intention was that she should: 'You have a great deal before you', the author portentously remarks to 'Tabitha', 'if you are ever going to find your way about in the unconscious Flux.' For Mum-Mum to reply, not unreasonably: 'It's fortunate for her that she won't have to do any such thing, and what IS the use of muddling her up with long words?' Ivy was already aware of (if not reconciled to) Ransome's pessimistic view of his newly extended family life. He pointedly dedicated *The Footways of Dream*[19] to her, writing 'the footways of dream are like slender bridges, that will bear two in safety, but will not carry three'. Certainly tactless, Ivy may not, in fact, have noticed that this pessimistic literary conceit is also ambiguous: ensnared, as he saw it, in a hopeless marriage, a life with Tabitha may have seemed more plausible. It was a fantasy that led to long remorseful years, vainly hoping he might 'recover' his lost girl.[20]



1. 'The Start of the Voyage', from *Swallows and Amazons* (1930). 'Mother waved her handkerchief. Nurse waved hers, and Vicky waved a fat hand.' Ransome's normally faithful illustration of a scene significantly departs from the text.

The Narrative Challenge

The Blue Treacle was Ransome's earliest essay into autobiographical fiction, an attempt to fashion a narrative technique capable of alluding to (or burying) personal concerns – in this case concerns relating to marriage, sexuality and the birth of his daughter – and at the same time enveloping real individuals in elements drawn from fairy story. It fails because he had yet to perfect the unique amalgam of magic and realism – magical children acting in mundane settings – that was to become his own distinctive gift to children's literature. The narrative challenge he had set himself was extremely subtle. The heroines of fairy tale (goose girl princesses, for example) are immune to the vicissitudes of reality because they inhabit stories that grew organically out of the preoccupations of humanity over hundreds, if not thousands, of years. It is this fact that licenses children to take pleasure in events, characters and settings that are otherwise far too disagreeable. The threats facing children in fairy stories are often quite literally sadistic:[21] they suffer at the whim of capricious nature, savage animals, unpleasant adults, ogres, ghosts and witches. No one is expected to treat pain in a fairy story as real. Emotion, if it occurs at all, can be discounted while the characters negotiate life in a world where being eaten alive or cooked in a pie is not out of the ordinary. The problem Ransome failed to solve in *The Blue Treacle* is that the 'Tabitha' of that story must inevitably be identified as that all-too-real little girl, Tabitha Ransome, and, whereas fairy-tale children are almost invariably abandoned without consequence, this cannot be so for children of flesh and blood. 'Tabitha' spends most of the story in a state of fear. In one of the rare moments when she is willing to declare 'she was not frightened any more', she asks the Woolly Beast what he was afraid of, to receive the reply: 'The dark.' Not, it should be added, the darkness of nightfall but the darkness of caves that would, many years later, find expression in *Swallowdale* and *Pigeon Post*. When the abandoned 'Tabitha' comes to a place where 'there are no Dor-Dors and Mum-Mums', the mocking words, 'You are all by yourself, he, he', seem gratuitously cruel. In fact, the narrative technique adopted in *The Blue Treacle* makes claims on reality that are not permitted in a fairy story – claims that break a significant part of the contract with the reader. That is why true fairy tales cannot be invented at all and why the problem Ransome was trying to solve proved so intractable.

Old Peter's Russian Tales (1916) appeared to offer a possible solution – a kind of halfway house – creating a token audience by interposing a narrator distinct from the author. Unlike *The Blue Treacle*, it was

a success, albeit purchased at a price. The 'intermediate narrator' inevitably deprives the reader of a sense of immediacy, an ability to enter directly into the action. Things must be understood, as it were, at one remove, the reader forced to imagine effects not directly but reflected from little Vanya and Maroosia.[22] It is a technique which allows for subtle transitions between narrated fact and narrated fiction. For example, at one point in *The Little Daughter of the Snow*, Vanya and Maroosia appear to be watching the children making the snow witch in the story that Old Peter is telling them. Ransome even allows them to comment 'their little sheepskin coats are like ours'. However, the cost of this sleight of hand becomes evident when the old couple 'go into the yard and make a little snow girl'. At this point the reader must cope with as many as four levels of narrated fiction: perhaps manageable in relatively short stories, impossible to sustain in a novel.[23]

A letter Ransome wrote to his daughter in 1928 hints at the unique solution he devised to solve this fundamental narrative problem. Although she was unaware of it, he had settled on the means to effect a mythological transformation of the real eighteen-year-old Tabitha Ransome into the fictional nine-year-old Titty Walker. *Swallows and Amazons* contains neither the overt allegory of *The Blue Treacle*, nor the rhetorical tricks of *Old Peter's Russian Tales*. In their place an extraordinary range of allusion is deployed to create a completely original style in fiction for children, establishing an alternative, symbolic, narrative running in tandem with the story itself. It is this fact, of course, that accounts for the peculiar appeal to adults of a children's story in which so little happens to so ordinary a cast of characters.

The 1928 letter was long, its length the more extraordinary because it is wholly concerned with the activities of birds around the feeding table Evgenia had established at Low Ludderburn.[24] The tone is not so much whimsical as quite deliberately childish, better suited to someone exactly half Tabitha's age:

> there is one cole tit. He is the smallest of all and there is only one of him and the others in spite of no end of lectures from us are exceedingly beastly to him. . . . The chaffinches are birds of a selfish character and we think they have corrupted the others.

A feature of the letter is its almost obsessive reference to tits: cole tits (three times), great tits, blue tits and marsh tits. However, if he was fishing for a response to the fictional name he had bestowed on her, her reply, when it eventually arrived, was a disappointment.[25] 'You sound

decidedly dull!' she wrote, 'I have never been able to take an interest in the lives and habits of birds. . . . I like hearing them, especially the owls, blackbirds and cuckoos – but as to who they make friends with, and how they feed, I cannot be interested in it, sorry.'[26]

Brogan claims that Ransome the father found her reply hurtful, and this is perhaps true. But for Ransome the author it was too late to mend matters. He had long since decided, among many other things, that an ineluctable part of the character of his nine-year-old fantasy daughter would be a curious empathy with birds.[27] The significance of birds as symbols of freedom and escape would hardly escape someone so committed to the notion of 'associative' symbolism. In *The Blue Treacle* it is birds that pull 'Tabitha' out of her presumed state of unconscious inertia and it is a giant bird that takes her to safety in the denouement. He found a place somewhere in his fiction for all the birds Tabitha mentions in her letter.

In our first extended encounter with Titty in *Swallows and Amazons* she is (privately) being a cormorant.[28] Later, two whole pages of the book are devoted to her conversation with a polite dipper. Alone on the island she thinks of jays, parrots and cormorants. Owls feature in the denouement of the novel (and come to haunt Titty's consciousness in succeeding novels). By the time she likens the changing sound of the kettle to a cuckoo we accept the bizarre claim without a second thought – this being Titty. And, of course, Titty Walker walks out of the book possessed, however improbably, of a wild parrot.

In *Swallows and Amazons* Ransome deploys more nuanced and less obviously optimistic themes from an alternative *Goose Girl* story. The heroine of *The Goose Girl at the Well* is a young girl, abandoned by her father, the king, after she rejects him (like Cordelia) for demanding proof of her affection. She is cast out and lives at the discretion of an old witch, forced to disguise herself inside an ugly skin and bathe by plunging her head into the water of a well. When she weeps, her tears are described as pearls, an allusion captured in *Swallows and Amazons* by Titty's 'pearl-diving' game. The story concerns the king's eventual recovery of his lost daughter and its personal relevance to Ransome is obvious. The old witch says:

> You might have spared yourself the long walk if you had not three years ago unjustly driven away your child, who is so good and lovable. No harm has come to her . . . she has learnt no evil, but has preserved her purity of heart. You, however, have been sufficiently punished by the misery in which you have lived.

The denouement of *The Goose Girl at the Well* is pure wish fulfilment. The king looks on as the girl who weeps pearls returns to him: 'Thereupon the door opened, and the Princess stepped out in her silken garments, with her golden hair and her shining eyes, and it was as if an angel from heaven had entered.'

And what of the denouement of the psychodrama of *Swallows and Amazons*? Initially, Titty's relationship with Uncle Jim is hostile: he is 'worse than any native', she says. John may be placated by handsome apologies from Captain Flint but not Titty. 'I didn't want to capture the houseboat,' she says, 'I wanted to sink her.' Not even Susan's warning 'Titty!' can stop her: 'I wish we'd sunk her at the very first . . . nobody could have been such a beastly enemy as you.' Ransome the author might have left it there; Ransome the father could not. Titty is reconciled. Famously reconciled, rewarded with her parrot and the promise of an endless golden future filled with 'plans for next year, of climbing the ranges, of sailing to the Azores, or, better still, the Baltic'. All this, not by some conciliatory act of Captain Flint, but by her own heroic gesture, finding and restoring his stolen book. 'I've put the best of my life into this book,' he says, 'it would have been gone for ever if it hadn't been for you.'

As they return home to Holly Howe, Titty again suggests a song and they all join in:

> Oh leave her, Johnny, leave her when you can,
> It's time for us to leave her.

Ransome invited Tabitha to come to Low Ludderburn when she reached her majority and was her own woman at last.[29] Whether her mother approved or not, she was, finally, free to leave her.

She never did.

Notes to Chapter 4. The Lost Girl

1. An inevitably slanted account of his disintegrating marriage can be found in Ransome's *Autobiography*.
2. 'They were unsuited to each other in almost every way.' Brogan, *The Life of Arthur Ransome*, p. 66.
3. Chambers, *The Last Englishman*, p. 50.
4. 'Then the 1914 War came & my Father went to Russia on Secret Service.' Tabitha Ransome, in a document listed as 'A brief but candid autobiographical memoir, probably written about 1945', Dominic Winter Book Auctions, 2006.

5. Brogan, *Signalling from Mars*, p. 70.
6. Tabitha Ransome (1945). See note 4 above.
7. Although both Brogan (*The Life of Arthur Ransome*) and Chambers (*The Last Englishman*) do their best to provide balanced treatments of the divorce, their hearts are plainly not in it. Christina Hardyment, *The World of Arthur Ransome* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2012), is more sensitive to Ivy's position and provides an entirely believable (and well-researched) description of what happens when two utterly incompatible beings marry.
8. He appears to have misled Evgenia about the books. Still exiled in Riga, she wrote to him in 1924: 'it is too awful to think of your losing books, and if until now I tried to believe with you that Wiltshire [AR's private code word for Ivy] doesn't know what she is doing – I can't do it any longer. She knows only too well how to hurt most painfully. She is cruel.' Cited in Chambers, *The Last Englishman*, p. 325.
9. It is also unfair. The comment, 'Wiltshire has been just about as beastly as she possibly could be, beastlier than I thought it possible for anyone to be' (Brogan, *Signalling from Mars*, p. 135), must be set alongside Edward Thomas' comment in 1915 that '[Ivy] still has an irreducible maximum of admiration and affection for him'. Quoted in Hardyment, *The World of Arthur Ransome*, p. 50. See also C.E. Alexander, *Ransome at Home* (Kendal: Amazon Publications, 1996).
10. Hardyment patiently identifies all the individuals in an editorial afterword to *The Blue Treacle* (Kendal: Amazon Publications, 1993), p. 91.
11. There is an extended pun (one of a regrettable number) on the word 'catspaw' in *The Blue Treacle*, when 'Tabitha' barely escapes from under the paw of a giant cat.
12. A technique also deployed by Ransome in *Old Peter's Russian Tales* (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1916).
13. *The Blue Treacle*, p. 26.
14. Bruno Bettelheim devotes several pages to *The Goose Girl*, in a section entitled 'Achieving Autonomy', in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), p. 136.
15. Sexual symbolism and hats is considered in Chapter 6.
16. Although the Brothers Grimm entitled the story *The Goose Girl*, in other variants it is entitled *The Three Drops of Blood*.
17. Edward Thomas (ed.), *The Pocket Book of Poems and Songs for the Open Air* (London: Grant Richards, 1907), p. 327 (with music).
18. On 1 June 1914 he wrote from St Petersburg of his hopes to publish the book but war intervened. He entered its title in his diary until 1917 as 'written and unpublished'. A limited edition was produced by Amazon Publications in 1993, edited by Christina Hardyment.
19. Arthur Ransome's short story, *The Footways of Dream*, was published in *The Hoofmarks of the Faun* (London: Steven Swift & Co., 1912). He returns to the theme in *The Little Daughter of the Snow* in *Old Peter's Russian Tales*.
20. Writing in 1940 about the dispute over the disposal of his library: '. . . after my first wife's death I had hoped to recover my daughter . . .' Brogan, *The Life of Arthur Ransome*, p.376.
21. The sadistic punishment meted out to the 'false bride' in *The Goose Girl* is typical: that she should be 'stripped stark naked, and put in a barrel that is studded inside with sharp nails. Two white horses should be hitched to it, and they should drag

her along through one street after another, until she is dead.'

22. Ingmar Bergman borrowed the technique in the film version of *The Magic Flute*, occasionally cutting from the characters of the opera to the awestruck reaction of a little girl in the contemporary audience watching the performance.
23. A difficulty all too apparent in *Peter Duck* where a multiplicity of narrative perspectives leaves the reader disoriented.
24. Brogan, *Signalling from Mars*, p. 156. The letter, dated 21 December, wished Tabitha a Merry Christmas and enclosed a small cheque.
25. It is difficult to deny the name 'Titty' is awkward. Nicholas Tucker (*The Guardian*, 26 June 2015) refers to the Online Etymology Dictionary (copyright, Douglas Harper, 2010), implying that Ransome would have been unaware of the modern slang 'tits', since 'this seems to be a recent invention'. In fact, the dictionary continues, 'Titty, however, is on record from 1746 as "a dial. and nursery diminutive of teat"'. Ransome certainly knew the name was odd and was aware of its intended connotations: 'You must be John and you're Susan. And that's Roger. Which is the one with the funny name?' asks Daisy in *Secret Water*, p. 234.
26. Brogan, *Signalling from Mars*, p. 157.
27. In *Missee Lee*, Titty's empathy with birds saves all of them from a nasty end.
28. In our final encounter (in *Great Northern?*) she is protecting the nesting geese.
29. Brogan, *Signalling from Mars*, p. 187.