

Chapters 1 and 2 from
The Adventures of
Woodlouse & Earwig



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"Spring's come," he murmured happily to himself.

With illustrations by the author

MARTIN PROBERT

**Chapters 1 and 2
from the Paperback Version of**

**The Adventures
of
Woodlouse and Earwig**

Fantastic Tales About Minibeasts in the Garden

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The Adventures of Woodlouse and Earwig

Martin Probert

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Contents

Chapter 1 : Spring	7
Chapter 2 : The artificial horses	19
Chapter 3 : Waiting	29
Chapter 4 : Enchantment	39
Chapter 5 : The drought	47
Chapter 6 : The escape	63
Chapter 7 : The storm	79
Chapter 8 : The approach of winter	89
About the Author	105
Other Books by Martin Probert	



Chapter 1 : Spring

In which spring comes and Woodlouse is rescued by Earwig

One warm spring evening, after a winter of the coldest, wettest weather imaginable, the big grey woodlouse awoke.

"Spring has come," he murmured happily to himself.

All winter he had been hibernating deep in the soil, but this evening he sensed that the cold had finally gone out of his world. Nosing his way upwards, and working the soil back past him with his legs, he eased his way slowly to the surface. As he broke out into the warm evening air he paused, pricked up his feelers and twitched them once, then once more, and then once again. Finding the air to his liking he pulled himself out of the hole, stretched his fourteen legs and then arched his back, letting the armoured plates slide gently one over the other.

"I wonder if Earwig's awake," was his first thought.

Woodlouse set off over the lawn on his way down to the rockery, but as he tunnelled beneath the short grass he had the odd feeling that he was being watched. He stopped and turned around, but there was no one that he could see. Carrying on again Woodlouse soon came to the rockery and clambering over a few rocks found himself at the entrance to Earwig's home.

At the entrance Woodlouse paused to listen. There was a scraping noise coming out from under the rock as if something were being pushed around. After a while the noise gave way to silence, and in the silence came a quiet and melancholy song, sung so low that the silence was scarcely broken by it.

Deep underground
my friend sleeps sound
not dreaming spring is here,
while I alone
these long nights roam
waiting till he appear.

"Earwig!" called Woodlouse joyfully when the song had ended, and without waiting for an answer he scuttled under an overhanging rock into a low room beyond. The room was cluttered with odd scraps of wood that served as tables, not that Earwig had any great need of them, but he was fond of furniture. Just before his visitor had arrived Earwig had been busy rearranging the room and had already pushed several tables over from one place to another.

"Can I help?" offered Woodlouse at once.

"There's not much more to do," said Earwig, "save for that small table by you."

"Have you been up long?" asked Woodlouse as he helped move the table to where Earwig wanted it.

"Several nights," replied Earwig. "I looked in at the apple stump each night to see if you were awake yet, but it was always empty."

"How is my room up there?" asked Woodlouse at the mention of the apple stump.

"A few bits of leaf have drifted in," said Earwig, "but they shouldn't take long to clear out. The room here was splashed with mud," he continued, looking round at the clean walls. "It took me the best part of three nights to wipe down."

While he answered his friend's questions, Earwig bustled around laying out food on the largest table.

"Are you ready to eat?" he asked as he came to the end of his work.

Woodlouse was surprised how much food Earwig had been able to find so early in the year, and now he set to eagerly and finished all that was put before him. When they had emptied the table Earwig got up.

"I'll give you some help up at the apple stump," he said.

Woodlouse got up too, but as he scuttled after his friend he bumped unexpectedly into him as Earwig came hurrying into the house again.

"What is it?" asked Woodlouse in surprise.

"A human!" whispered Earwig. "On hands and knees, staring down at the rockery."

Woodlouse crept forward and peered out into the garden.

"He seems to have gone," he called back.

Earwig joined him.

"He was kneeling just there," he said, "beyond the rocks."

"How strange," said Woodlouse. "I wonder what he was about."

Earwig had no idea.

"Who could ever guess," he replied. "I never could make out one half of the odd things they do. My grandfather used to think there might be more to them than met the eye if one took the trouble to watch them closely."

"Did he watch them much?" asked Woodlouse with interest.

"Oh no!" laughed Earwig. "He'd have liked to, but grandfather never could keep awake long after dawn. Anyway, as you say," he concluded, "the human has gone. Let's get your house tidied up."

The pair of them made their way out over the rockery and across the lawn to where Woodlouse lived. His home lay in the trunk of an apple tree, a forked trunk it had been, but years ago one part of it had been lopped off short not far above the ground. The other part towered above the stump, overshadowing it in the hottest weather with a leafy canopy of broad wide-spreading branches, so that the short stump below was always moist and cool.

Climbing up, Woodlouse went in to look at the cool damp chamber which would again shelter him during the hot dry days of summer. Odd bits of leaf had settled here and there on the floor and lay banked up in the corners. Woodlouse and Earwig made a start at the back of the room, gradually working their way round to the

narrow opening, nosing the fragments of leaf before them out into the garden.

Standing in the open together the two friends twitched their feelers, picking up the fresh scent of the night air.

"The garden seems to be empty," said Woodlouse looking around. "No humans in sight."

"No," said Earwig, "it's late now. See how bright the stars are."

Woodlouse peered up. The stars shone like glow-worms among the leaves of the apple tree.

"The leaves are fresh and green again," he said. "How sad they looked last winter, so brown and wrinkled."

"Still," said Earwig, "the winter's over now, while three seasons of adventures lie before us. What shall we do this night?"

Woodlouse thought for a few moments.

"Shall we take a look at the buds of apple blossom?"

Earwig thought this an excellent idea as Woodlouse knew he would, for Earwig had a taste for petals. In fact Earwig had been up the apple tree almost every night to see how the swelling buds were coming on.

They went down the apple stump till they came to the fork, then crossed over to the old gnarled trunk and climbed up it into the crown of fresh green leaves.

Woodlouse watched his friend crawling about among the twigs from bud to bud, his feelers tapping excitedly upon each one. The buds were swollen and quite fit to burst, and some that had already begun to split tempted

Earwig with a sight of the delicious pink that lay beneath.

While Earwig busied himself among the buds, Woodlouse went off on his own, following each long drooping branch outwards and peering down into the garden from the swaying tip. Along one of the branches he came upon something red, a small woollen blanket hung up on the washing line to dry, which had, in flapping in the breeze, wrapped itself firmly around the branch. The blanket, still pegged to the washing line, was pulled taut between the line and tree. Looking out along the blanket, Woodlouse saw himself in his mind's eye crossing over it as if it were a bridge to the line beyond. Turning back along the branch he set off in search of Earwig.

"Delicious bud!" he could hear Earwig murmuring somewhere among the leaves. "Why stay closed so long when the warm spring is already here? Have no fear of the cold. Look, even the stars shine brightly to give you warmth at night. Hug yourself less tightly and spread your crisp petals for the starlight to shine upon."

"Alas!" replied Woodlouse in a voice so soft and sweet that Earwig might think it was the bud that spoke, "I would have opened many nights ago, but feared that the cool breeze, or something worse, might nip my petals."

For a few moments there was no reply to this from the other side of the leaves.

"Is that you, Woodlouse?" asked at length a slightly embarrassed Earwig who had thought himself to be quite alone.

"Suppose," laughed Woodlouse, "I answer no?"

"Then of course you'd be the bud that spoke," said Earwig coming out through the screen of leaves, "and I'd nip you soundly!"

As he came forward Woodlouse in mock fear stepped quickly back, missed his footing and disappeared from view.

"I don't think I'll take the quick way down tonight," called Woodlouse breathlessly, hanging from his front legs beneath the branch and struggling to get the others up as well. The weight of his body pulled him down, but the bark was rough and Woodlouse had a good grip on it. Once the other legs were up, it was but a moment before Earwig saw him coming round the side of the branch, his body at first still hanging from outstretched legs, then sinking down upon the branch as he arrived on top of it.

"No," Woodlouse continued, "rather than drop to the lawn, or go down by the trunk, I thought we might make use of a bridge I found."

"What bridge?" asked Earwig curiously who had never seen any bridge up in the apple tree and could not imagine to where it might lead.

"One that leads to the line," replied Woodlouse. "I thought we might go home that way."

Woodlouse knew the washing line of old and had the trick of it, though the first time he had been along it he had wandered too far underneath. Although he had held on as tightly as he could, the weight of his body kept dragging his slipping feet from the smooth surface, then suddenly they had slipped away altogether and he had dropped to the lawn.

Earwig however cared less for such antics.

"You go that way, Woodlouse, I'll wander back among the buds and down by the trunk."

Leaving Woodlouse to go by way of the woollen bridge and along the washing line back home, Earwig set off on another tour of the buds and spent so long about it that he was still in the apple tree when morning dawned. He set off quickly down the trunk, but at the fork, branched off to wish Woodlouse a good day's sleep. Woodlouse it seemed was not yet back, so Earwig crossed the lawn and scuttled across the rockery to his home. Once there he squeezed himself as usual into a crevice between two upright slabs of rock and straight away fell fast asleep.

Not long after this he was woken out of his sleep by voices.

"It won't reach," said the first voice.

"Let's try from the seat," said another, "we might get it down from there."

Earwig looked out. There were two humans standing together in the garden, one of them with a wooden pole, and a third human coming up to them with a small

garden seat. The human with the pole climbed up on the seat, and reaching up with the pole, poked it towards the washing that had wrapped itself in the night around the branch of the apple tree. Earwig watched with sleepy interest as the human jabbed at the washing, waiting to see if it would come free of the branch, then all at once he caught sight of something else up there.

"It's no use," said one of the humans, "the blanket won't come down. The pole's still not long enough."

"There might be a longer pole in the shed," said another, "and even if there's not we can always tie two together."

The humans trooped off the lawn and up the terrace steps. As they went off, Earwig hurriedly parted the tiny wing-cases on his back and began to unfold his wings. It was a long time since he had last parted his wings to fly - perhaps it was only three times he had flown in the whole course of his life - but he was impatient now to get off the ground. His wings unfolded backwards and outwards, spreading out on either side of him like two small fans. For a moment Earwig fluttered them, trying their strength, but in the next moment he rose from the rock, sailing up above the lawn and soaring steadily towards the caught-up washing.

As he came near he caught sight of Woodlouse, wedged tightly in a loop of wool. Earwig sailed full tilt at the blanket, flew straight into it by the side of

Woodlouse, and wasting no time in words, began nibbling at the wool.

"I was pushing my way through all this woollen fluff," explained Woodlouse, "when I got snared up in the loop. I couldn't push on, the loop was too small, and when I tried to go backwards, the edges of the armoured plates all around me caught against it. The loop has held me fast since last night. I never reached the line."

"Right, drop!" cried Earwig as the loop gave way.

Earwig watched as his friend dropped out of the apple tree and sped away. Once down on the lawn Woodlouse raised himself on a stem of grass and looked back up at the branch.

Earwig's wings still lay spread behind him. There was no time to tuck them neatly away before dropping down by Woodlouse, so Earwig took off again and glided down in one long curving smooth descent to the garden. As he touched down by Woodlouse the humans trooped back again with a new pole.

"Look!" cried one of them in surprise, "the wind's flapped it loose."

Woodlouse looked up. It was true, the washing hung limply on the line, swaying gently in the breeze. Turning to look at his friend, Woodlouse watched how Earwig worked at his wings, twisting his body first to one side, then to the other, folding his wings up fanwise, easing them shut pleat by pleat. At length the two fans lay folded up once more upon his back, neatly

tucked up into two small packs. Earwig closed down his wing-cases upon them.

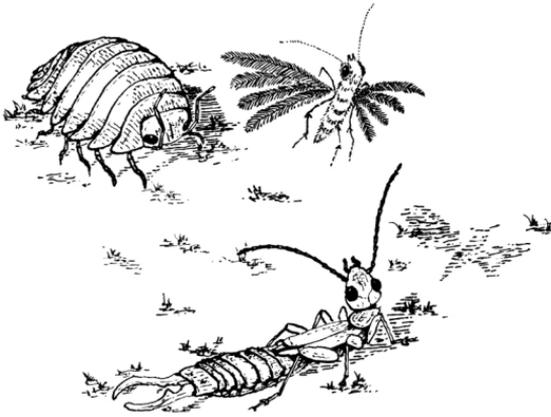
"Don't you wish you were a bee," laughed Woodlouse, "and could spread your wings or put them back again with ease?"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with flying," replied Earwig carelessly, "but the ground's good enough for me."

"The view must be fine," said Woodlouse wonderingly.

"There's no end of view," agreed Earwig. "That's half the trouble. There's little else up there but view. Nothing but birds," he added thoughtfully, "and you can't eat those."

Earwig fell silent as he said this, for a flock of starlings had settled in the apple tree. The birds strutted along the thicker branches, or stood bending their heads from side to side and wiping their yellowish bills noisily on the bark. The humans, who had gone off some time ago, now wandered back, sending the birds swarming up into the air. The bustle of the day had begun. Softly bidding each other farewell, Woodlouse and Earwig turned from each other and made their separate ways back home.



Chapter 2 : The artificial horses

In which Woodlouse gives Earwig two artificial horses and how they both go riding

Woodlouse lay deep in thought, gazing out from his opening in the apple stump and staring at the apple blossom that lay scattered about the lawn. Since waking at sunset he had been thinking, but his thoughts so far had led him nowhere.

"If it were my birthday," he was thinking, "it would be simplicity to find myself some present. Happy birthday, Woodlouse, I'd say, giving myself just what I'd always wanted. Thank you very much, Woodlouse, I'd reply, Just what I'd hoped for. But it's not my birthday at all, it's Earwig's, and it's not Earwig that's giving presents to himself, it's me that's giving him one."

Dusk was already fast turning into night when Woodlouse, abruptly breaking off his thoughts, set off down the apple stump and across the grass. Reaching the steps which led up to the terrace he climbed onto the bottom one, then stopped and waited. Presently a pair of soft horns waved over the far edge of the step, and then the rounded top of a snail's house rose into view. When the snail drew level with him Woodlouse hailed it.

Woodlouse, being in no great hurry, had decided to go by snail. Clambering on board he settled himself high on the snail's shell, then off they went. It was difficult at times to avoid slipping off, especially up the steep rise from one step to the next, but by edging forward on the shell, almost to the opening, Woodlouse managed to hold on. When once they reached the terrace it was easier going, so for a while he squatted down comfortably and enjoyed the ride, but kept a close watch to left and right, peering at all they passed.

"I hope you're in no hurry," said the snail politely.

"Not at all," replied Woodlouse, still wondering what he could make Earwig as a birthday present.

"Did you ever see a moon-bow?" asked the snail with interest.

"No," replied Woodlouse, not really listening.

"Nor I," said the snail sadly. Then, half to himself, he sang.

"Snail, don't pass by!
First tell me why
your horns are quivering so."

"My horns, down this lane,
in this moon-lit rain,
just touched a pale moon-bow."

By now they had been nearly once round the terrace and were just coming back to the steps again when the snail began to wind its way between a number of rosehips that lay scattered around. Tapping once on the shell to bring the snail to a stop, Woodlouse slithered

off. After watching the snail slide away into the night Woodlouse set about inspecting the rosehips, looking for four that were both soft and firm. When he had sorted out the best he rolled them one by one to the top of the steps, then down over the edge onto the step below. Crawling after them and pushing them down from step to step he got them as far as the rockery, on a level with Earwig's house.

Leaving the rosehips among the rocks Woodlouse climbed back to the terrace. There was a pile of fir needles heaped up in one corner, lying where a small fir tree had been propped up during the last winter. Pulling out a few needles, as many as he could drag behind him, and by making several journeys down to the rosehips, Woodlouse soon had a little stack of the finest sharpest needles that could be found.

Somewhere a blackbird had begun to sing.

"Softly, blackbird," whispered Woodlouse, "don't wake the sun yet, or dawn will break before I'm done."

Quickly he set to work. He jammed a rosehip up against a rock, prodded it with the point of a fir needle, piercing the skin, and worked the needle in as far as the stone. In this manner he got in four needles to act as legs, another for a tail and one more as a neck.

Woodlouse had some trouble next in trying to push the other end of the neck into a second rosehip, which was to be a head, but once it was on he quickly added two more needles for ears, and then the horse which he had been making was quite complete. Turning to the

remaining rosehips and needles, Woodlouse hurriedly made a second horse identical to the first.

When he had finished it was already day. The two horses lay on their sides between the rocks, but Woodlouse knew it was beyond his strength to stand them up. Leaving them where they lay, Woodlouse made his way over the rockery, across the grass, back up the apple stump and so to bed.



"Woodlouse! Woodlouse! Wake up!"

Earwig was shaking him.

"Wake up, Woodlouse! Come on! My birthday's tonight. I've made myself a cake of crushed apple blossom, but you can't help me eat it half asleep. Wake up!"

"Oh, it's you," the sleeper yawned. "Happy birthday!" Woodlouse stretched himself, sleepily at first, then woke up all at once.

"Is it late?" he asked.

"The moon is riding the sky," replied Earwig.

"Come on," said Woodlouse, "let's hurry."

The two friends set off at a good pace, Earwig running before, Woodlouse scuttling after as fast as he was able. When they arrived at Earwig's house, Earwig reached for the cake.

"Wait," interrupted Woodlouse, "not here!"

"Not here?"

"No. Bring it with you. Follow me."

Mystified, but ready to do whatever Woodlouse suggested, Earwig obeyed. Woodlouse led him round the side of the house and over a slab of rock, then sent him first down a narrow valley into an open space almost surrounded by high rock. There, to one side, Earwig came upon two artificial horses lying on their sides and made of rosehips and pine needles. He looked from one to the other, then up at Woodlouse, and finally walked right round the horses.

"Did you make these, Woodlouse?"

"Yes," said Woodlouse, "they're for you, Earwig. Do you think you and I could stand them up?"

After a few tries they found that if Earwig pushed up at the ears while Woodlouse pulled down on the hooves, the horses tipped up onto their legs quite easily. Then each climbed up onto the back of a horse. By

holding tightly to the neck and by rocking back and forth, the two friends discovered that they could get the horses to work their way over the ground. Soon a race was in progress.

"Come along there," cried Woodlouse to his horse.

"Hurry up there," cried Earwig.

The horses, tipping backwards and forwards as the riders egged them on, kicked up the dust, each in turn taking the lead, then lagging behind. At the end by a short head it was Earwig's horse that won the race. Earwig laughed and slithered down.

"And now" he called behind him as he scuttled back across the course, "the cake."

The cake was magnificent. Moonlight gleamed on the moist surface, sparkling on the damp scraps of petal. Just at that moment there was a movement in the air, a fluttering of white feathery wings. The two friends watched enchanted where a plume moth danced mysteriously in the night air between them, her wings radiant in the moonlight, shining with an unearthly whiteness in that dark night. Gently, so gently, she landed on the ground by Earwig. As she settled he felt a soft breeze waft over him, but instantly she was in the air again, fluttering now around the horses. Three times she circled them, a closing circle that brought her nearer, nearer, still nearer to the horses' heads. Gently her soft plumes brushed their ears, and as they felt her touch the horses trembled from nose to tail, pricked up

their ears, and then, stepping forward to some low plants, bent down their necks and began to graze.

Neither friend had said a word or moved, but the strange moth was gone now, leaving nothing but the shuffling of hooves as the horses tore at the sweet leaves.

Earwig was the first to speak.

"Are we dreaming?" he asked.

"This must be a dream," said Woodlouse. "Dare we touch them, or will they fade like the stars at dawn? And suppose we climb on their backs, would they carry us or throw us off?"

"Who knows," replied Earwig, "till we try. Come on!"

Once again they mounted the horses, but two very different horses were these from the stiff-legged beasts they had raced on earlier. Pawing the ground, the horses waited impatiently while Woodlouse and Earwig climbed up, then off they galloped, their hooves drumming on the rocks, down the rockery, across the lawn, racing pell-mell straight at the garden wall. For a moment the riders thought they were going to crash, but with a tremendous leap the horses sailed up into the air, cleared the top of the wall, and before long were galloping neck and neck in the open country. Strange woods and hedges sped past them, fields and farmsteads they had never seen before flashed by, over hill and through vale they raced, till the horses' mad gallop gave way to a gentle trot, and ambling to a

standstill they stopped by the clear rippling waters of a narrow brook.

The riders climbed off, and while the horses went down the mossy bank to drink the cool water, Woodlouse and Earwig lay down on the grass and looked up at the stars and the moon.

"My grandfather" began Earwig as he looked up at the sky, "once dreamt that he was the crescent moon, and that all the stars were tiny flowers with petals sweet as nectar. As he swept through the sky, and the stars before him faded one by one, he dreamt that he was eating them. The sweet juice from the petals was in his mouth and was so delicious that he couldn't keep himself from eating more and more, and the more he ate the rounder he grew, and he grew rounder and rounder until, having eaten the shining flowers from half the sky, he dreamt he had grown as round and fat as a full moon and was crammed with the bright stars of night. Ever after, whenever he saw the full moon, my grandfather would say that the taste of that sweet juice was in his mouth."

The horses having finished drinking were grazing now on the lush grass. After some time Woodlouse and Earwig got up and went over to them. The horses looked round, neighing softly, standing still while the two friends climbed back on. Once more they went galloping through wood and field till they came again to the garden wall, and sailing over touched down in the

small space between the rocks where they had first felt life.

As the horses touched down their whole bodies, legs and neck and ears and tail, grew stiff. Once again they were artificial horses, nothing more than rosehips stuck with fir needles.

Woodlouse and Earwig climbed down and looked around. The moon had gone down and its light sparkled no more on the cake. The faintest stars were beginning to fade in the first light of dawn. Earwig took up the cake and led the way through the rockery back home. Breaking the cake in two he pushed a half of it towards Woodlouse. They were large halves and Woodlouse and Earwig ate in silence, filling their bellies, growing sleepier and sleepier till eventually, dozing off in their places, they both slipped slowly to the floor and fell fast asleep.

Pages 28-104 not included

About the Author

Martin Probert is a keen observer of insect behaviour. Many of his discoveries have appeared in the pages of *The Bulletin of the Amateur Entomologists' Society*.

Martin and his wife Veronika have three children. Weekends and holidays have been spent hiking on Dartmoor, in Wales, and in the Swiss mountains, where all five kept a look-out for bees, bugs, butterflies, beetles, other insects, millipedes, centipedes, woodlice, and other wildlife.

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The Adventures of Woodlouse and Earwig

Fantastic Tales about Minibeasts in the Garden

A delightful book for anyone interested in nature and wildlife. Fascinating tales full of charm and quirky happenings.

We meet the two friends as they emerge in the spring sunshine, follow them through the warm summer months and a long drought, through an autumn storm, and say farewell to them as winter approaches. A year's adventures.

During the drought the animals organise an underground concert in which a small beetle sings a song. "It's a humorous song" she began, "about our hosts." There was a pause, then she added shyly, "About Woodlouse and Earwig."

On the way we meet other inhabitants of the garden, a mysterious plume moth, a dreaming snail, acrobatic grasshoppers, birds, insects, other animals . . . and humans too, of whom Earwig says he "never could make out one half of the odd things they do".

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