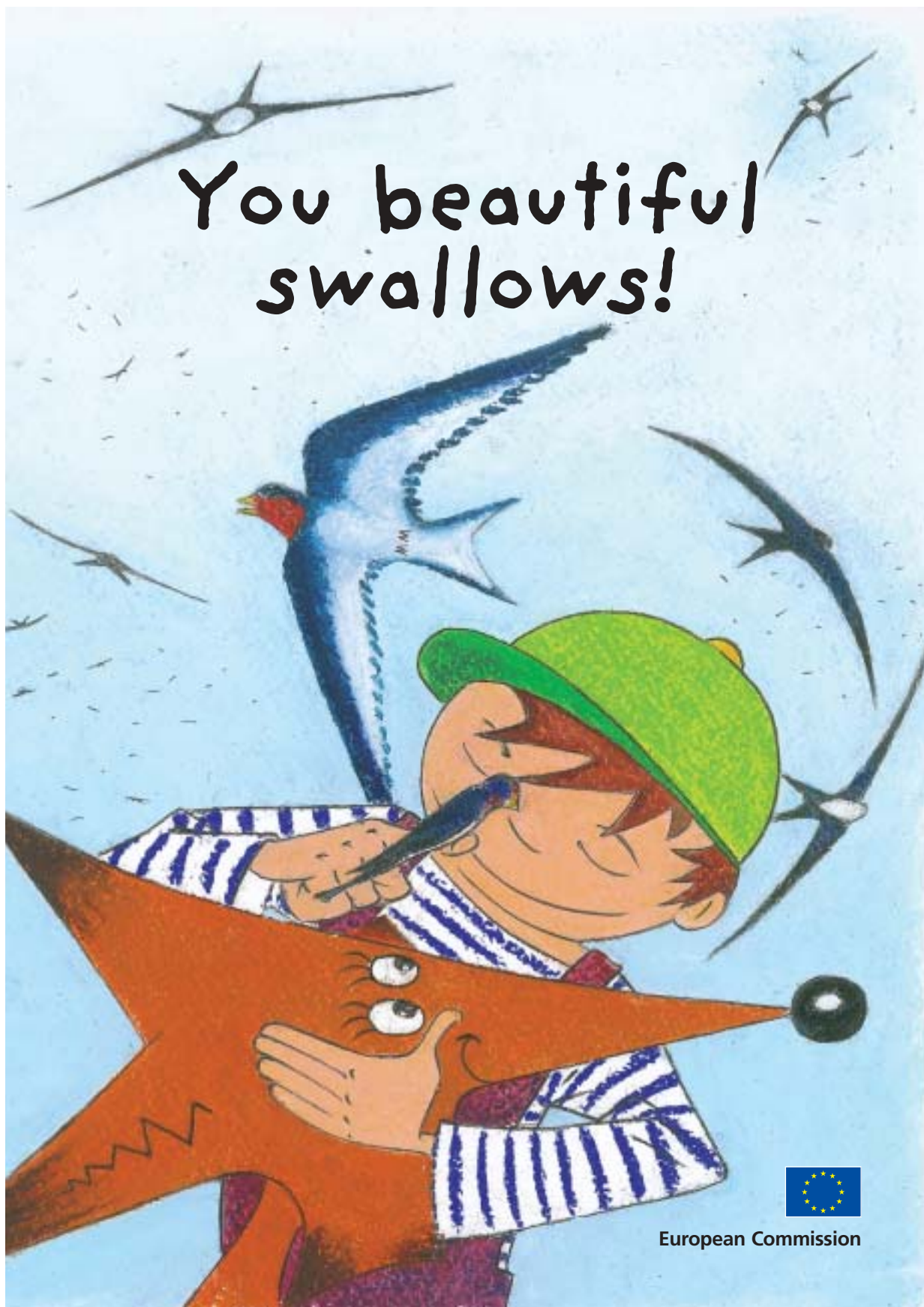
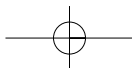




You beautiful swallows!



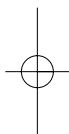
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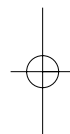
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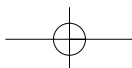
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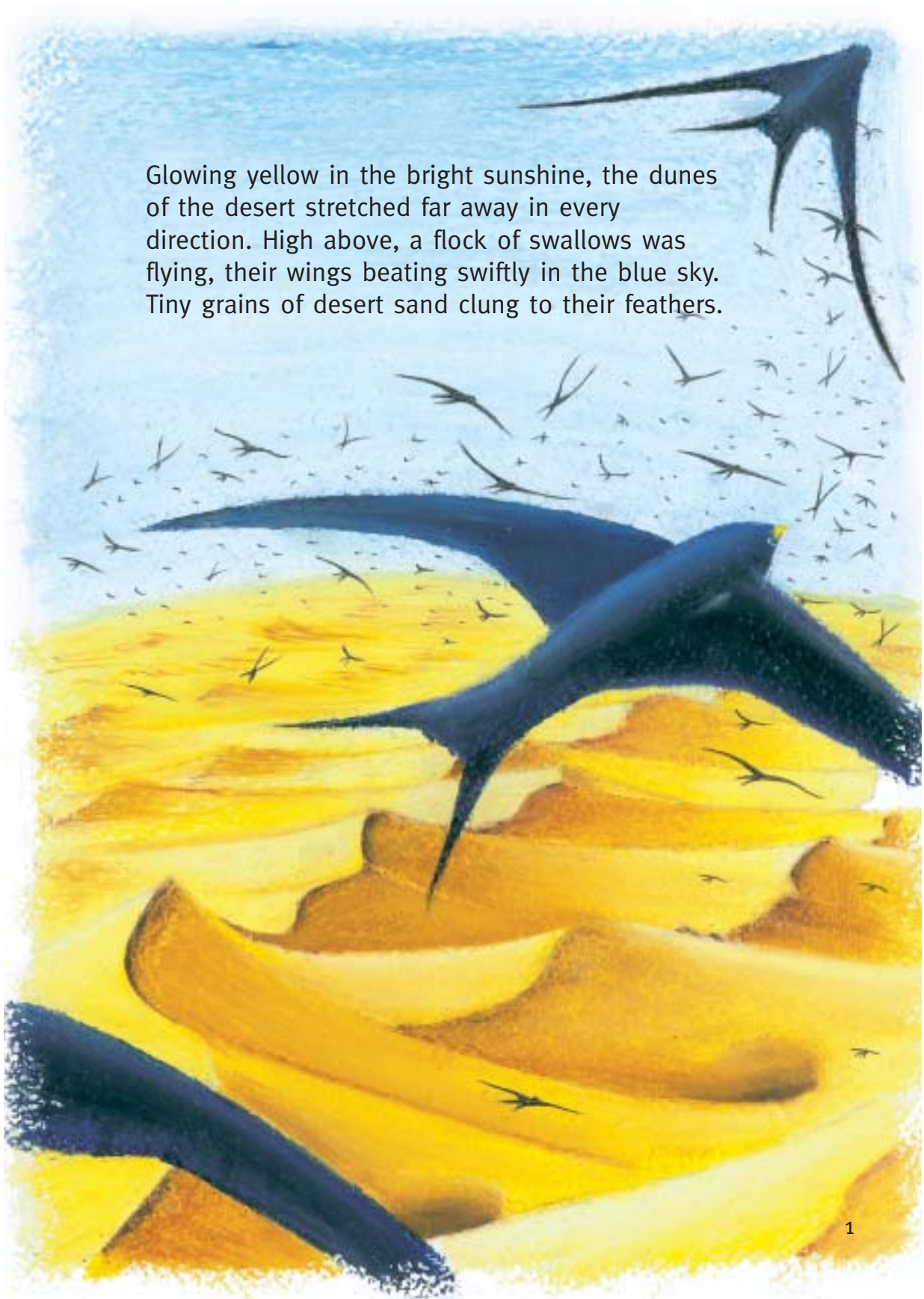
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Glowing yellow in the bright sunshine, the dunes of the desert stretched far away in every direction. High above, a flock of swallows was flying, their wings beating swiftly in the blue sky. Tiny grains of desert sand clung to their feathers.



On, and on, and on they flew. Such beautiful swallows! As they flew they chirped to one another. In swallow language they were saying “Come on! Hurry! We’re late! Our friends will be there by now!” That’s how swallows travel. They leave behind the green countryside and travel far across deserts to other lands with more green countryside. People call this ‘migrating’. Swallows just say to themselves “I like travelling! I live wherever in the world suits me best, at the time that suits me best!”



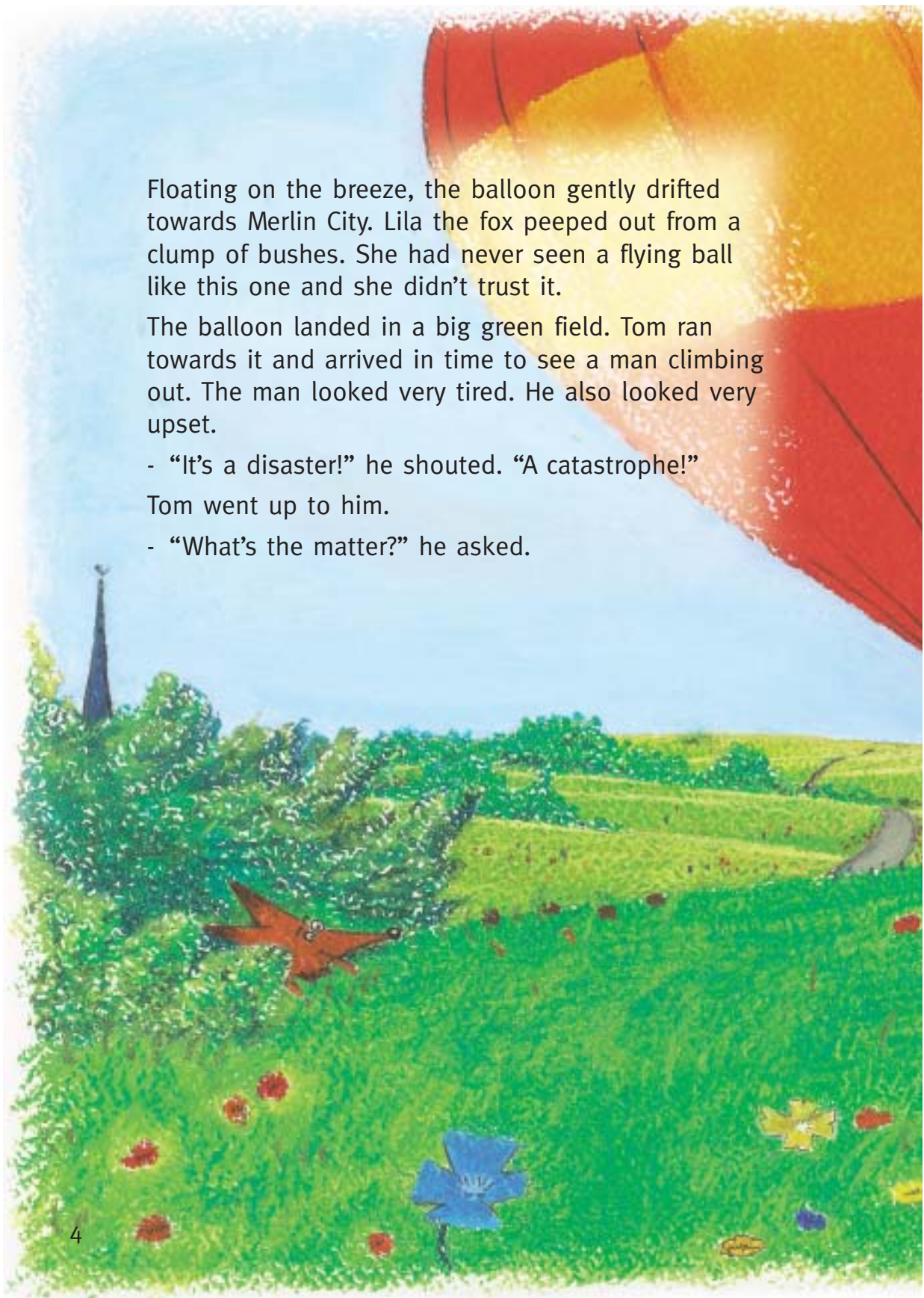


Thousands of kilometres further north, a gentle breeze was blowing through the streets of Merlin City. Spring had come! Everyone seemed happy, but Tom was feeling anxious. For days now he had been watching the sky, waiting for the swallows to arrive as they did every year. But there was no sign of them! No sound of their chirping and twittering. Nothing at all. Silence. The worrying silence of a sky with no birds in it.

Suddenly, up there in the blue sky, Tom caught sight of a strange red and yellow thing, shaped like a ball.

- "Wow! It's a big balloon!" he said to himself.





Floating on the breeze, the balloon gently drifted towards Merlin City. Lila the fox peeped out from a clump of bushes. She had never seen a flying ball like this one and she didn't trust it.

The balloon landed in a big green field. Tom ran towards it and arrived in time to see a man climbing out. The man looked very tired. He also looked very upset.

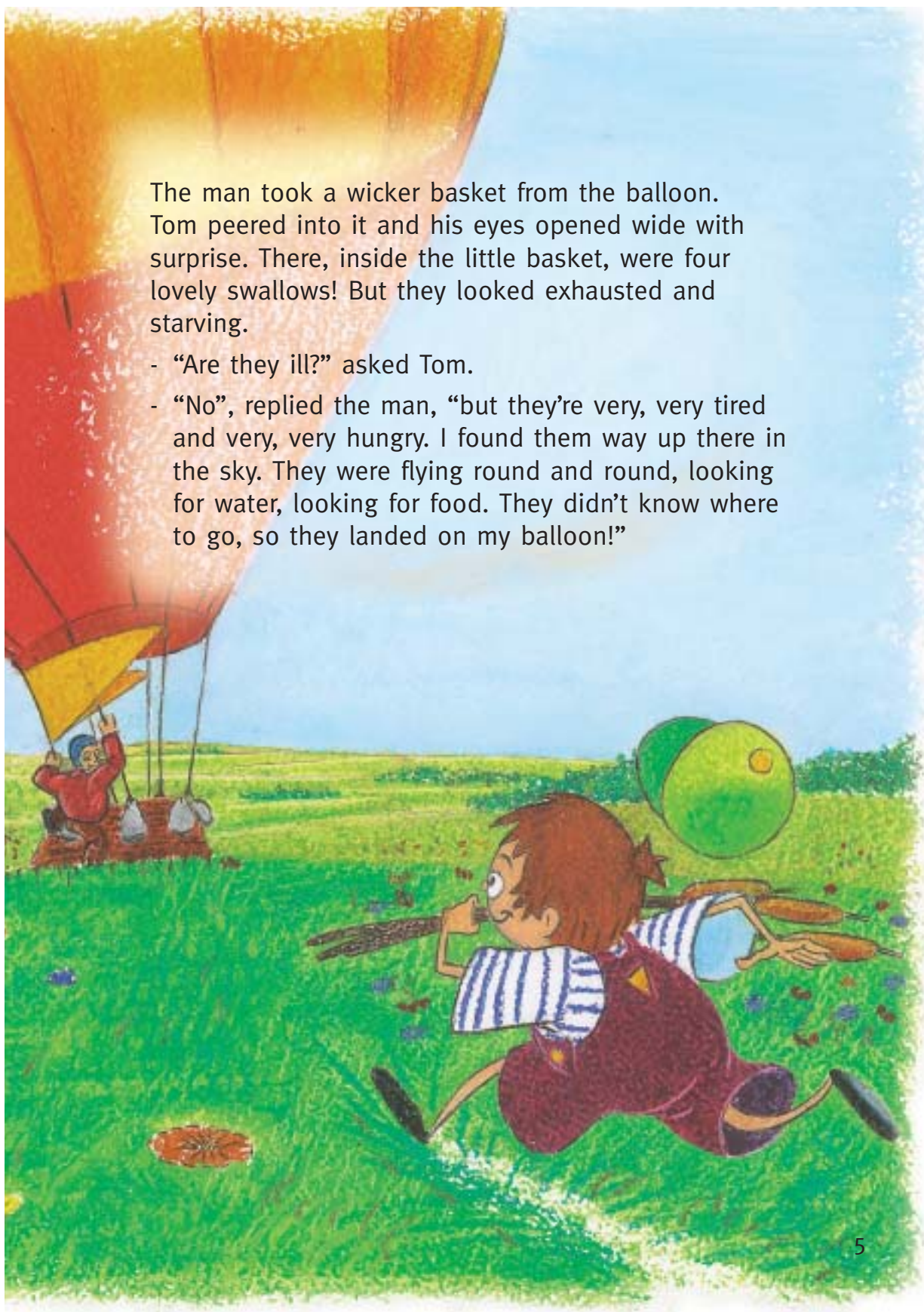
- "It's a disaster!" he shouted. "A catastrophe!"

Tom went up to him.

- "What's the matter?" he asked.

The man took a wicker basket from the balloon. Tom peered into it and his eyes opened wide with surprise. There, inside the little basket, were four lovely swallows! But they looked exhausted and starving.

- "Are they ill?" asked Tom.
- "No", replied the man, "but they're very, very tired and very, very hungry. I found them way up there in the sky. They were flying round and round, looking for water, looking for food. They didn't know where to go, so they landed on my balloon!"



From the shelter of the bushes, Lila the fox was watching her friend Tom. She could see he wasn't afraid of the big red and yellow thing, so she crept out of her hiding-place and crossed the field to join him.

- "Look out!" shouted the man. "A fox! Keep it away from the swallows!"
- "Don't worry" said Tom. "That's Lila, my best friend".
- "Really?" said the man, astonished.
"And what's your name?"
- "Tom", said Tom.

Lila came up to Tom and looked at the four birds.



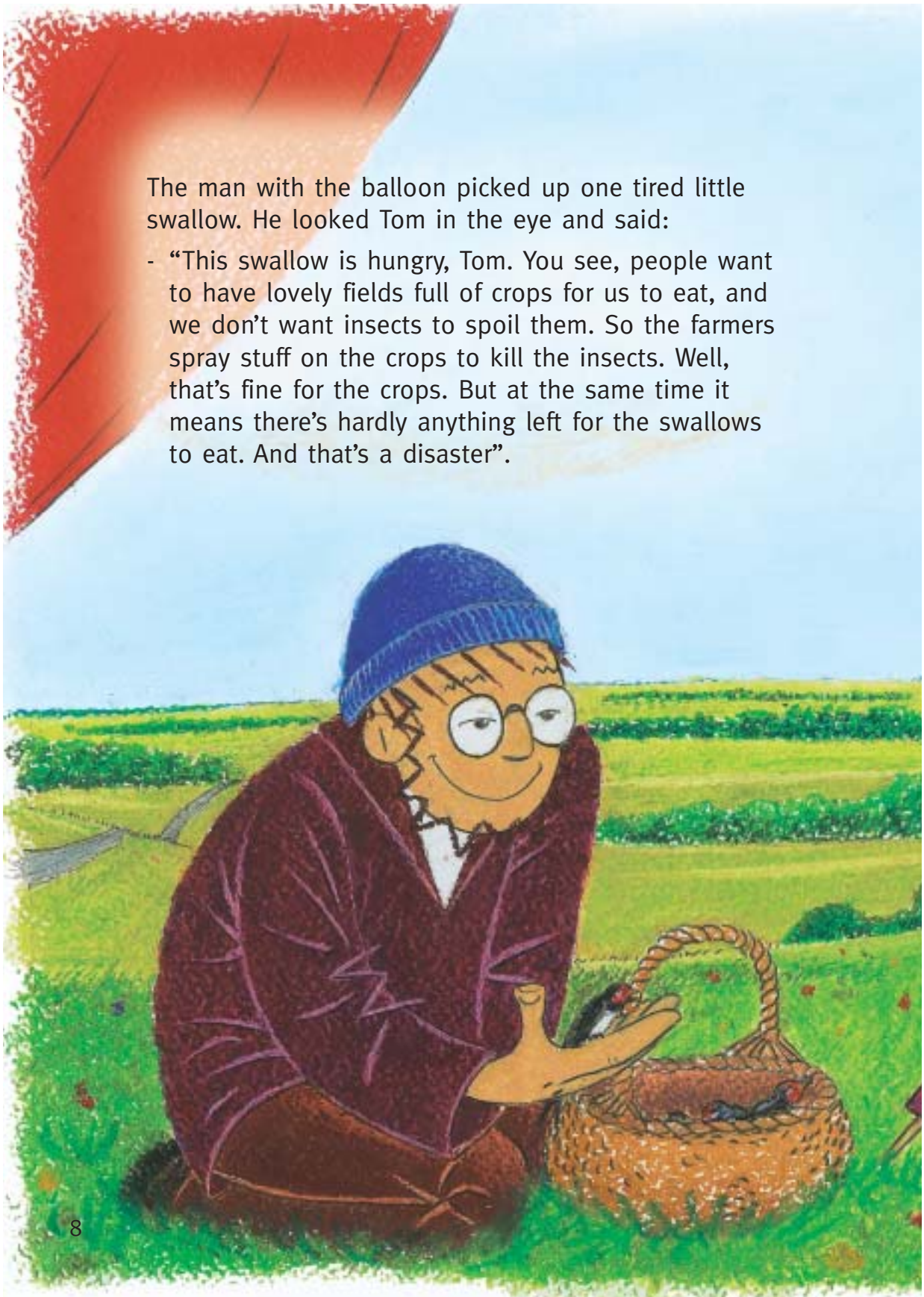
Meanwhile, far away to the south, a thousand more swallows had left behind the vast yellow desert and had already crossed the sea. Now they were flying over wide open fields and above great cities. As they flew, they called out anxiously to one another, sending alarm calls. They were saying:

- "There are no insects in the fields! There's nothing to eat!"
- "Why? Why?"
- "We don't know!"
- "Look down there! Tractors are spraying the fields!"
- "What's going on?"



The man with the balloon picked up one tired little swallow. He looked Tom in the eye and said:

- “This swallow is hungry, Tom. You see, people want to have lovely fields full of crops for us to eat, and we don’t want insects to spoil them. So the farmers spray stuff on the crops to kill the insects. Well, that’s fine for the crops. But at the same time it means there’s hardly anything left for the swallows to eat. And that’s a disaster”.

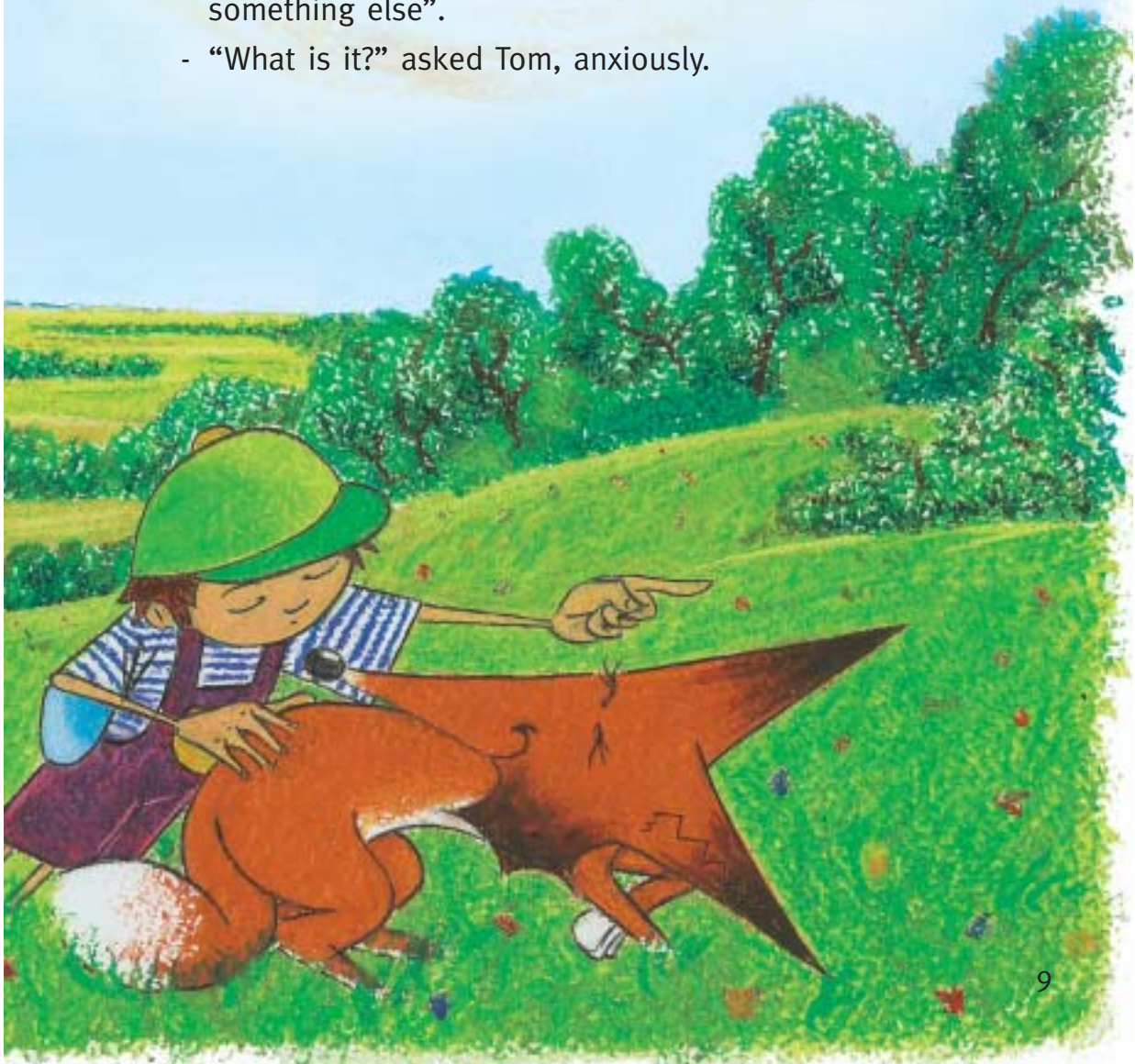


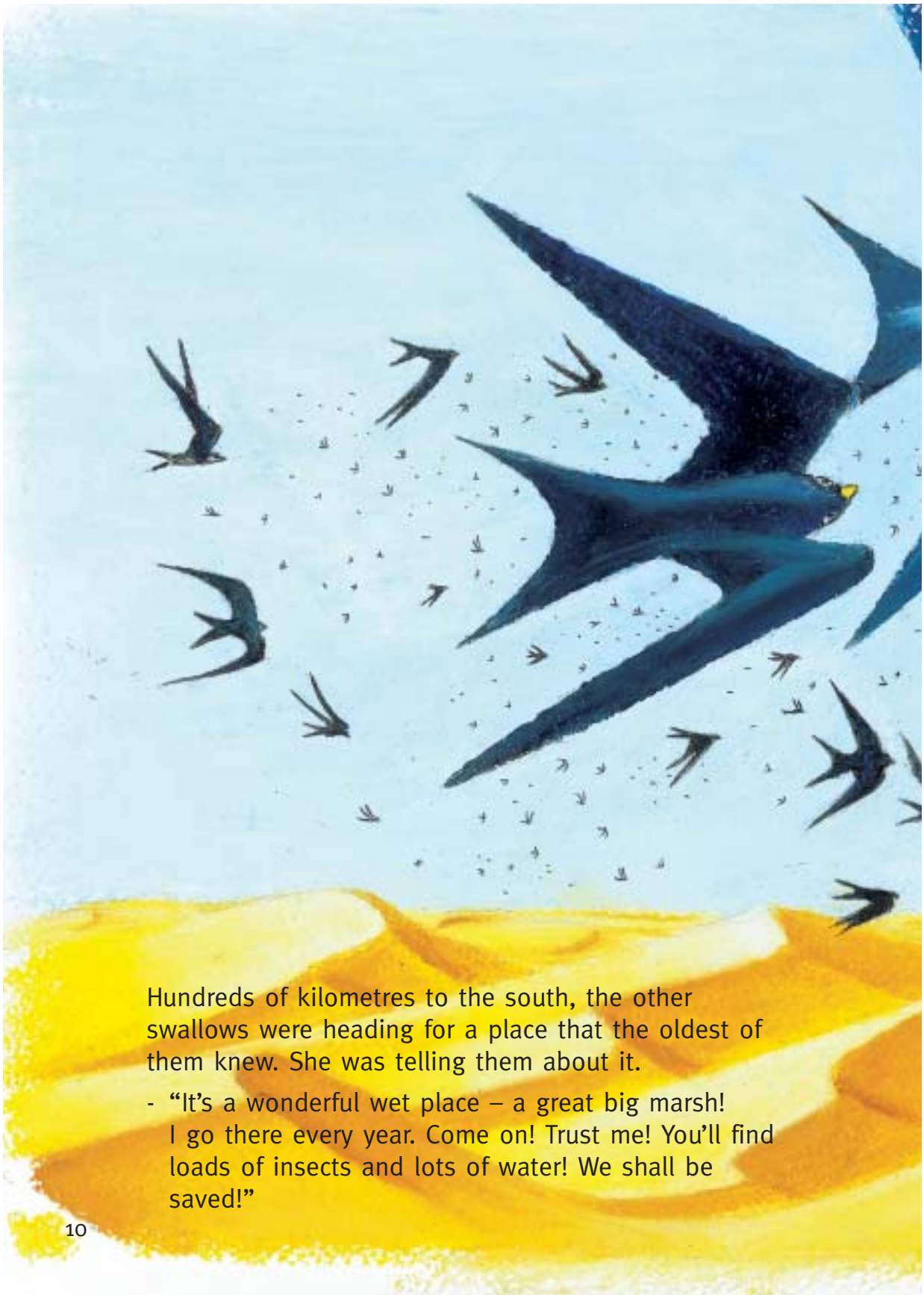
Tom turned to Lila.

- “Quick, Lila! Go and fetch some insects for our four swallows! You’ll find some in the big wood. Off you go, Lila! And thanks: you’re a real friend!”

Lila understood. Off she ran, making straight for the big wood. The man looked at Tom again.

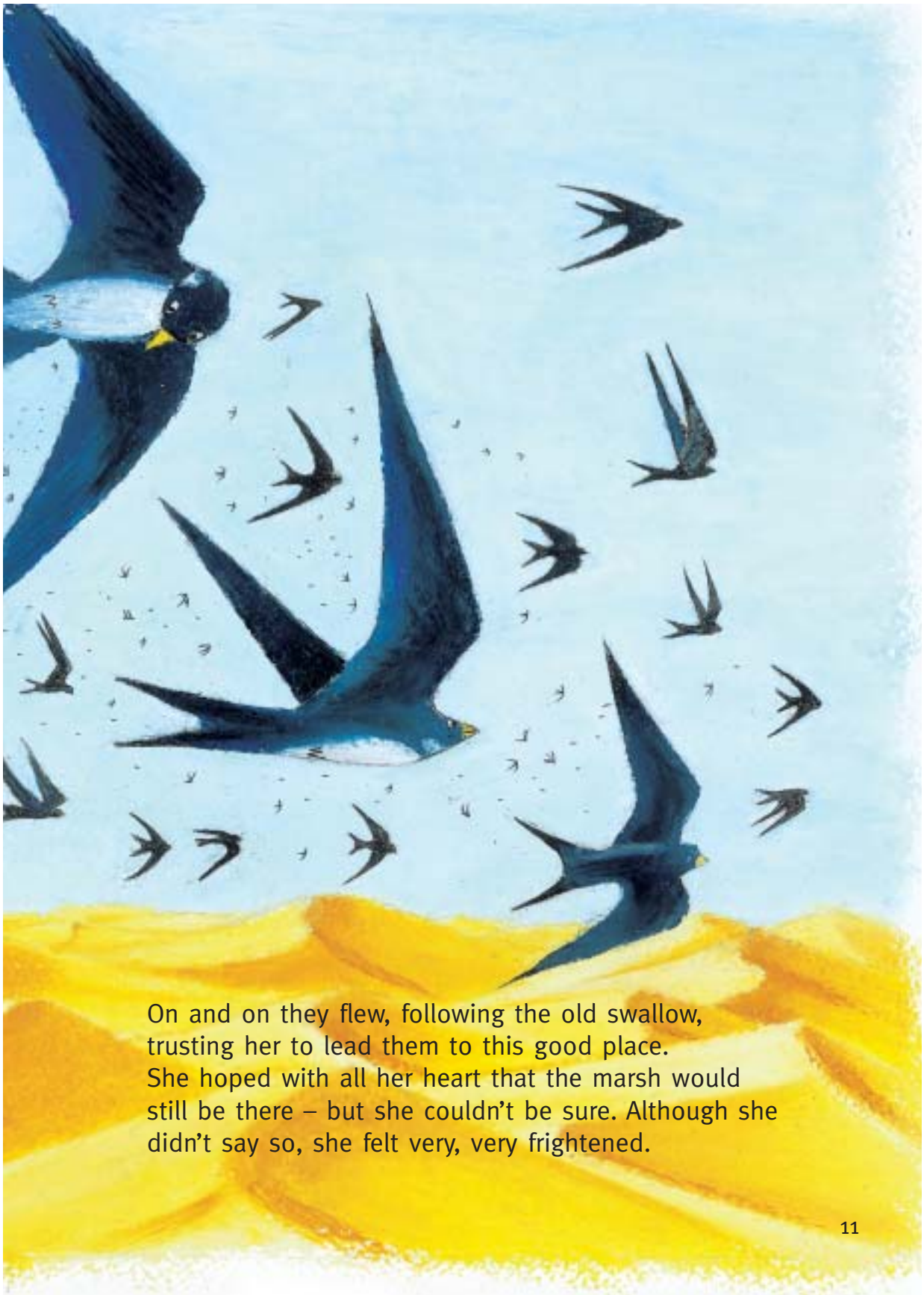
- “I’m afraid that’s not the only problem, Tom. There’s something else”.
- “What is it?” asked Tom, anxiously.





Hundreds of kilometres to the south, the other swallows were heading for a place that the oldest of them knew. She was telling them about it.

- "It's a wonderful wet place – a great big marsh! I go there every year. Come on! Trust me! You'll find loads of insects and lots of water! We shall be saved!"



On and on they flew, following the old swallow,
trusting her to lead them to this good place.
She hoped with all her heart that the marsh would
still be there – but she couldn't be sure. Although she
didn't say so, she felt very, very frightened.

In the big green field, which smelt of springtime, the man laid a trembling hand on Tom's shoulder.

- "What is it?" asked Tom again. "What's the other problem you wanted to tell me about?"

The man looked all around – at the sky, the trees, the four swallows. Finally he looked Tom in the eye again and said:

- "As the swallows travel on their long journey, they need to drink. But every year there's less water for them. Instead of leaving wild marshes, people prefer to build houses, and motorways, and playgrounds..."

- "But I love marshes!" said Tom. "You can find tadpoles there, and frogs, and pond skaters... I love splashing about in the mud too!"

The man smiled and patted Tom on the head.
He said:

- "I can see you're a great explorer, Tom! And you're right: marshes are important places for wildlife. They provide food and drink for all kinds of birds! When the swallows migrate they fly from one marsh to another... But..."

He looked down at the four tired little swallows in the basket.

- "But", he continued, "if there are no marshes any more, where will the swallows find water to drink?"



Just then, Lila the fox returned from her trip to the big wood. She was soaking wet, as if she had just swum across a river. She tiptoed up to the basket. The man was still afraid she might hurt the swallows, but Tom said:

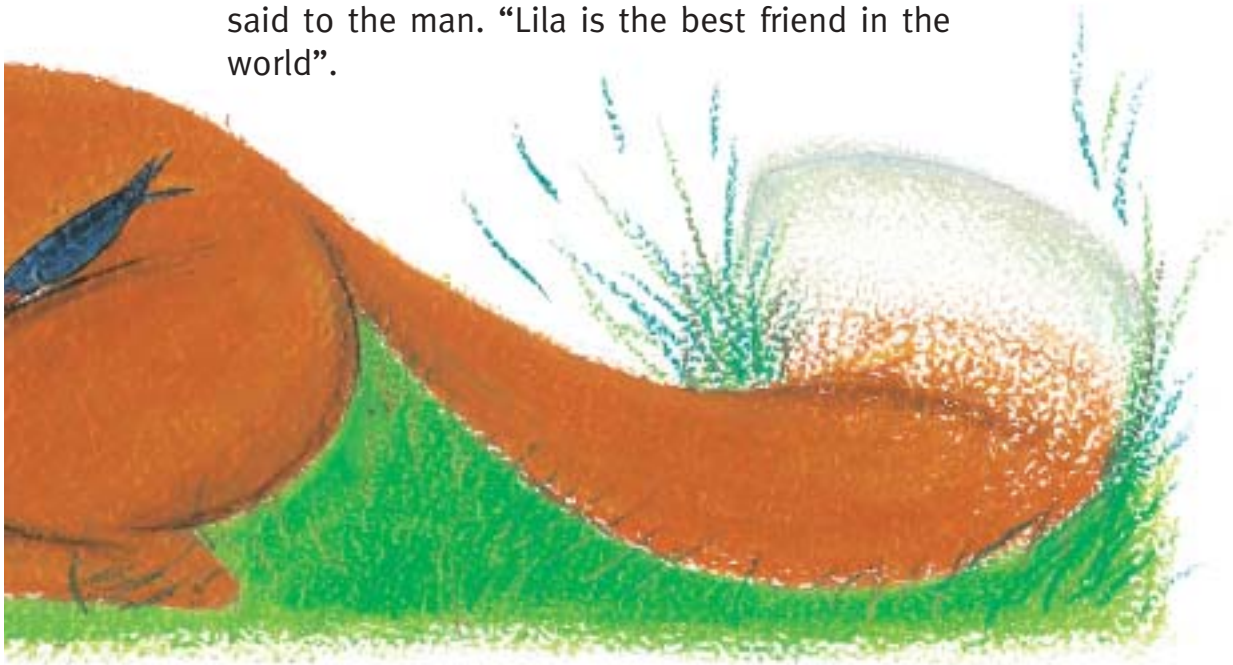
- "Don't worry. Lila will take good care of the birds".

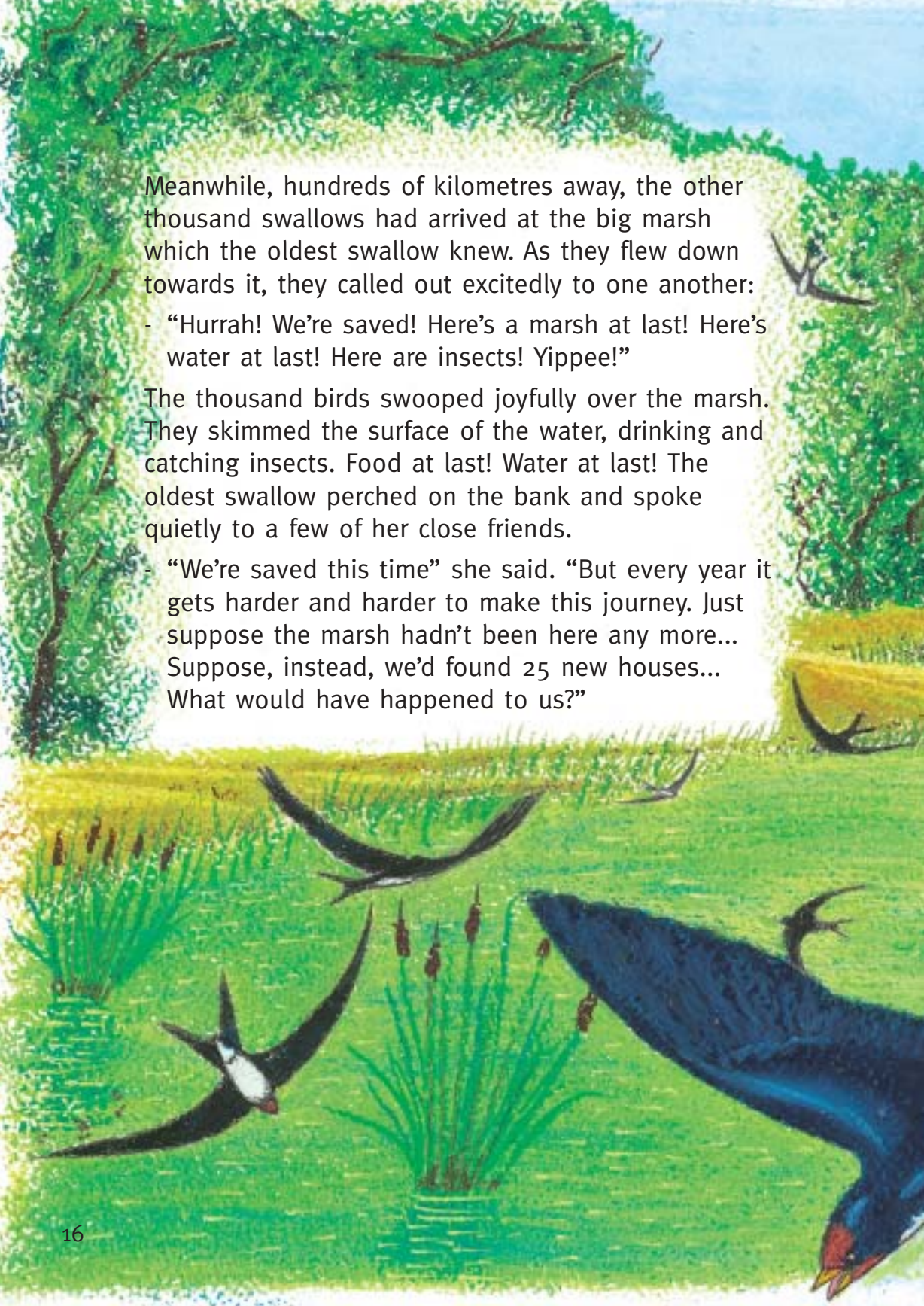


Lila stood right in front of the four swallows and opened her mouth wide. The man looked terrified, but once again Tom told him not to be afraid. Then Lila put out her long pink tongue. Stuck to it were 20 insects! The swallows saw them. Gently, one of the birds placed her little beak against Lila's tongue, picked up an insect and gulped it down. Then a second swallow did the same. It was lovely to see Lila feeding the hungry birds. The man from the balloon was so happy it brought tears to his eyes.

The four swallows ate five insects each. Then Lila lay down next to the birds. Clinging to her fur were a thousand drops of water from the stream in the wood. The swallows understood straight away! One by one, they snuggled up to her and drank, and drank, and drank. Tom smiled.

- "I told you there was nothing to worry about" he said to the man. "Lila is the best friend in the world".





Meanwhile, hundreds of kilometres away, the other thousand swallows had arrived at the big marsh which the oldest swallow knew. As they flew down towards it, they called out excitedly to one another:

- "Hurrah! We're saved! Here's a marsh at last! Here's water at last! Here are insects! Yippee!"

The thousand birds swooped joyfully over the marsh. They skimmed the surface of the water, drinking and catching insects. Food at last! Water at last! The oldest swallow perched on the bank and spoke quietly to a few of her close friends.

- "We're saved this time" she said. "But every year it gets harder and harder to make this journey. Just suppose the marsh hadn't been here any more... Suppose, instead, we'd found 25 new houses... What would have happened to us?"

Her friends looked at her. One of them said:

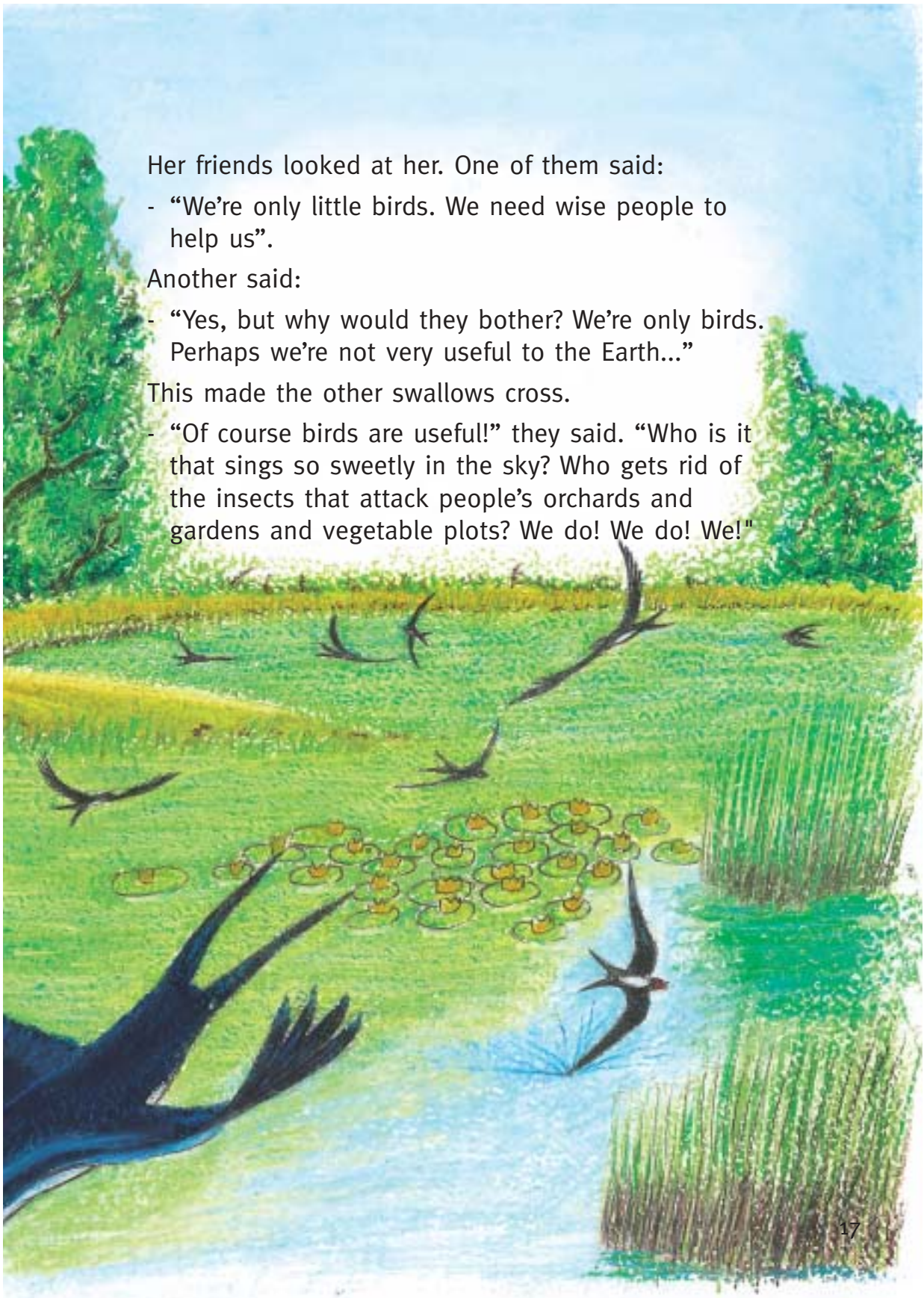
- "We're only little birds. We need wise people to help us".

Another said:

- "Yes, but why would they bother? We're only birds. Perhaps we're not very useful to the Earth..."

This made the other swallows cross.

- "Of course birds are useful!" they said. "Who is it that sings so sweetly in the sky? Who gets rid of the insects that attack people's orchards and gardens and vegetable plots? We do! We do! We!"

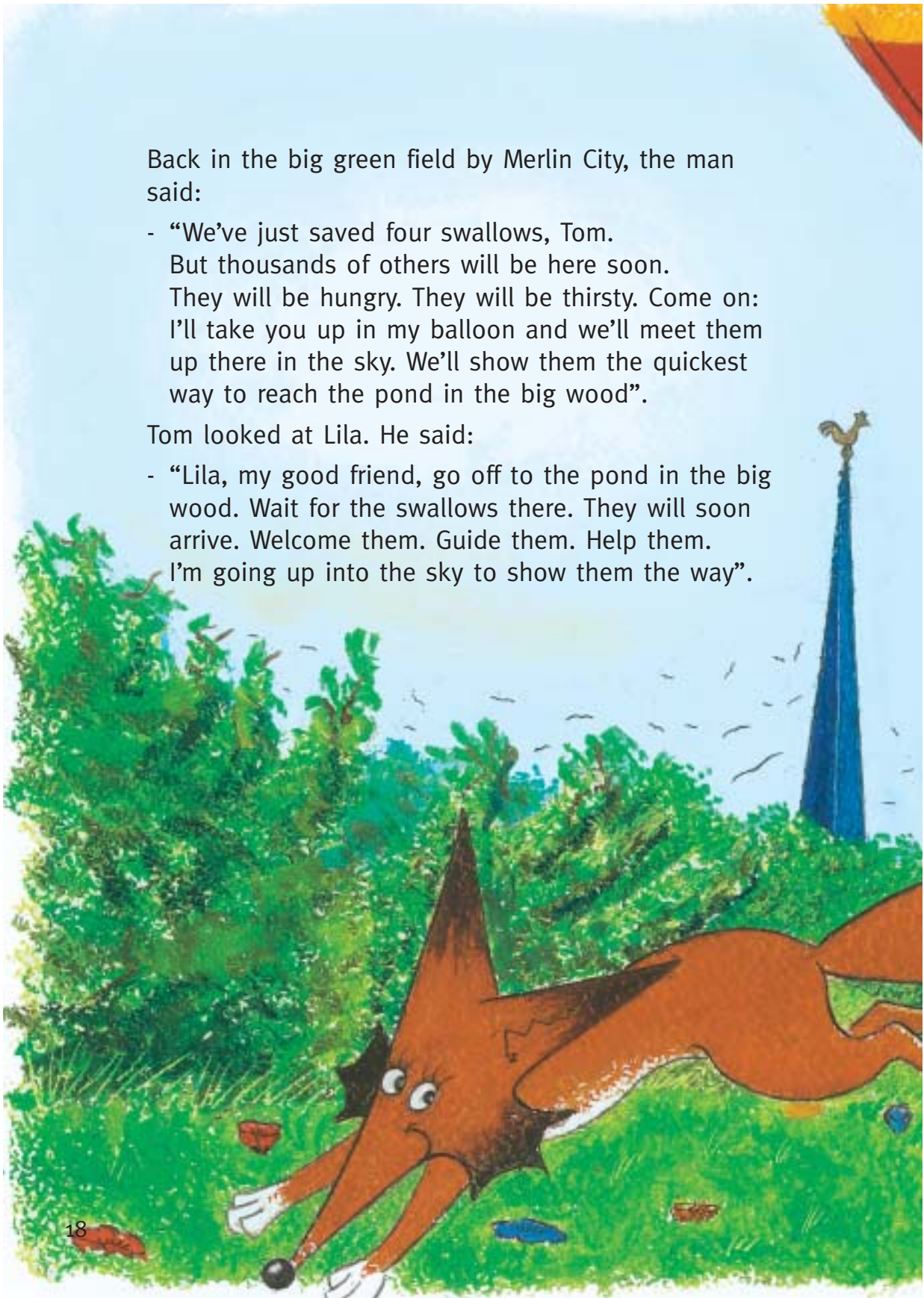


Back in the big green field by Merlin City, the man said:

- “We’ve just saved four swallows, Tom. But thousands of others will be here soon. They will be hungry. They will be thirsty. Come on: I’ll take you up in my balloon and we’ll meet them up there in the sky. We’ll show them the quickest way to reach the pond in the big wood”.

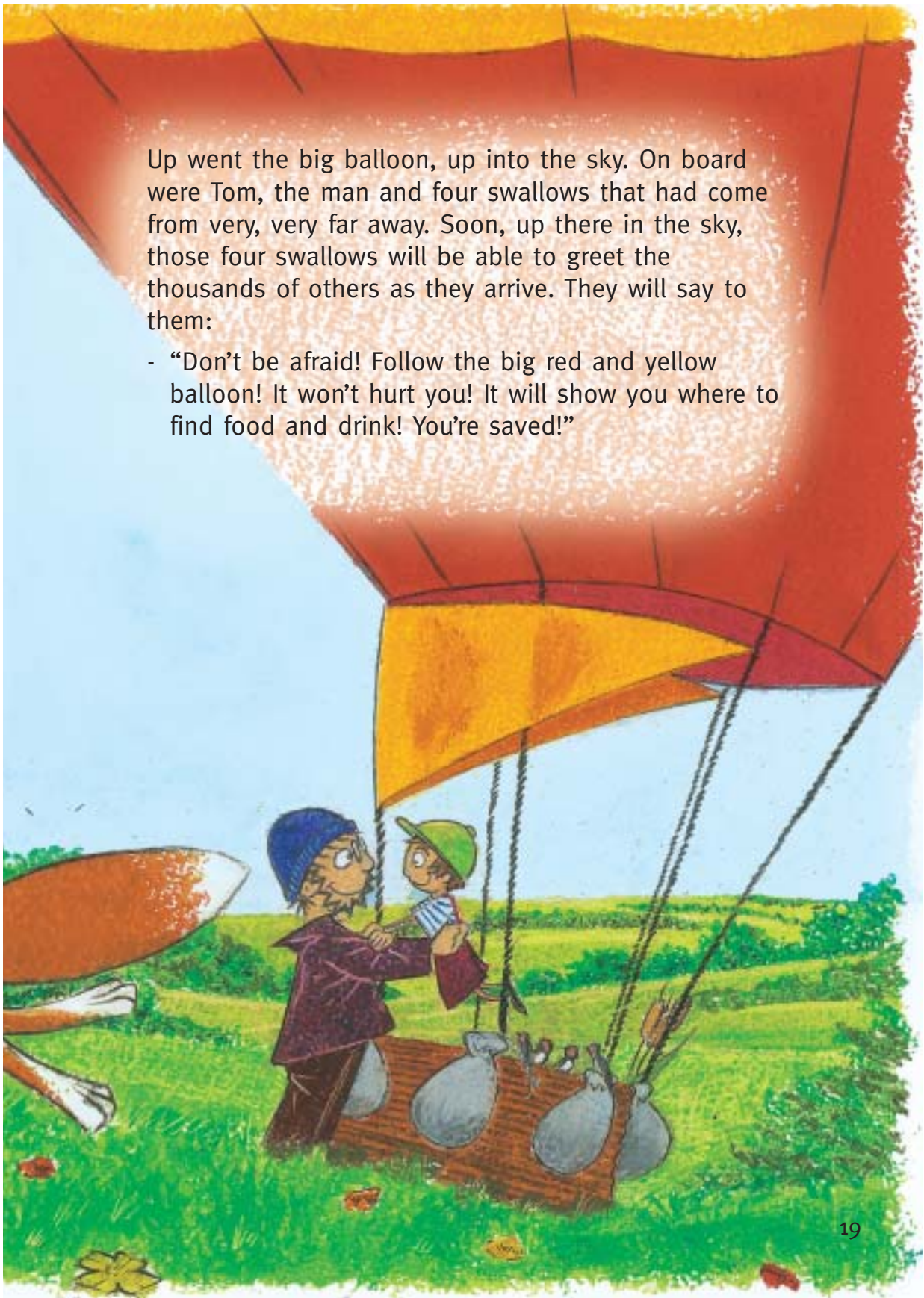
Tom looked at Lila. He said:

- “Lila, my good friend, go off to the pond in the big wood. Wait for the swallows there. They will soon arrive. Welcome them. Guide them. Help them. I’m going up into the sky to show them the way”.



Up went the big balloon, up into the sky. On board were Tom, the man and four swallows that had come from very, very far away. Soon, up there in the sky, those four swallows will be able to greet the thousands of others as they arrive. They will say to them:

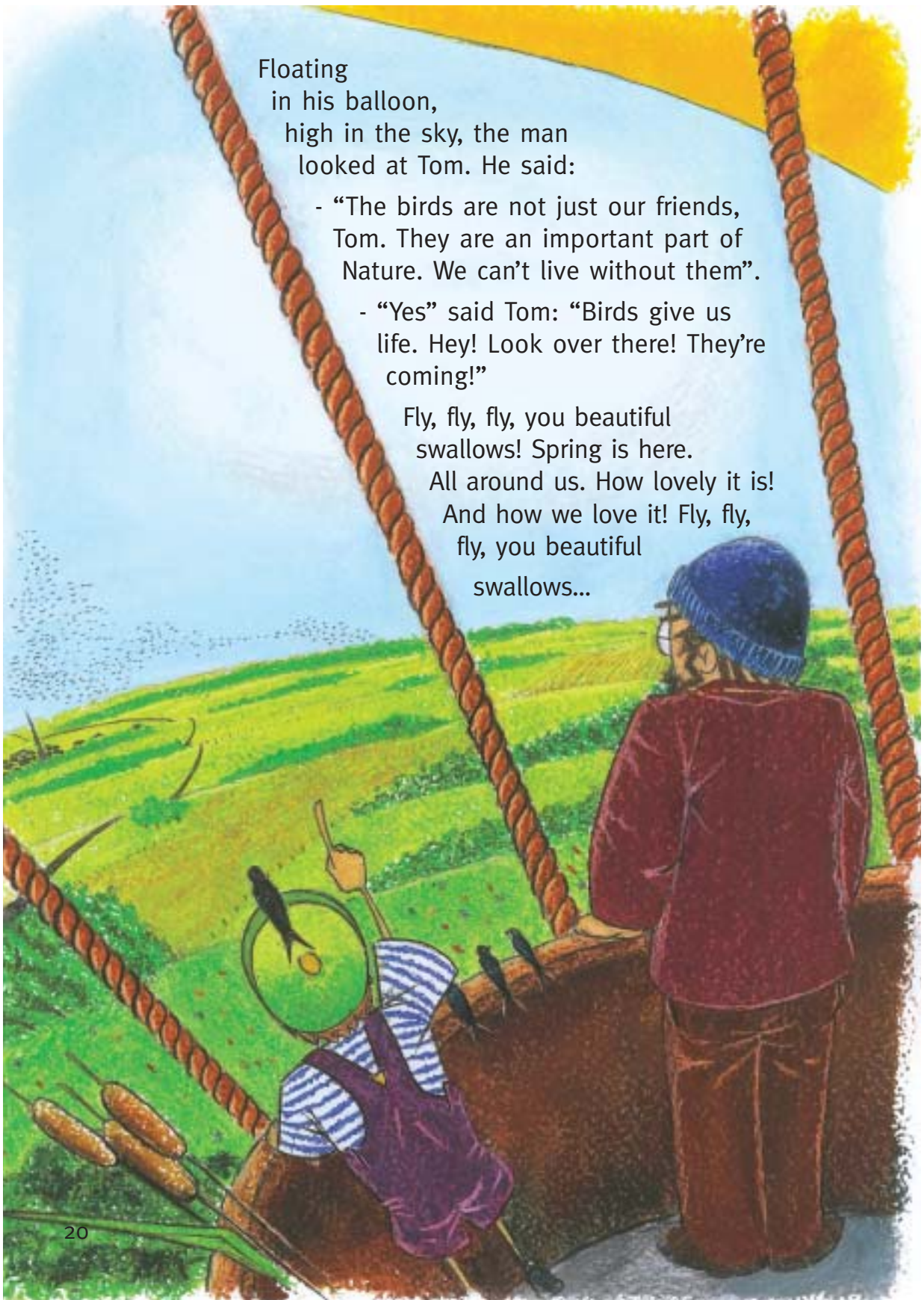
- "Don't be afraid! Follow the big red and yellow balloon! It won't hurt you! It will show you where to find food and drink! You're saved!"

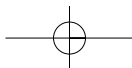


Floating
in his balloon,
high in the sky, the man
looked at Tom. He said:

- "The birds are not just our friends,
Tom. They are an important part of
Nature. We can't live without them".
- "Yes" said Tom: "Birds give us
life. Hey! Look over there! They're
coming!"

Fly, fly, fly, you beautiful
swallows! Spring is here.
All around us. How lovely it is!
And how we love it! Fly, fly,
fly, you beautiful
swallows...





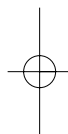
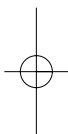
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