

OF BOOKS AND READING
FOR CHILDREN AND
YOUNG PEOPLE



T H E
Horn Book
MAGAZINE

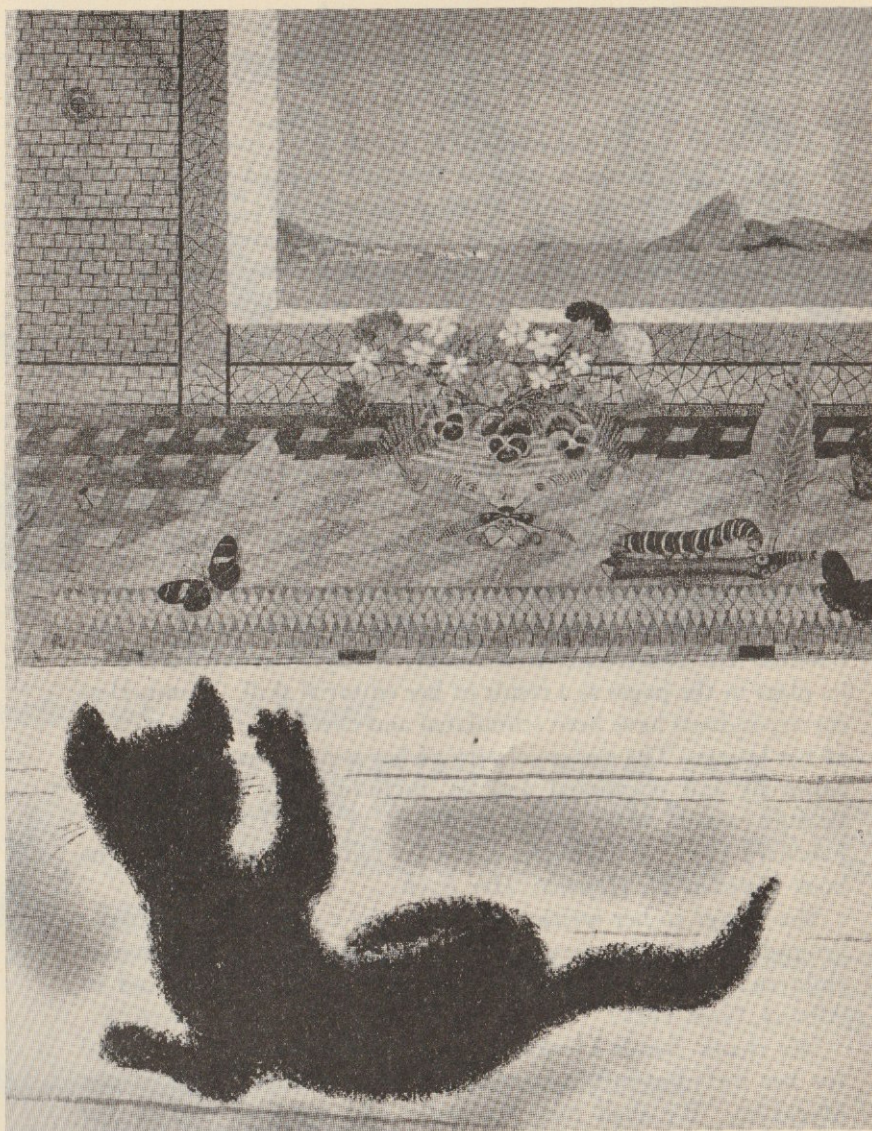
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Margaret Wise Brown, "Laureate of the Nursery"
by Louise Seaman Bechtel

The Animals, One by One, by Anne H. White



"Summer came. The air was soft and little bugs
and butterflies flew in at the window."

*The cat is looking at a painting
by José Bernardo Cardoso, Jr., in "The House of
a Hundred Windows" by Margaret Wise Brown*

THE HORN BOOK

M A G A Z I N E

June, 1958

MARGARET WISE BROWN, "LAUREATE OF THE NURSERY"

By LOUISE SEAMAN BECHTEL

WHAT DO writers care most about? My answer would be two simple things: first, that they continue to feel a joy in the act of writing; second, that their work be published so that possibly it may live. Margaret Wise Brown was one whose joy in writing was most obvious to all who knew her. She wanted her books published even more than most writers because she conceived them as picture books and couldn't wait to see the picture part completed. She had that satisfaction to a remarkable degree, with the added joy of huge sales which told her she had delighted many children.

Her success was almost fantastic. To date, about one hundred books by her have been published, with total sales probably over fifteen million. She collaborated on, or contributed to, a dozen more books, including some school primers. She wrote a children's page for *Good Housekeeping* and helped make several Victrola records. She was given an illustrated write-up in *Life*, for which she and the interviewer concocted a rather fantastic picture of herself. Probably humor or fantasy is all one can use who is asked to explain what drives one to publish from four to eight books a year, when it is not financial need. Her inner ambition was to write adult poetry, of which she left a great hoard, all unpublished. More or less secretly, she kept trying to be a painter. She was adult and sophisticated in many ways, yet she never lost the special sensory acuteness of childhood nor a present sense of the real and the dream worlds of her childhood.

How can I describe this engaging friend, to make her come alive to you? She was medium tall, slim, with flying flaxen hair, and never a hat upon it. I saw her most often in winter, in a worn old fur coat, holding the leash of one or both of her big Kerry Blue dogs. Her pale face had a golden glow to match her hair. Her large, light blue-green eyes were quiet, watchful, often lit with fun; when she talked they became most luminous and expressive. She had an odd, gentle, high-pitched voice; she talked slowly, often hesitantly, hinting at a complex emotional make-up.

Margaret Wise Brown was born in Brooklyn, New York, on May 23, 1910. Her father, Robert Bruce Brown, was a prosperous manufacturer. Both he and her mother came from Kirkwood, Missouri, where his father had been a Governor and a United States Senator. Early in her childhood they moved to Whitestone Landing on Long Island where she had the freedom of woods and beaches. She had many pet animals: the thirty-odd rabbits and "one dog of my own plus six borrowed dogs" foretold the many animal heroes of her books. Her brother being a bit too old and her sister a bit too young for close companionship perhaps bred an independence in play and friendships. Very early she showed that special love for and need of privacy that never left her.

She attended Dana Hall, in Wellesley, Massachusetts, after spending two years at school in Switzerland where, she insisted, she learned "*French and Scotch*." She went to Hollins College, Virginia, where she won her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1932. At school and college she was chiefly interested in experimental writing and in reading "new" writers. After college she took a short story course at Columbia but said she gave it up because she "couldn't think up any plots." That she was more a poet than a storyteller is obvious in most of her children's books.

Chance suddenly led her into a field of writing she had never considered. She heard of a truly experimental writing group, a class conducted by Lucy Sprague Mitchell at the Bank Street School, then called "The Bureau for Educational Experiment." Her very first work there made her happy. She said, "Experimenting in writing for children is so much less *precious* than doing it for grownups."

The brilliant Mrs. Mitchell who ruled over "69 Bank Street" was the sort of creative person who analyzed writers shrewdly and helped many besides Brownie to find themselves. I often visited her writing classes to criticize or to advise about publica-



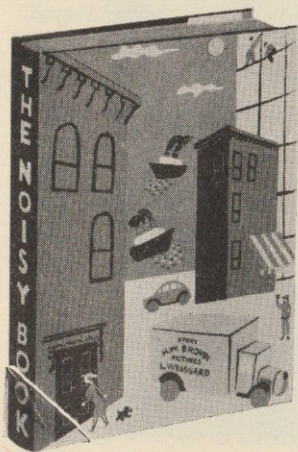
Brownie with her poodle

tion. After one of them Mrs. Mitchell said to me, "That Brownie bears watching. She is a poet, and really knows small children."

At Bank Street, Brownie could tell stories to various age groups of children. She could watch them through those windows at which they cannot see you looking in. She was put on the school's publication staff, and helped through the press Mrs. Mitchell's second *Here and Now Story Book* to which both she and I contributed, and in meetings about it we became friends. She took down stories told by children at the Little Red Schoolhouse and said they were "a revelation of spontaneity, of imagination and of language." So she studied lower age levels "to find how and

when this creative vitality started." She found that Mrs. Mitchell had already studied the same problem and written upon it.

Soon she met young William Scott and his partner John McCullough, who were starting a new firm to publish new kinds of books for the "neglected" nursery-age child, the age of their own children. She was their first official editor, and author of their first book *Bumblebugs and Elephants* (1937). Printed on stiff cardboard, its "big and little" creatures still delight the very youngest. A bit before that, Harper published *When the Wind Blew*, a fantasy based on a story by Chekhov. Then in 1938, Dutton issued *The Fish with the Deep Sea Smile*, and Scott, *The Little Fireman*. Altogether, she had seven books in those first two years and was well started on her extraordinary career.



In 1939 came Brownie's and Scott's first big sales success, *The Noisy Book*. We met the little dog Muffin, with his bandaged eyes, guessing at city things about him by their sounds. A child must guess, as Muffin does, before you turn the page. Thousands of parents found out how their youngest children were all attention for a book they had to talk back to. The brilliant flat-colored modern art by Leonard Weisgard fascinated them. So a series was started which now has seven titles, all nursery classics.

Harper published the last three and have now taken over also the first four. When interviewed about them, Brownie once said that they were intended "to make children give honest sensory responses, not take them from a page without thinking."

Brownie's greatest editorial excitement, while still an editor for William Scott, was in persuading Gertrude Stein to write a children's book for them. She loved to tell about the day the manuscript arrived, how she and Mr. Scott and Mr. McCullough gathered at her apartment that evening, forgetting dinner, to read it aloud. A huge birthday cake in the shape of a ship stood there, intended for a friend. They sat up most of the night, reading and re-reading *The World Is Round, or Rose Is a Rose* (Scott 1939) and gradually ate up the cake. The book caused a

tremendous stir; some adults were "against" it, but lots of children loved it and saw the fun of the style. I remember writing a vigorous bit of praise for it in *The Horn Book*.

With four books a year, and half a dozen more contracted for, Brownie left her editorial job. During the war, I once met her for lunch at the Museum of Modern Art where she introduced me to that great Mexican artist, Orozco. I told her I was against her using pseudonyms — "Golden MacDonald" and "Juniper Sage" — that they didn't hide her real name from anyone. She gleefully announced a third one, "Timothy Hay," but *he* had only one book, *Horses*. She claimed that each name had a different personality, and publishers didn't like having so many books a year under one name. Probably I told her that success was ruining her.

Be that as it may, "Golden MacDonald" wrote some of Brownie's best books for Margaret Lesser at Doubleday. What child could resist *Red Light, Green Light* (1944)? What adult could fail to buy *Little Lost Lamb* (1945) for which Leonard Weisgard created that appealing small shepherd and of course a *black* lamb? Then in 1946 he illustrated *The Little Island*, which won him the Caldecott Medal, and of which more later. Whatever the "alias" used on them, these books surely will live as Brownie's.

As "Juniper Sage" she collaborated with Edith Thacher Hurd, a friend of the Bank Street days, on that startling book *The Man in the Manhole: and the Fix-it Men*, illustrated by Bill Ballantine (Scott, 1946). A new edition has appeared recently, taking children again under city streets to see the mysteries that bring them light, heat and water. Brownie and Mrs. Hurd also did together the Little Golden Books about firemen, miners, policemen, etc., bringing those heroes to the level of very small children, weaving facts into brief, amusing stories.

Brownie's first Simon and Schuster book was a "big" one, *The Golden Egg Book* (1947), with truly gorgeous color by Leonard Weisgard. It was the essence of spring and a most welcome new version of the Easter bunny idea. It was a great success, and of course they offered her further contracts. This got her into trouble with her other publishers. Simon and Schuster's children's books were sweeping the country, and other countries, too. Publishers of the "regular" trade editions were apprehensive and wanted to keep their authors to themselves. But Brownie

would sign no contract restricting her output, and she won. As a matter of fact, she had books with nine publishers by 1952.

Well I remember the day when she received her first huge check from S. & S., huge because they paid in advance on the printing of the first edition, which might be 50,000 to 75,000. She was dazed, and decided to spend it at once before it proved untrue. New cars were hard to get that year so she took her one remaining Kerry Blue on a plane to Florida where she had heard there were lots of new cars. "I'm going to buy a big station wagon," she said. "A dog like a Kerry isn't comfortable in a little car." It was the same spirit in which, ten years before, she had taken her first advance royalty check from Dutton straight to the steamship office to buy passage to Ireland.

Her eighteen titles with Simon and Schuster have sold, up to this writing (February 1958), almost twelve million copies. The best seller is *Five Little Firemen*, over two million. All have had foreign editions, mostly in European countries, some in the Argentine and Australia. The delightful *Color Kittens* wins with nine foreign editions. Brownie's editors here were Georges Duplaix, Dorothy Bennett, and Lucille Ogle.

My own firm favorite of these books is *Mister Dog*, "the dog who belonged to himself." He is named Crispin's Crispian, after Brownie's big black poodle who succeeded the Kerry Blues. What a lovably ragged, characterful person Garth Williams made of him! He appears again in *The Sailor Dog*, a fine story told her by the eight-year-old neighbor, Austin Clarke, whom she credits as collaborator. Dog lovers of all ages chuckle at the details in *Mister Dog* and at the very essence of dogginess in this lovable book. The touch of genius is in creating a small boy who also "belongs to himself," as all little boys realize they do, while they laugh at the pretend boy who lived with a dog.

Brownie could write anywhere and on any old scrap of paper, in an airplane, in the station wagon in front of her grocer's. But of course her homes were important to her books. When I first knew her, she lived in an apartment on West Tenth Street, a conventional, well-kept home, with lovely old furniture, many books, unusual paintings. There was nonsense around, too, possibly gifts from members of her "Bird Brain Club" which held Christmas at any time of the year they wished.

Later she bought an old house on the Maine island called Vinal

Haven, twelve miles out to sea from Rockland. There she had spent several summers in childhood. She named it "The Only House," because it was the last of a group built long ago by granite cutters. In its attic studio, she told me, she felt as if living in treetops, wonderfully alone with the sounds of the sea, "wanting to think hard but happy just in being." The magic of the place, its dramatic changes with mists and tides, seeped into her. No words or ideas about it seemed worthy of it; she waited and waited. "Suddenly I had the thought that it is such a relief, when we are adults with the bewilderingly gigantic world around us, to remember that we knew, as children, that the world is as big as the part of it we really know."

So she slowly wrote and rewrote *The Little Island*, with its kitten who learns that the island is both part of the great world and a world of its own. Mr. Weisgard came to the attic studio to make the pictures, and later wrote of it all vividly for *Junior Wings*: about the window opening on a sheer twenty-foot drop to the sea; apple blossoms in another window; bees and bats



"He gave himself the bone and trotted home with it."

Full-color picture by Garth Williams for "Mister Dog"

coming in and out; the odor of fish chowder rising from the kitchen. Together they made an outstanding book, which Doubleday gave very fine color printing. It captures the magic of all islands.

Now let us put the pail of clams we have just dug, some flowers, a big basket of books, and the dog, into the station wagon and head for New York. We go home to "Cobble Court," way up on York Avenue. We ring the bell of a shabby old brick house, go through its dark hall, and out onto a sunny courtyard, neatly set about with clipped trees in tubs and perhaps potted daisies or chrysanthemums. There stands a tiny old white gingerbread house, a storybook house, built in 1810, miraculously left among factories and skyscraping apartments, and still heated only by wood fires.

In the hall hang Brownie's big brass beagle-horn and velvet beagling cap. There are fur rugs, a big fur-covered chair, and in the bedroom a fur rug on the bed. You go upstairs for the living-dining room and galley-size kitchen. Here sun pours in over plants in bloom and a row of big shells. A typewriter looks incongruous, and you note with surprise that Brownie knows how to use it. On an outer balcony you see piles of oil paintings, "all beginnings," says Brownie, "no good, but I can't stop doing them." She tells of an illustrator, whose work she criticized severely, who said, "You're really a frustrated painter."

One day she showed me her "Diary," kept in an old book with a worn Florentine leather cover. "What's in it," she said, "isn't facts of my life, but other matters. Dreams — I have wonderful dreams — and I put down interesting colors, and faces, and places. A few stories — here are some told me by darling colored children at a school in Harlem. Maybe I'll use them some day, but not as they are here, the children wouldn't like that. They want words better arranged than their own, and a few gorgeous big grownup words to bite on. Most children are so wonderful. After being with them I decide that almost no stories they have are good enough for them. I mean, of course, very small children. One can keep trying new ways to release their own feelings and imaginings."

It is odd to think that I jotted down these words in 1946, meaning to write a *Horn Book* piece about Brownie. Little did I know that soon I would be reviewing her books each season. How difficult it is to choose a few more to mention here! First

I turn with satisfaction to the Harper books, where her first editor (1937) was Louise Raymond. Ursula Nordstrom, her assistant, was soon to be head of the department. Harper has published thirty-two of Brownie's books, more than any other publisher, proving Miss Nordstrom's very special understanding of, and friendship for, this unique writer.

The Runaway Bunny (Harper, 1942), with its beautiful pictures in five colors by Clement Hurd, is a treasure for young mothers to read aloud and for young eyes to look at over and over. Brownie said she was "using the repeated cadences of an old French love song, transferred to the real world of a small child." It has sold on and on. Less popular, but still being reprinted, is *The House of a Hundred Windows* (Harper, 1945), introducing fifteen modern paintings to children. Each was a window in a magical house where lived only a cat. At the end, "It was up to the cat!"—whether or not he would go out the door



"Maybe I am a little Island too . . . a little fur Island
in the air."

Full-color picture by Leonard Weisgard for "The Little Island"



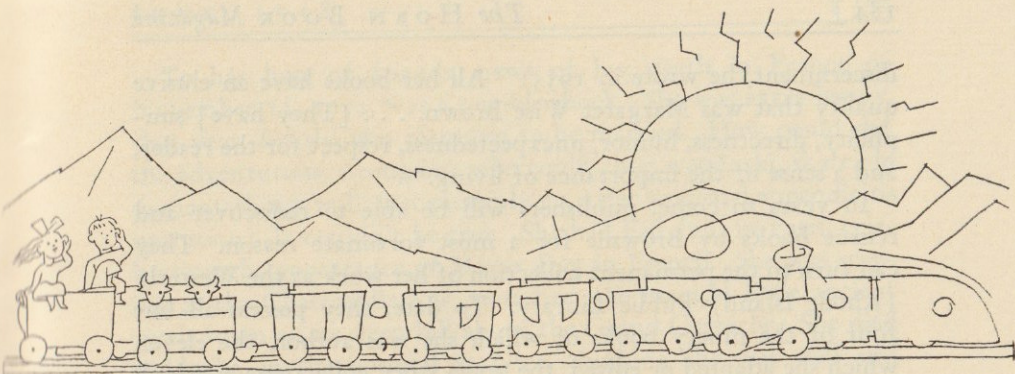
" If you become a crocus . . . I will be a gardener.
And I will find you."

Line drawing by Clement Hurd for "The Runaway Bunny"

and never return, a mind-stretching question. The talented young architect De Veyrac created this house and helped make the book one of rare distinction.

And oh! the fun I had with *The Little Fur Family* (Harper, 1946). Do you remember it, all bound in rabbit skin, in a little box with a hole to show that little fur stomach? That box alone made a kindergarten class roll on the floor with laughter. I had to read it to them over and over, and pass it around for loving pats, and for squeals of joy at Garth Williams' entrancing, tiny pictures. After over 100,000 were sold, and it had appeared "in fur" in three other countries, it turned out that rabbit skins were sadly prone to worms and moths. So a new edition appeared in more normal book format.

Of thirty-eight illustrators of her work, Mr. Weisgard has been her most frequent collaborator, with twenty-two titles. His are the books with the most varied styles and moods — he can be funny, real, magical; he can evoke beautiful places, create appealing children and creatures; he used a striking poster style in *The Noisy Books* and a brilliant, Dali-like exactness in *The Important Book*. Clement Hurd, with his power to make the present world both real and touched with magic, and his special understanding of small children, comes next with ten titles. Garth Williams, in nine books, brings to life unforgettable creatures, expressive,



"Look down, look down that long steel track,
where you and I must go."

Line drawing by Jean Charlot for "*Two Little Trains*"

wonderfully funny and appealing, always real animals. See the raccoons on page 185. All three artists were superbly able to fulfill Brownie's book plans and to supplement them with their own different sorts of imagination. But she was in a very real sense a collaborator with each artist, discussing her own layout, their sketches, and all details. When a picture was finished, sometimes she changed some words in the text to fit it better. She generally "pulled out" the best work of every artist. She was always eager for collaborators with "new" styles, such as Lucienne Bloch, Dahlov Ipcar, Symeon Shimin, E. Slobodkina, Marc Simont, Remy Charlip.

An artist whose work Brownie greatly admired and was proud to have illustrate her words was the French-Mexican Jean Charlot. He did *A Child's Goodnight Book* in 1943 and made a larger, revised version of it in 1950. With all his forceful strength and bold design, he still captured the humor and tenderness of the text and took the poetic suggestions a leap further. His handling of *Two Little Trains* (1949) is superb. In fact, all five of his books for Brownie's texts are masterpieces of modern children's bookmaking. All were published by her old friend William R. Scott, who since those early days has done twenty of her books. He has cleverly revived some of the first in new editions, such as *Willie's Adventures* and *Sneakers*.

Mr. Scott wrote in 1938: "The tremendous success of her books is due to a rare quality: sure emotional insight into the realities of a young child's world bounded by the here and now." With equal

discernment, he wrote in 1955: "All her books have an elusive quality that was Margaret Wise Brown. . . . [They have] simplicity, directness, humor, unexpectedness, respect for the reader, and a sense of the importance of living."

In years to come, publishers will be able to rediscover and reissue books by Brownie for a most fortunate reason. They can turn to the permanent collection of her work at the Westerly (Rhode Island) Public Library. To date, they possess all but four of the ninety books of which she was author, the eleven which she adapted or edited, the seven story collections in which she appeared. They have some of the artist's originals and the author's book layouts; records, filmstrips, and much other fascinating material.*

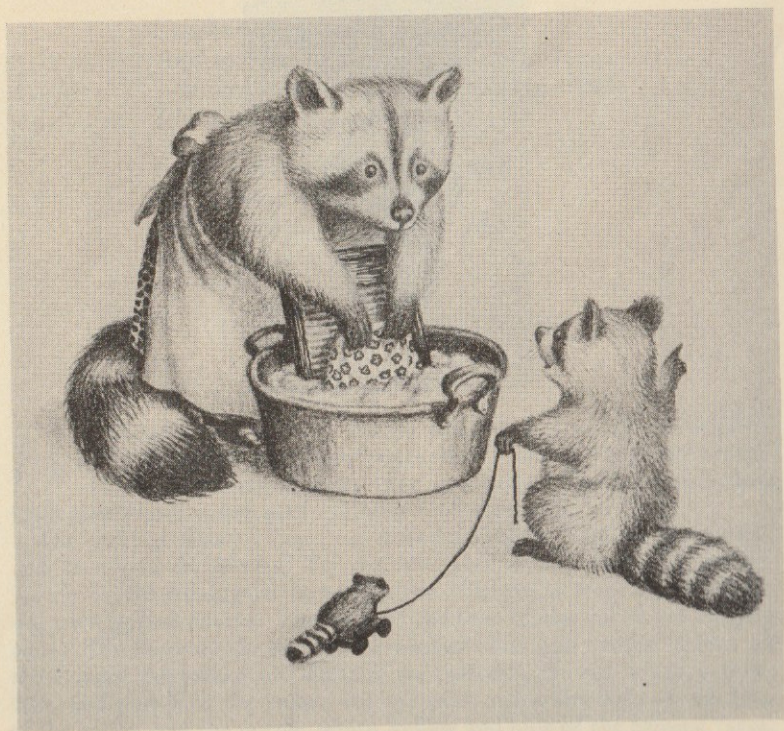
In the early days a publisher once asked Brownie, "Have you another manuscript you can show us?" She replied: "I have a big drawer full of them. I dream them up in twenty minutes, then polish some of them for a year." A person who is creative in this way (and I think most truly creative people are prolific) is not apt to be self-critical, that is, as to relative values of separate pieces of writing. Brownie believed in the criticism given her by children themselves. She would often try out manuscripts and finished books on children she knew in various homes and in schools. This way of testing books is far from infallible. But anyone who has seen small children make a beeline for her books knows that, with her, it worked.

I suspect that she enjoyed the wide arena of her publishing world in the same sporting spirit as that which took her off to hunt with the Buckram Beagles on Long Island. She enjoyed any contest of wits in a publisher's office, whether over binding or punctuation (her idea of this was, the less the better). She seemed shy in public but she was very curious about people and interested in editors she felt were truly creative. As to the business end of it all, she was far from reliable. She kept no proper record of her sales and royalties. I find a letter which tells me one firm paid her forty percent on a book! It is said that once she claimed she *couldn't* have to pay an income tax because that year she had spent more than she had earned. One list she sent me that I fully believed in is headed *Books Under Construction*. Some of these you will see in 1958 and 1959.

* See note in Hunt Breakfast, page 164.

To her host of friends, news of her death in France on November 13, 1952, was a terrible shock. She was extra happy, that year, for she was planning to be married. How could she, the adventurous, strong one who could chop wood, ski, skate, do so many things well, just suddenly go, after a normal appendicitis operation? It couldn't be true. She had had fun, in Paris, celebrating the appearance of *Mister Dog* in French. She was staying at the Chateau Barlow, near Eze, the magical little ancient castle town on its steep hill above the Grand Corniche. She died suddenly, in the hospital at Nice, thinking she was well and ready to go home.

Once she said to me, "In the back of my head, I keep busy; in the front of my head, I am slow and stupid." I love to think of her at Eze, seeing in impressions of that beautiful old world and



"I want to go out in the woods and see the night."

Two-color drawing by Garth Williams for
"Wait Till the Moon Is Full"

the sea spread out below, wondering whether she would now, in a new life at home, turn at last to writing for adults. The last words should be her own:

"A book can make a child laugh or feel clear-and-happy-headed as he follows a simple rhythm to its logical end. It can jog him with the unexpected and comfort him with the familiar, lift him for a few minutes from his own problems of shoelaces that won't tie and busy parents and mysterious clock-time, into the world of a bug or a bear or a bee or a boy living in the timeless world of story. If I've been lucky, I hope I have written a book simple enough to come near to that timeless world."

