

The Snow Goose

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The Great Marsh lies on the Essex coast between the village of Chelmbury and the ancient Saxon oyster-fishing hamlet of Wickaeldroth. It is one of the last wild places of England.

In the late spring of 1930, Philip Rhayader came to the abandoned lighthouse at the mouth of the river Aelder. He bought the Lighthouse and many acres of marshland and salting surrounding it.

He lived and worked there alone the year round. He was a painter of birds and of nature and had withdrawn from all human society because he was a hunchback and his left arm was crippled, thin and bent at the wrist, like the claw of a bird.

Physical deformity often breeds hatred of humanity in men. Rhayader did not hate; he loved very greatly, man, the animal kingdom, and all nature.

He was twenty-seven when he came to Great Marsh. He had travelled much and fought valiantly before he made his decision to withdraw from the world in which he could not take part as other men.

In his retreat he had his birds, his paintings, and his boat.

He would sail the tidal creek and estuaries and out to sea, and would be gone for days at a time, looking for new species of birds to photograph or sketch.

He became adept at netting them to add to his collection of tamed wildfowl in the pen near his studio that formed the nucleus of a sanctuary.

In his enclosures were the geese that came winging down the coast from Iceland and Spitzbergen. Many hundreds came and remained with him all through the cold weather from October to the early spring, when they migrated north again to their breeding-grounds below the ice rim.

One November afternoon, three years after Rhayader had come to the Great Marsh, a child approached the lighthouse studio by means of the sea wall. In her arms she carried a burden.

She was no more than twelve, slender, dirty, nervous and timid as a bird but beneath the grime as eerily beautiful as a marsh faery. She was desperately frightened of the ugly man, but greater than her fear was the knowledge that this ogre who lived in the lighthouse had magic that could heal injured things.

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She had never seen Rhayader before and was close to fleeing in panic at the dark apparition that appeared at the studio door, drawn by her footsteps – the black head and beard, the sinister hump, and the crooked claw.

She stood there staring, poised like a disturbed marsh bird for instant flight.

But his voice was deep and kind when he spoke to her.

‘What is it, child?’

She stood grounded, and then edged timidly forward. The thing she carried in her arms was a large white bird, and it was quite still. There were stains of blood on its whiteness and on her dress where she had held it to her.

The girl placed it in his arms. ‘I found it, sir. It’s hurt. Is it still alive?’

‘Yes. Yes, I think so. Come in, child, come in.’

Rhayader went inside, bearing the bird, which he placed upon a table, where it moved feebly. Curiosity overcame fear. The girl followed and found herself in a room warmed by a coal fire, shining with many coloured pictures that covered the walls, and full of a strange but pleasant smell.

The bird fluttered. With his good hand, Rhayader spread one of its immense, white pinions. The end was beautifully tipped with black.

Rhayader looked and marvelled, and said: ‘Child: where did you find it?’

‘In t’ marsh, sir. What – what is it, sir?’

‘It’s a snow goose from Canada. But how in all heaven came it here?’

The name seemed to mean nothing to the little girl. Her deep violet eyes, shining out of the dirt on her thin face, were fixed with concern on the injured bird.

She said: ‘Can ‘ee heal it, sir?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Rhayader. ‘We will try. Come, you shall help me.’

There were scissors and bandages and splints on a shelf, and he was marvellously deft, even with the crooked claw that managed to hold things.

He said: ‘Ah, she has been shot, poor thing. Her leg is broken, and the wing tip, but not badly. See, we will clip her primaries, so that we can bandage it, but in the spring the feathers will grow and she will be able to fly again. We’ll bandage it close to her body, so that she cannot move it until it has set, and then make a splint for the poor leg.’

Her fears forgotten, the child watched, fascinated while he fixed a fine splint to the shattered leg.

‘We will call her *‘La Princesse Perdue,’* the Lost Princess. And in a few days she will be feeling much better. See!’ He reached into his pocket and produced a handful of grain. The snow goose opened its round yellow eyes and nibbled at it.

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The child laughed with delight, and then suddenly caught her breath with alarm as the full impact of where she was pressed in upon her, and without a word she turned and fled out of the door.

‘Wait, wait!’ cried Rhayader, and went to the entrance, where he stopped so that it framed his dark bulk. The girl was already fleeing down the sea wall, but she paused at his voice and looked back.

‘What is your name, child?’

‘Frith.’

‘Eh?’ said Rhayader. ‘Fritha, I suppose. Where do you live?’

‘Wi’ t’ fisherfolk at Wickældroth.’ She gave the name the old Saxon pronunciation.

‘Will you come back tomorrow, or the next day, to see how the Lost Princess is getting along?’

She paused, and again she looked like one of the wild water birds caught motionless in that split second of alarm before they took to flight.

But her thin voice came back to him: ‘Ay!’

And then she was gone, with her fair straight hair streaming out behind her.

END OF EPISODE ONE

Episode Two

The snow goose mended rapidly and by midwinter was already limping about the enclosure with the wild pink-footed geese with which it associated.

She had learned to come to be fed at Rhayader’s call, and the child, Fritha, or Frith, was a frequent visitor.

The child had overcome her fear of Rhayader. Her imagination was captured by the presence of this strange white princess from a land far over the sea.

Then one June morning a group of late pink-feet answered the call of the breeding-grounds and rose lazily, climbing into the sky in ever widening circles. With them, her white body and black-tipped pinions shining in the spring sun, was the snow goose.

It so happened that Frith was at the lighthouse. Her cry brought Rhayader running from the studio.

‘Look! Look! The Princess! Be she going away?’

Rhayader stared into the sky at the climbing specks. ‘Ay,’ he said, unconsciously dropping into her manner of speech. ‘The Princess is going home. Listen! She is bidding us farewell.’

Out of the clear sky came the mournful barking of the pink-feet, and above it the higher, clearer note of the snow goose. The specks drifted northward, formed into a tiny v, diminished, and vanished.

With the departure of the snow goose ended the visits of Frith to the lighthouse. Rhayader learned all over again the meaning of the word 'loneliness'.

That summer, out of his memory, he painted a picture of a slender, grime-covered child, her fair hair blown by a November storm, who bore in a her arms a wounded white bird.

In mid-October the miracle occurred.

Rhayader was in his enclosure, feeding his birds. A grey north-east wind was blowing and the land was sighing beneath the incoming tide.

Above the sea and the wind noises he heard a clear, high note.

He turned his eyes upward to the evening sky in time to see first an infinite speck, then a black-and-white pinioned dream that circled the lighthouse once, and finally a reality that dropped to earth in the pen and came waddling forward importantly to be fed, as though she had never been away.

It was the snow goose.

There was no mistaking her. Tears of joy came to Rhayader's eyes. Where had she been? Surely not home to Canada. No, she must have summered in Greenland or Spitzbergen with the pink-feet geese. She had remembered and had returned.

When next Rhayader went into Chelmbury for supplies, he left a message with the postmistress – one that must have caused her much bewilderment.

He said: 'Tell Frith, who lives with the fisher-folk at Wickaeldroth, that the Lost Princess has returned.'

Three days later, Frith, taller, still tousled and unkempt, came shyly to the lighthouse to visit *La Princesse Perdue*.

Time passed. On the Great Marsh it was marked by the height of the tides, the slow march of the seasons, the passage of the birds, and, for Rhayader, by the arrival and departure of the snow goose.

The world outside boiled and seethed and rumbled with the news of the impending war that was soon to break forth. But not yet did it touch Rhayader, or, for that matter, Frith.

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They had fallen into a curious natural rhythm, as the child grew older.

When the snow goose was at the lighthouse, then she came too, to visit and learn many things from Rhayader. From him she learned the lore of every wild bird that flew the

marshes. She cooked for him sometimes, and even learned to mix his paints.

But when the snow goose returned to its summer home it was as though some kind of bar was up between them, and she did not come to the lighthouse.

One year the bird did not return, and Rhayader was heartbroken. All things seemed to have ended for him. He painted furiously through the winter and the next summer, and never once saw the child.

But in the fall the familiar cry once more rang out from the sky, and the huge white bird, now at its full growth, dropped from the skies as mysteriously as it had departed. Joyously, Rhayader sailed his boat into Chelmbury and left his message with the postmistress.

Curiously, it was more than a month after he had left the message before Frith reappeared at the lighthouse, and Rhayader, with a shock, realised that she was a child no longer.

After the year in which the bird had remained away, its periods of absence grew shorter and shorter. It grew so tame that it followed Rhayader about and even came into the studio while he was working.

END OF EPISODE TWO

Episode three

In the spring of 1940, the birds migrated early from the Great Marsh. The world was on fire. The whine and roar of the bombers and the thudding explosions frightened them.

The first day of May, Frith and Rhayader stood shoulder to shoulder on the sea wall and watched the last of the unpinioned pink-feet and barnacle geese rise from their sanctuary; she, tall, slender, free as air and hauntingly beautiful; he, dark, grotesque, his massive bearded head raised to the sky, his glowing dark eyes watching the geese form their flight trajectory.

‘Look, Philip,’ Frith said.

Rhayader followed her eyes. The snow goose had taken flight, her giant wings spread,

but she was flying low, and once came quite close to them, so that for a moment the spreading black-tipped, white pinions seemed to caress them and they felt the rush of the bird's swift passage. Once, twice, she circled the lighthouse, then dropped to earth again in the enclosure with the pinioned geese and commenced to feed.

'She be'ent going,' said Frith, with marvel in her voice 'The Princess be goin' t' stay.'

'Ay,' said Rhayader, and his voice was shaken too. 'She'll stay. She will never go away again. The Lost Princess is lost no more. This is her home now – of her own free will.'

The spell the bird had girt about her was broken, and Frith was suddenly conscious of the fact that she was frightened, and the things that frightened her were in Rhayader's eyes – the longing and the loneliness and the deep, welling, unspoken things that lay in and behind them as he turned them upon her.

His last words were repeating themselves in her head as though he had said them again: 'This is her home now – of her own free will.'

The women in her bade her take flight from something that she was not yet capable of understanding.

Frith said: 'I – I must go. Good-bye. I be glad the – the Princess will stay. You'll not be so alone now.'

She turned and walked swiftly away, and his sadly spoken 'Good-bye, Frith,' was only half-heard.

She was far away before she dared turn for a backward glance. He was still standing on the sea wall, a dark speck against the sky.

Her fear had stilled now. It had been replaced by something else, a queer sense of loss that made her stand quite still for a moment, so sharp was it.

Then, more slowly, she continued on, away from the sky-ward-pointing finger of the lighthouse and the man beneath it.

It was little more than three weeks before Frith returned to the lighthouse. May was at its end, and the day, too, in a long golden twilight that was giving way to the silver of the moon already hanging in the eastern sky.

She told herself, as her steps took her thither, that she must know whether the snow goose had really stayed, as Rhayader said it would. Perhaps it had flown away, after all. But her firm tread on the sea wall was full of eagerness and sometimes unconsciously found herself hurrying.

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Frith saw the yellow light of Rhayader's lantern down by his little wharf, and she found him there. His sailboat was rocking gently on a flooding tide and he was loading supplies into her – water and food and bottles of brandy, gear and a spare sail. When he turned to the sound of her coming, she saw that he was pale, but that his dark eyes, usually so kind and placid, were glowing with excitement, and he was breathing heavily from his

exertions.

Sudden alarm seized Frith. The snow goose was forgotten. ‘Philip! Ye be goin’ away?’

Rhayader paused in his work to greet her, and there was something in his face, a glow and a look, that she had never seen there before.

‘Frith! I am glad you came. Yes, I must go away. A little trip. I will come back.’ His usually kindly voice was hoarse with what was suppressed inside him.

Frith asked: ‘Where must ye go?’

Words came tumbling from Rhayader now.

He must go to Dunkirk. A hundred miles across the Channel.

A British army was trapped there on the sands, awaiting destruction at the hands of the advancing Germans. The port was in flames, the position hopeless.

He had heard it in the village when he had gone for supplies.

Men were putting out from Chelmbury in answer to the governments call, every tug and fishing boat or power launch that could propel itself was heading across the Channel to haul the men off the beaches to the transports and destroyers that could not reach the shallows, to rescue as many as possible from the Germans’ fire.

Frith listened and felt her heart dying within her. He was saying that he would sail the Channel in his little boat. It could take six men at a time; in a pinch, seven. He could make many trips from the beaches to the transports.

The girl was young, primitive, inarticulate. She did not understand war, or what had happened in France, or the meaning of the trapped army, but the blood within her told her that here was danger.

‘Philip! Must ‘ee go? You’ll not come back. Why must it be ‘ee?’

The fever seemed to have gone from Rhayader’s soul with the first rush of words, and he explained it to her in terms that she could understand.

He said: ‘Men are huddled on the beaches like hunted birds, Frith, like the wounded and hunted birds we used to find and bring to sanctuary. Over them fly the steel peregrines, hawks, and gyrfalcons, and they have no shelter from these iron birds of prey. They are lost and storm-driven and harried, like the *Princesse Perdue* you found and brought to me out of the marshes many years ago, and we healed her. They need help, my dear, as our wild creatures have needed help, and that is why I must go.

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‘It is something that I can do’ he went on ‘Yes, I can. For once – for once I can be a man and play my part.’

Frith stared at Rhayader. He had changed so. For the first time she saw that he was no longer ugly or mis-shapen or grotesque, but very beautiful. Things were turmoiling in her

own soul, crying to be said, and she did not know how to say them.

‘I’ll come with ‘ee! Philip.’

Rhayader shook his head. ‘Your place in the boat would cause a soldier to be left behind, and another, and another. I must go alone.’

He donned rubber coat and boots and took to his boat. He waved and called back; ‘Good-bye! Will you look after the birds until I return, Frith?’

Frith’s hand came up, but only half, to wave too. ‘God speed you,’ she said, but gave it the Saxon turn. ‘I will take care of t’ birds. God-speed, Philip.’

It was night now, bright with moon fragment and stars and northern glow. Frith stood on the sea wall and watched the sail gliding down the swollen estuary. Suddenly from the darkness behind her there came a great rush of wings, and something swept past her into the air. In the night light she saw the flash of white wings, black-tipped and the thrust-forward head of the snow goose.

It rose and cruised over the lighthouse once and then headed down the winding creek where Rhayader’s sail was slanting in the gaining breeze, and flew above him in slow, wide circles.

White sail and white bird were visible for a long time.

‘Watch o’er him. Watch o’er him,’ Frith whispered. When they were both out of sight at last, she turned and walked slowly, with bent head, back to the empty lighthouse.

END OF EPISODE THREE

Episode Four

Now the story becomes fragmentary, and one of these fragments is in the words of the men on leave who told it in the saloon bar of the Crown and Arrow pub.

‘A goose, a bloomin’ goose, so ‘elp me,’ said Private Potton, of His Majesty’s London Rifles.

‘Garn,’ said a bandy-legged artilleryman.

‘A goose it was. Jock ‘ere, seed it same as me. It come flyin, down outa the muck and stink an’ smoke of Dunkirk that was o’erhead.

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It was white, wiv black on its wings, an’ it circles us like a bloomin’ dive bomber.

Jock, ‘ere, ‘e sez: ‘We’re done for. It’s the hangel of death a-come for us.’

‘ ‘Garn,’ He sez, ‘it’s a ruddy goose, come over from ‘ome wiv a message from Churchill, an’ ‘ow are we henjoying the bloomin bathing. It’s a omen, that’s what it is, a bloody omen. We’ll get out of this yet, me lad.’

‘We was roostin’ on the beach between Dunkirk an’ Lapanny, like a lot o’ bloomin’ pigeons on Victoria Hembankment, waitin’ for Jerry to pot us. ‘E potted us good too. ‘E

was be'ind us an' flankin' us an' above us. 'E give us shrapnel and 'e give us H.E., an' e' peppers us from the bloomin' hatmosphere with Jittersmiths.'

'An' offshore is the Kentish Maid, a ruddy cursion scow wot Hi've taken many a trip on out of Margate in the sumeer, for two-and-six, waiting to take us off, 'arf a mile out from the bloomin' shallows.

'While we are lyin' there on the beach, done in an' cursin' becos there ain't no way to get out to the boat, a Stuka dives on 'er, 'an 'is bombs drop alongside of 'er, throwin' up water like the bloomin' fountains in the palace gardens; a reg'lar display it was.

'Then a destroyer come up and' says: 'No, ye don't' to the Stuka with ack-acks and pom-poms, but another Jerry dives on the destroyer, an' it's er. Coo, did she to up! She burned before she sunk, an' the smoke an' the stink come driftin' inshore, all yellow an' black, an' out of it comes this bloomin' goose, a-circlin' around us trapped on the beach.

'An' then around a bend e' comes in a bloody little sailboat, sailing along as cool as you please, like a bloomin' toff out for a pleasure spin on a Sunday hafternoon at 'Enley.'

' 'Oo comes?' inquired a civilian.

' 'Im! 'Im that saved the lot of us. 'E sailed clean through a boil of machine-gun bullets from Jerry --the water was all frothin' with shell splashes an' bullets, but 'e didn't give it no mind, 'e didn't. 'E didn't 'ave no petrol to burn or hexplode, an' he sailed in between the shells.

'Into the shallows 'e come out of the black smoke of the burnin' destroyer, a little dark man wiv a beard, a bloomin' claw for a 'and, an' a hump on 'is back.

' 'E 'ad a rope in 'is teeth that was shinin' white out of 'is black beard, 'is good 'and on the tiller an' the crooked one beckonin' to us to come. An' over'ead, around and around, flied the ruddy goose.

'Jock, 'ere, sez, 'Lawk it's all over now. It's the bloody devil come for us 'imself. Hi must 'ave been struck an' don't know it.'

'"Garn" I sez "it's more like the good Lord, 'e looks to me, than any bloomin' devil.'

'E did too, like the picture from the Sunday-school books, wiv 'is white face and dark eyes an' beard an' all, and 'is bloomin' boat.

' 'Hi can taken seven at a time,' 'e sings out when 'e's in close.

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'Our horfficer shouts: 'Good man!....You seven neareset, get in.'

'We waded out to where 'e was. Hi was that weary Hi couldn't climb over the side, but 'e takes me by the collar of me tunic an' pulls, wiv a 'In ye go, lad. Come on. Next man.'

'An' in Hi went. Coo, 'e was strong, 'e was. Then 'e sets 'is sail, part of wot looks like a bloomin' sieve from machine-gun bullets, shouts: 'Keep down in the bottom of the boat, boys, in case we meet any of yer friends,' and we're off, 'im sitting in the stern wiv 'is rope in 'is teeth, another in 'is crooked claw, an' is right 'and on the tiller, a-steerin' an'

sailin' through the spray of the shells thrown by a land battery somewhere back of the coast. An' the bloomin' goose is flyin' around and around, 'onking above the wind and the row Jerry was makin', like a bloomin' Morris on Winchester by-pass.

'Hi told you yon goose was a omen,' Hi sez to Jock. 'Look at 'im there, a bloomin' hangel of mercy.'

'Im at the tiller just looks up at the goose, wiv the rope in 'is teeth, an' grins at 'er like 'e knows 'er a lifetime.

'E brung us out to the Kentish Maid and turns around and goes back for another load. 'E made trips all afternoon an' all night too, because the bloody light of Dunkirk burning was bright enough to see by. Hi don't know 'ow many trips 'e made, but 'im 'an a nobby Thames Yacht Club motorboat an' a big lifeboat from Poole that come along brought off all there was of us on that particular stretch of hell, without the loss of a man.

'We sailed when the last man was off, an' there was more then seven hunder' of us haboard a boat built to take two hunder'. 'E was still there when we left, an' 'e waved us good-bye and sails off towards Dunkirk, and the bird wiv 'im. Blimy, it was queer to see that ruddy big goose flyin' around 'is boat, lit up by the fires like a white hangel against the smoke.

'A Stuka 'ad another go at us, 'arfway across, but 'e'd been stayin' up late nights, an' missed. By mornin' we was safe 'ome.

'Hi never did find out what become of 'im, or 'oo 'e was - 'im wiv the 'ump an' 'is little sail-boat. A bloody good man 'e was, that chap.'

'Coo,' said the artilleryman. 'A ruddy big goose. Whatcher know?'

END OF EPISODE FOUR

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Episode Five

In an officer's club in Brook Street, a retired naval officer, sixty-five years old, Commander Keith Brill-Oudener, was telling of his experiences during the evacuation of Dunkirk.

Called out of bed at four o'clock in the morning, he had captained a lopsided Limehouse tug across the Channel, towing a string of Thames barges, which he bought back four times loaded with soldiers. On his last trip he came in with her funnel shot away and a hole in her side. But he got her back to Dover.

A naval-rescue officer, who had two Brixham trawlers and a Yarmouth drifter blasted out from under him in the last four days of the evacuation, said: 'Did you run across that queer sort of legend about a wild goose? It was all up and down the beaches. You know how these things spring up. Some of the men I brought back were talking about it. It was supposed to have appeared at intervals the last days between Dunkirk and La Panne. If you saw it, you were eventually saved. That sort of thing.'

'H'm'm'm,' said Brill-Oudener, 'a wild goose. I saw a tame one. Dashed strange experience. Tragic in way, too. And lucky for us. Tell you about it.'

Third trip back. Toward six o'clock we sighted a derelict small boat. Seemed to be a body in her. And a bird perched on the rail.

'We changed our course when we got nearer, and went over for a look-see. By Gad, it was a chap. Or had been, poor fellow. Machine-gunned, you know. Badly. Face down in the water. Bird was a goose, a tame one.'

'We drifted close, but when one of our chaps reached over, the bird hissed at him and struck at him with her wings. Couldn't drive it off. Suddenly young Kettering, who was with me, gave a hail and pointed to starboard. Big mine floating by. One of Jerry's beauties. If we'd kept on our course we'd have piled right into it. Ugh! Head on. We let it get a hundred yards astern of the last barge, and the men blew it up with rifle-fire.'

'When we turned our attention to the derelict boat again, she was gone. Sunk. Chap with her. He must have been lashed to her. The bird had got up and was circling. Three times, like a plane saluting. Dashed queer feeling. Then she flew off to the west. Lucky thing for us we went over to have a look, eh? Odd that you should mention a goose.'

Fritha remained alone at the little lighthouse on the Great Marsh, taking care of the pinioned birds, waiting for she knew not what. The first days she haunted the sea wall, watching; though she knew it was useless.

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Later she roamed through the storerooms of the lighthouse building with their stacks of canvases on which Rhayader had captured every mood and light of the desolate country and the wondrous, graceful, feathered things that inhabited it.

Among them she found the picture that Rhayader had painted of her from memory so many years ago, when she was still a child, and had stood, wind-blown and timid, at his threshold, hugging an injured bird to her.

The picture and the things she saw in it stirred her as nothing ever had before, for much of Rhayader's soul had gone into it. Strangely, it was the only time he had painted the snow goose, the lost wild creature, storm-driven from another land, that to each had brought a friend, and which, in the end, returned to her with the message that she would

never see him again.

Long before the snow goose had come dropping out of a crimsoned eastern sky to circle the lighthouse in a last farewell, Fritha, from the ancient powers in her blood that was in her, knew that Rhayader would not return.

And so, when one sunset she heard the high-pitched, well-remembered note cried from the heavens, it brought no instant of false hope to her heart. This moment, it seemed, she had lived before many times.

She came running to the sea wall and turned her eyes, not toward the distant Channel whence a sail might come, but to the sky from whose flaming arches plummeted the snow goose. Then the sight, the sound, and the solitude surrounding broke the dam within her and released the surging, overwhelming truth of her love, let it well forth in tears.

Wild spirit called to wild spirit, and she seemed to be flying with the great bird, soaring with it in the evening sky, and hearkening to Rhayader's message.

Sky and earth were trembling with it and filled her beyond the bearing of it. 'Frith! Fritha! Frith, my love. Good-bye, my love!' The white pinions, black-tipped, were beating it out upon her heart, and her heart was answering: 'Philip, I love 'ee.'

For a moment Frith thought the snow goose was going to land in the old enclosure, as the pinioned geese set up a welcoming gabble. But it only skimmed low, then soared up again, flew in a wide, graceful spiral once around the old light, and then began to climb.

Watching it, Frith saw no longer the snow goose but the soul of Rhayader taking farewell of her before departing for ever.

She was no longer flying with it but earth-bound. She stretched her arms up into the sky and stood on tip-toes, reaching, and cried: 'God-speed, God-speed, Philip!'

Frith's tears were stilled. She stood watching silently long after the goose had vanished. Then she went into the lighthouse and secured the picture that Rhayader had painted of her. Hugging it to her breast, she wended her way homeward along the old sea wall.