

The Snow Goose

by Paul Gallico

(Adapted book. Pre-Intermediate level)

Part One

Women turned their eyes away when they saw him. So they never learned that he was a lover of all living things.

The Great Marsh lies on the Essex coast, between the villages of Chelmbury and Wickaeldroth.

It is one of the last wild and lonely places in England. Nobody lives there. The only sounds are the cries of the many birds that make their homes in the marsh. It is a long, low, flat land of grass and water. Greys and blues and soft greens are the colours. But sometimes, when the sun goes down, the sky and land are a wonderful red and gold.

In the spring of 1930, a man bought some land and an old, empty lighthouse standing at the mouth of the little river Aelder. The man's name was Philip Rhayader. He lived and worked alone at the lighthouse all through the year. He was a painter, and he painted pictures of the birds and the marsh.

Philip lived at the lighthouse because he wanted to live alone. Every two weeks he went to the village of

Chelmbury for the food and other things that he needed. When the villagers first saw the strange shape of his body and his dark, bearded face, they were a little afraid of him. They spoke of him as 'that strange painter-man from the lighthouse'. But slowly, as time passed, they learned to accept his strange ways.

Philip was a hunchback. His left arm was weak and thin and twisted, and his left hand looked like a bird's foot. He was twenty-seven when he came to the lighthouse on the Great Marsh.

He lived in many places before he came there. He always tried hard to make friends with the people that he met. But other people did not want to be friends with Philip. His twisted body made them uncomfortable. Women turned their eyes away when they saw him. So they never learned that he was a gentle man and a lover of all living things.

Philip did not hate these people. His heart was too full of love; he could only feel sadness for them.

He spent time with his birds and his paintings. He owned a sailing boat and he could sail very well in it. He sailed up and down the rivers, and sometimes out to sea. Often he went away for many days. He looked for different birds to draw and photograph, and then to paint.

He built an enclosure at the side of the lighthouse, and sometimes he caught birds and put them in there. He never shot at a bird. If someone shot at them, he told them not to

come near the lighthouse. He was a friend to all living things, and so all living things became his friends.

Some of the birds in the enclosure were the geese that flew down the coast from Iceland and Spitzbergen each October. They filled the air with the noise of their wings. Many hundreds came and stayed with him through the cold weather, from October to the early spring. Then they flew north again. But they came back in the autumn. Something inside them knew that Philip's place was a safe place for the winter.

And this made Philip happy.

One November afternoon, three years after Philip came to the Great Marsh, a girl came to the door of the lighthouse with something in her arms. She was twelve years old, thin and untidy. She had fair hair and blue eyes.

She was afraid to knock at the door. People told strange stories about the man who lived in the lighthouse. But her reason for being here was more important than her fear. In one of the stories about him, the villagers said, 'This hunchback man at the lighthouse can make hurt or sick birds better.'

The girl knocked at the door and waited. Slowly, the door opened. When she saw Philip, with his thick hair and beard, she nearly ran away. But then he spoke. He had a kind voice.

'What do you want, little girl?' he asked gently.

She pushed out her arms towards him. In them was a large, white bird. The bird did not move. There was blood on its feathers and more blood on the front of her dress. She gave the bird to him.

'I found it,' she said, quietly.

'Did you?' he said.

'Yes,' she said. 'It's hurt.'

'I can see that,' he said.

'Is it still alive?' she asked.

'Yes. Yes, I think so,' he said, looking at it. 'Come in, child, come in.'

Philip went inside, carrying the bird. The girl still felt afraid but she followed him. She wanted to see inside the lighthouse. He put the bird carefully on to the table. The room was warm; a fire was burning. There were many pictures on the wall, and the room was full of a strange but pleasant smell.

The bird moved, and Philip gently opened one of its large white wings. It was black at the end.

He turned to the girl. 'Where did you find it?' he asked.

'There's a place in the marsh where the men shoot birds,' she said. 'What sort of bird is it?'

'It's a snow goose from Canada,' he told her. Then he said to himself, in surprise: 'But why is it here?'

'Can you make it better?' asked the girl.

'Yes, yes,' said Philip. 'We'll try. You can help.'

Philip put the things that he needed on the table. His gentle hands began to work on the bird, and the child watched with wide-open eyes.

'She was shot, poor thing,' he said.

'Oh!' she said.

'One of her legs is broken, and the end of the wing,' he said. 'But not badly. We must cover the part of the wing that is hurt. Then, in the spring, the feathers will grow and she'll be able to fly again.'

As he worked, he told her a wonderful story.

'She's only a young snow goose, you know - about a year old. She comes from Canada. That's a big country far, far away across the ocean. In Canada the winters are very, very cold, so each year the snow geese fly south to warmer countries. But this time, as this snow goose was flying south, she flew into a great storm.

'It was a wild, wild storm, and the wind picked her up and carried her with it for many days and nights. She had strong wings, but they could not help her. At last the storm ended and she was able to fly south again.

'But now she was flying over England - a strange place to her, with strange birds. She was lost and tired, so she landed here in the friendly green marsh. And when she came down to rest, did we greet her like a visiting princess? No! A man with a gun tried to shoot her!'

He put a thin piece of wood on the broken leg to hold it straight. While he was mending the bird's leg, he told her about the birds in his enclosure.

'The geese in the enclosure flew all the way from Iceland and Spitzbergen,' he told her. 'They arrive in October. They make the sky dark because there are so many of them. The sound of their wings is like a strong wind.'

He finished mending the leg. Then they went outside and put the snow goose with the other birds. As he placed her gently in the enclosure, Philip said, 'In a few days she'll be much better. We'll call her the Lost Princess.'

The girl looked pleased. Then she noticed that some of the birds were unable to fly.

'What's the matter with those birds?' she asked. She pointed at two birds who were trying to fly.

'I've cut the ends of their wings,' he said, 'so they can't fly. They have to stay here.'

'Does it hurt them?' she asked.

'No, no, little girl,' he said, laughing gently. 'The feathers will grow again next spring.'

'So why do you cut their wings?' she asked.

'Because these birds will show the others that there's food here. It's a safe place for them to stay,' he answered her. 'In the spring, they'll fly back to their homes in the north.'

While she listened to him, she forgot the strange stories about him. But suddenly she remembered them and ran to the path towards the village.

Philip called after her. 'What's your name?'

She stopped running and turned to answer him.

'It's Fritha,' she called back.

'Where do you live?' he asked.

'With the fishing people in the village,' she replied.

'Will you come back in a day or two? You can see how the Princess is,' he said.

She did not answer immediately, but at last he heard her say, 'Yes.'

Then she ran along the path.

* * *

The snow goose got better very quickly. By the middle of winter, she was able to walk about in the enclosure with the other birds. Fritha often walked to the lighthouse to see the Princess. At each visit her fear of Philip became less and less. She loved Philip's story about this strange, white princess. He showed her a map of Canada, the goose's home.

Then, one morning in June, the Princess left them.

Fritha was at the lighthouse at the time. She saw the great bird flying in wider and wider circles, up into the sky. Her white wings shone in the spring sun.

'Look!' Fritha shouted to Philip. 'Look at the Princess! Is she leaving us?'

Philip came running from his painting. The snow goose got smaller and smaller in the sky, and finally disappeared.

'Yes, the Princess is going home,' he said quietly. 'Listen, she's saying goodbye.'

As they stood listening, the sad call of the snow goose came through the air.

Fritha did not come to the lighthouse after the snow goose left. Philip was alone again with his birds and his paintings.

That summer, from his memory, he painted a picture of a thin, untidy little girl with fair hair. The girl was carrying a big white bird.

* * *

It was October again and Philip was in the enclosure. He was feeding the birds that could not fly. The cold northeast wind and the noise from the sea made it hard to hear any other sounds. Suddenly Philip heard the high, clear call of a bird. He turned his head and looked into the sky.

At first he could only see something small. But as it came closer, it grew into the shape of a bird. While Philip watched, the bird flew round the lighthouse. Then it dropped into the enclosure. His eyes filled with tears. It was the snow goose!

Philip watched her walk round the enclosure.

'She acts like a bird that's never been away!' he said to himself. But he did not understand. 'How could she go all the way home to Canada and then come back here again?' he thought. 'Perhaps she spent the summer in Greenland. Then it was time to fly south again. She remembered our kindness and returned.'

Philip immediately thought of Fritha. He knew that he must tell her. So when he went to the village for food, he left a note at the post office. It said:

Tell Fritha (of the fishing people) that the Princess is back.

Three days later Fritha came to the lighthouse to visit the Lost Princess. The girl was taller but still untidy.

* * *

The years passed. On the Great Marsh very little changed. The sea continued to move in and out, and the birds came and went with the seasons. For Philip the coming and going of the snow goose showed the passing of time.

When the snow goose was at the lighthouse, Fritha visited Philip. She sailed with him in his boat and they caught birds for the enclosure. Fritha learned many things from Philip. He taught her everything about the wild birds

that flew across the marshes. She learned how to get his paints ready. Sometimes she cooked a meal for him.

But when the snow goose left in the summer, Fritha did not come to the lighthouse. She did not feel that she could visit Philip. The bird was not there.

Then, one year, the Princess did not return. Philip was very sad and lonely. He spent all his time painting. He painted all winter and through the next summer. He did not see Fritha.

But in October he heard again the cry of the snow goose. And the beautiful white bird, bigger than before, dropped from the sky.

'She came back!' he said happily.

Philip went into the village immediately. As before, he left a note at the post office for Fritha.

This time it was a month before she came to the lighthouse. When he saw her, he was surprised. She was grown-up; she was not a child now.

From that time, the snow goose stayed at the lighthouse for longer and longer each year. She followed Philip everywhere outside. Sometimes she went into the lighthouse when he was working.

And so time passed...

Part Two

Fritha looked at Philip. He was changed. For the first time he was not ugly, but very beautiful.

In the spring of 1940, the birds left the Great Marsh early and flew away to their summer homes in the north. Something was happening in the world outside the Great Marsh. That something changed the lives of Philip, Fritha and the snow goose.

It was the Second World War.

On the first day of May, Philip and Fritha watched as the last birds left the enclosure. The snow goose started to fly away too. But she did not fly with the others. She just flew around their heads a few times and landed back in the enclosure.

'She isn't going!' said Fritha, surprised. 'The Princess is staying.'

'Yes,' said Philip.

His voice was shaking, because he, too, was surprised.

'She'll stay here now,' he said. 'She'll never fly away again. The Lost Princess isn't lost now. She's decided to stay. This will be her home now.'

As he spoke these words, Philip thought: 'And Fritha comes and goes from the lighthouse. She's like the snow

goose. But I like it when she comes. Her visits make me happy.'

Philip looked at Fritha. She was a young woman now.

And suddenly he knew that he loved her.

But he could not tell Fritha about his love for her. He did not frighten her now. He knew that. But it was unpleasant for her to look at him. He knew that too. So his loving words for her stayed locked in his heart. But his loving feelings towards her showed clearly in his eyes.

Fritha turned to Philip when he finished speaking. She could see that he was lonely. But she could also see a look in his eyes that she could not understand. The sadness and gentleness in them made her unhappy inside herself. She could not find any words to say to him. She looked away.

For some minutes neither of them spoke.

At last Fritha said, 'I... I must go. I'm glad that the Princess is staying. Now you won't be so lonely.'

She walked away from him quickly, and only half-heard him say sadly, 'Goodbye, Fritha.'

When she was far away, she stopped. She turned and she looked back at the lighthouse. He was still standing in the same place, watching her. After a minute or two, she turned towards the village and walked slowly home, away from the lighthouse and the man outside it.

It was a little more than three weeks before Fritha returned to the lighthouse. By then it was the end of May. She wanted to know if the snow goose really did stay at the lighthouse. She came in the early evening, when the moon was already in the eastern sky.

She saw a yellow light shining from the place where Philip kept his boat. She hurried down to the river.

The boat was moving gently from side to side in the water. Philip was putting drinking water, food, clothes and another sail into it. He heard her coming and turned round. His face was pale but his dark eyes were excited.

Fritha saw what he was doing. She immediately forgot about the snow goose.

'Philip! Are you going away?' she asked.

He stopped working to greet her. She saw from the look of excitement in his eyes that he was doing something very urgent and important.

'Fritha! I'm glad that you've come,' he said. 'Yes, I must go away. A little journey.'

'A journey?' she said.

'Yes,' he said. 'I'll come back when I can.'

'Where must you go?' she asked.

His words poured out now.

'I must go to Dunkirk, 160 kilometres across the Channel,' he said. 'British soldiers are waiting there on the

beaches - waiting to die. The Germans are moving nearer and nearer all the time.'

'How do you know this?' she asked.

'I heard about it when I was in the village,' he said. 'The British can't move. They have the sea in front of them, and the German soldiers behind them. Dunkirk is on fire. There's little hope for them. The government in London has asked everyone with a boat to sail across the Channel. They want us to take as many soldiers as possible off the beaches. They want us to take them out to the big boats in the deeper water.'

'And you are going,' said Fritha.

'Yes,' said Philip. 'I'm going to take my little boat across the Channel, Fritha. I must. I can take six men, perhaps seven, each time I sail from the beach to one of the large ships. Do you understand now that I have to go?'

Fritha was a simple country girl who did not understand about war. She did not know what was happening to the soldiers on the beaches of France. She only knew that this journey was dangerous for Philip. She was afraid.

'Philip, must you go?' she cried.

'Yes,' he said softly. 'I must.'

'You won't come back!' she cried. 'Why must it be you?'

Philip began to speak gently to her. There was no excitement in his voice now. He explained why he had to

help the men at Dunkirk. He spoke slowly, because he wanted her to understand.

'Those soldiers are like the birds that we've helped here,' he said. 'Many of them are hurt, like the Lost Princess who you brought to me. They are afraid, and they need help, my dear, like the birds. I can do something for them.' He smiled. 'At last I can be a man and help in this terrible war.'

Fritha looked at Philip. He was changed. For the first time she saw that he was not ugly, but very beautiful. She wanted to tell him this, but she could not find the words. She remembered the look that she saw in his eyes a few weeks before. Now she knew what it was.

It was love.

Suddenly she cried, 'I'll go with you, Philip!'

Philip shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'If you come, you'll take a soldier's place in the boat. Do you understand? No, I must go alone.'

He put on a rubber coat and boots, and climbed into the boat. 'Goodbye, Fritha,' he said. 'Look after the birds until I return to the lighthouse.'

As he sailed away, he turned. He waved to her. She waved back, but she was unhappy.

'I'll look after them, Philip,' she replied.

It was night now. The moon was bright, and there were stars in the sky. Fritha watched the boat sail out to sea. Suddenly, from the darkness behind her, came the

sound of wings. Something flew past her into the air! Fritha looked up and saw the snow goose flying into the night sky. It went round the lighthouse once, then it flew out to sea - after Philip's boat. When it reached the little boat, it flew above it in slow, wide circles.

'Look after him, Princess!' called Fritha.

She watched the white sail and the white bird for a long time. Then, at last, they disappeared into the night. Fritha turned and walked slowly back to the empty lighthouse.

* * *

The rest of the story about Philip Rhayader and the snow goose is in two parts. A soldier - Private Potton - tells one part.

Private Potton was with the first 200 soldiers who arrived home from Dunkirk. A boat carried them across the Channel. Newspaper reporters from The Times, the Evening News, the Daily Sketch and the Daily Express were waiting for them when they arrived in England.

The reporters came from London. They wanted the story of the men's escape from Dunkirk, but many of the soldiers were hurt, or they were too tired to talk to the reporters.

But not Private Potton. He went with some others to a pub and was happy to tell his story to everyone. And the reporters were very happy to listen. They wrote down every word that he said.

Suddenly one of them asked: 'What do you mean... "it was hopeless"?''

Potton turned to answer him. 'Listen. There we were, on that beach, with no place to go to. The Germans were behind us and the sea was in front of us. That's right, isn't it, Jock? Jock was there, too.'

The man next to Potton said, 'Yes, that's right.'

'The shooting came at us from all sides... from the air, too, as the planes flew low over the beaches,' continued Potton. 'We all lay on that beach and put our hands over our heads. The noise was terrible! You couldn't hear yourself speak, could you, Jock?'

'That's right,' said Jock.

'There was smoke everywhere,' continued Potton. 'It was so thick at times - you could almost taste it. And out at sea we could hear the fighting between the German planes and the British warships.'

'We waited for them to hit us. We were too sick and tired to move. And less than a kilometre out at sea was the boat, the Kentish Maid. I know that boat well. She always sailed out from Margate in the summer. I've been on her, many times, when I was on holiday in Margate. Well, there she was, waiting to take us home to dear old England. But we couldn't swim out to her, and she couldn't come in nearer to us.'

'Then suddenly, through the smoke, this goose came. Yes, a goose! I couldn't believe my eyes. But Jock saw it too, didn't you, Jock?'

'I did,' said Jock. 'It was white and it went round and round in circles above our heads.'

'Jock shouted out, "It means death for all of us",' said Potton. 'But I shouted back, "It means good luck." Then through the thick smoke comes the man - sailing in this little boat.'

'What man?' asked a reporter from The Times.

'The man who saved us!' said Private Potton. 'He came sailing near the beach. He took no notice of the guns and bombs. In he sailed, like a man out sailing on a Sunday afternoon!

'But he was a strange-looking man, wasn't he, Jock?'

'Strange, yes,' said Jock.

'He had a beard, a thin and twisted left arm, and a hunched back,' continued Potton. 'He was guiding the boat with his good hand.

'He waved us out to his boat and shouted to our officer, "I can take seven men at a time!" Our officer thanked him and told the nearest seven of us to get in.

'Jock and I were two of those seven, so we pushed through the water to the boat. But it was hard work, even that short way, wasn't it, Jock?'

'Yes,' said Jock. 'When we reached the boat we were so tired. We couldn't even climb over the side. But the man was strong, and he pulled us in.'

'He told us to lie in the bottom of the boat,' said Potton. 'Then we sailed away. When I looked at the sail I was surprised. How did the boat move? The sail was full of holes from the shooting!

'And up there, over our heads, that goose flew round and round and round. Never stopped, did it, Jock?'

'No,' said Jock.

"There, that goose does mean good luck!" I said to Jock. When the man heard me, at the back of the boat, he looked up at the goose. And he smiled. "He knows her!" I thought to myself.

'We got to the Kentish Maid and climbed up on her. Then the man and the goose turned round and went back to the beach for seven more soldiers. He made journeys all afternoon and all night, too. He could see at night because Dunkirk was on fire: it lit up the sky! I don't know how many journeys he made. He was very tired. But he didn't stop, did he, Jock?'

'He didn't,' said Jock.

'There was also a large boat from the Thames Sailing Club and a big boat from Poole. Those two boats brought all of us off that beach without losing a man.

'The Kentish Maid sailed when the last man was off the beach. There were more than 700 of us on a boat that was built for 200.

'The man was still there when we left. He waved goodbye to us and then sailed off towards Dunkirk - that goose with him. Ooh - it was strange to see that big goose flying round and round the little sailing boat.

'We don't know who he was. We don't know what happened to him. But he was a good man, he was. He saved our lives, didn't he, Jock?'

'He did,' said Jock.

* * *

Commander Keith Emerson also helped British soldiers escape from Dunkirk. At an officers' club in Brook Street, London, he told his story.

At four o'clock one morning, the telephone woke him, and someone asked him to take a boat across the Channel to Dunkirk. The slow but strong boat pulled four big Thames river boats along behind it. With these boats, the commander crossed the Channel many times to save the soldiers on the beaches.

'Did you hear that strange story about a wild goose?' one of the commander's friends asked. 'They were telling the story up and down the beaches, and some of the returning men were talking about it. They said, "It came between Dunkirk and La Panne. If you see it, you'll be safe."'

'Hmm,' said the commander, 'a wild goose, you say? I saw a white goose and it was lucky for us, too. I'll tell you about it.

'We were on our way back from Dunkirk. It was our third journey back. At about six o'clock we saw a small sailing boat. There seemed to be a man or a body in it - and this white goose was standing on one of the sides. I decided to have a look. When we got nearer, I saw a man lying in the bottom of the boat - a man with a beard. The poor man was dead - shot many times.

'When we were next to the boat, one of my men tried to put his hand on the side. But the goose hit him with her wings. He couldn't get near.

Suddenly one of the men with me shouted and pointed to something in the water. It was a mine! It was lucky for us that we went to look at that boat. That's why I'm not dead now!

'When all our boats were past the mine, our men shot at it. There was a very loud BANG! We looked for the sailing boat, but it wasn't there. It went down when the mine went off. I'm afraid that the man went with his boat. The goose was in the air. She was flying round in circles above the place where the boat went down. She flew round three times, like someone saying goodbye. Then she flew away to the west. It was very strange and a little sad,' said the commander, as he finished his story.

After Philip went to France, Fritha stayed at the lighthouse on the Great Marsh. She looked after the birds that could not fly away. She was waiting for something. But she did not know what she was waiting for. During the first days after Philip left, she watched at the sea wall for his boat. But the days passed and Philip did not return. She spent some days looking in the rooms of the lighthouse. In one room she found Philip's paintings. There were pictures of that wild and empty country around the lighthouse, and of the beautiful birds that came there.

And there was a painting of Fritha. She was still a child in the picture. It was her first day at the lighthouse, and she was standing at the lighthouse door. She held the snow goose in her arms.

'It's strange,' Fritha thought. 'This is the only painting of the snow goose. The only picture of the lost, wild bird that brought Philip and me together.'

It was a beautiful picture. Fritha could feel the love that went into the painting of it.

* * *

Long before the snow goose circled the lighthouse with a last goodbye, Fritha knew. Philip was not coming back.

She was standing by the lighthouse one evening when she heard the bird's call. She ran to the sea wall and looked up into the red eastern sky. She saw the snow goose and looked down the river towards the sea. But she already

knew that there was no hope. There was no little sailing boat. The snow goose was alone.

Then Fritha knew that she loved Philip. Tears filled her eyes and poured down her face. As she watched the snow goose, she could hear Philip's voice. It seemed to call to her, 'Fritha, Fritha, my love. Goodbye, my love.'

'I love you, Philip,' Fritha said to herself.

Fritha waited for the snow goose to land in the enclosure. The other birds sent up welcoming calls to her. She came down very low, but she flew up again into the sky. She circled the lighthouse once and then climbed higher into the sky.

Fritha watched the snow goose. She did not see it as a bird. She saw it as Philip's last goodbye before he disappeared for ever.

She put out her arms, high into the sky, and cried: 'Goodbye, Philip! Goodbye!'

She stopped crying. Then she watched in silence for a long time after the snow goose disappeared. At last she went into the lighthouse and found Philip's picture of her and the snow goose. She held it to her chest and walked home slowly along the old sea wall.

Each night, for many weeks after that, Fritha went to the lighthouse. She fed the birds that could not fly. Then, early one morning, a German aeroplane flew over the lighthouse. The pilot made a mistake. He thought that he had to bomb the lighthouse. The plane flew high into the

sky and then down towards the lighthouse. It dropped its bombs. After a minute there was nothing there. The lighthouse, and everything in it, was destroyed.

Fritha came in the evening to feed the birds. She was walking along the path and stopped suddenly. Where was the lighthouse? Where was the enclosure? The sea covered the place where the lighthouse stood the day before.

- THE END -

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