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opening extract from

The Curse of the Toads

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published by

Hodder Children's Books

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1682

Kidnapped

Reuben had been walking for so long now that every tree or stone he passed on the lonely lane swayed in front of his eyes. And the terrible image in his mind – the body dangling on a rope – *that* was swaying too, back and forth, back and forth, like a giant, ragged pendulum.

Reuben shook his head, trying to dislodge the pictures, but the muddy lane was pitted with holes and peppered with stones and he stumbled. He stopped to rub at his sore ankles where his boots had chafed him. His arms felt leaden, as if he'd been carrying invisible pails of milk for the last three miles. He wrapped them around his chest, digging his cold hands into the warm nest of his armpits before he trudged off again, not knowing where he was going or what would make him stop.

His thoughts seesawed in time to the bobbing horizon of hedge, tree and ditch:

Granny's gone. I hate them. She's gone. I hate them. She's gone. His fists clenched and unclenched: hate them, hate them, hate them!

He walked and walked.

Since he'd left the village, he'd hardly met a soul. Every time he did see another figure on the road his heart started beating wildly and sweat wetted his hands: was it the churchwarden's men coming to catch him? Or Meg Silver? Her big son, Oliver? The magistrate? Every person posed a threat.

I'll say I'm John Tavener from Portsmouth, going to meet an uncle. John Tavener from Portsmouth. Don't forget, he chided himself. John Tavener.

He pulled his hat down low; it was in a sorry state after the rain and sleeping outside. The wide brim dipped and flared wildly and the green ribbon that his grandmother had sewn round it had completely vanished, but it could still hide his face from passersby.

Swing, swing, back and forth, went the pendulum. *Swish, swish*, her skirts sighed and sang as they swayed from side to side, and the thick rope creaked against the wood.

Three times, Reuben was convinced there were soft footsteps shadowing his. Each time he glanced round, squinting into the low sunshine, but if there was anyone, they always dipped out of sight just as he turned. So he gave up looking round and didn't even hear the horse clip-clopping along behind him, or the grinding sound of the cart's wooden wheels rumbling along, until they were too close for him to run.

He'd thought he was alert to any danger and yet he'd let a cart creep up on him.

Stupid boy! Dolt!

He went on, staring down at his muddy boots, seeing the path slide past his feet like a belt slipping through its loops.

Now the cart was right behind him. His heart began to pound. A giant hand squeezed iron fingers around his chest.

'Way! Halt there!'

Reuben faltered, his feet seemed to jolt against the earth. He stopped and the leafless trees beside him suddenly stilled long enough for him to see them clearly and automatically start naming them; birch; alder – damp in that spot, though it didn't look it; elm; hazel . . . Anything rather than face another human being.

The horse snorted loudly, shook its head, jangling the metal on its harness. Reuben felt a wave of warmth against his back, steaming off the animal's flanks and was surprised when tears pricked his eyes.

'Where you going, boy? Want to take the weight off them spindly legs?'

Not men from the village to bring him back, then. Reuben turned and looked up at the big, piebald horse and tall, covered wagon. A man and a youth were perched on it like scraggy birds.

The youth's lumpen and misshapen head put Reuben

in mind of an unbaked loaf of bread; his small, dark eyes pushed into the doughy flesh, like shrivelled currants. His cheeks were raw with spots and sores; his hair a mess of oily rat-tails. He grinned a crooked-toothed grin at Reuben and nodded in greeting.

The other, older man was very different. Although he was grinning at Reuben too, his smile didn't lighten his strange face. The man's massive nose, like a broken, hooked beak, curved lopsidedly. The left cheek was dented and scarred; the left eye hung slightly more open than his right, as if a weight were hanging on the lower lid. His coal-black eyes must have been staring straight into Reuben's and yet they went past him, through him and out the other side like a red-hot needle burning a hole through a leather strap. The eyes were stony, dark as jet, set deep under jutting brows. Beneath a tall, battered old hat, curling, wiry hair streaked with grey fell to his shoulders.

Reuben swayed, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in his feet.

'Weary? Come on, lad. We'll give you a ride.' The man with the lopsided face didn't look at Reuben as he spoke, but gazed off down the road as if he could see something very interesting at the end of it. 'It's a long, long walk to Longford,' he added with a chuckle.

'Well—' Before Reuben's protest was past his lips, they were reaching down to him and hauling him up onto the

wooden bench, squashing him between them, into a space barely wide enough for a cat.

'Name's Doctor Flyte,' said the man with the terrible face, looking straight ahead. 'Travelling Medical Man. And that lumpen ignoramus is Baggs. Get on, Nellie!' He flicked the reins and Nellie obediently walked on. 'Something bad happen to you, boy?'

Reuben pulled his hat even lower. 'Nothing,' he said. 'I was just walking.'

Baggs nudged him with his elbow. 'You look sad, though. Or is it that your ma was so ugly, you took your first look at her when you were borned and got that snitchy face, eh?'

'I'm sure she wasn't ugly,' said Reuben, miserably.

'Least ways he's known his ma,' said Doctor Flyte, 'which is more than you can claim, Baggs.'

Baggs snorted.

'Peculiar,' said Doctor Flyte, staring at Nellie's back, 'seeing you on the road. We've not so long heard of a boy whose grandma's been hanged for witchcraft. That boy was walking from Willsbridge . . . Coincidence, ain't it?'

'Don't know.' Reuben swallowed, too tired and depressed to invent a lie. He shook his head. He felt Flyte and Baggs exchange a look over his head and knew they didn't believe him; he closed his eyes.

And I don't care, he said silently. I don't care what you two think. I don't care about anything in the world.

The wagon swayed and rocked from side to side as it trundled along the uneven track, pitching Reuben against his companions. Something tumbled out of its place in the back of the covered cart, making Reuben glance round instinctively, but Flyte quickly snatched the thick leather curtains closed behind him.

'Never you mind,' he growled. 'Not your business, lad.'

Reuben didn't care. Keep your secrets, he thought, and I'll keep mine.

The wagon had a rounded roof of patched leather stretched over hoops of wood. Its curved sides were covered by thick cloths, under which Reuben glimpsed colourful writing. Inside the wagon itself, there were shelves lined with bottles, packets of powders and swinging bunches of herbs. Flyte was a medical man, he'd said, and that stuff reminded Reuben of an apothecary's shop. Apothecary. Huh! He'd surely made a bad choice in travelling companions.

Reuben crouched lower, as if he could make himself invisible. His bony bottom jarred painfully on the hard seat as the wagon tossed him about.

I should've just gone on and on, he thought. Wish I'd not taken the ride. Wish the horse had run right over me. Wish I'd gone on walking till my feet had worn out. Wish I'd just fallen dead in a ditch.

2
Reuben is Given a Gift

'Longford,' growled Doctor Flyte as the wagon rolled into the town. 'You won't have seen the like, I 'spect.'

'Never,' Reuben heard himself whisper.

He sat up on his hard seat and stared about, sniffing the air like a hound, peering at everything around him. For the first time since it had happened, he forgot about his grandmother.

Reuben imagined the wagon was like a boat, clearing folk out of the way like a boat cleaves the water. The dogs dodged its rumbling wheels and children scurried past, criss-crossing in front of the horses with sure-footed swiftness. Crows and ravens, strutting over the dung heaps and scraps in the road, rose squawking as they passed, then floated back behind them.

Reuben's village, Birtwell Priory, was a jumble of small cottages strung along muddy tracks and paths, with three farms and a church. This place was so much bigger! The houses were so fine, some joined together forming a sort of crenellated castle wall with glass gleaming in the windows and painted doors. Some houses leaned drunkenly into the street. There were narrow, cobbled lanes leading into dark, higgledy-piggledy alleyways

cluttered with hanging signs and, everywhere, horses, carts, coaches and noise.

The wagon sailed on through the sea of living things. Rich men in leather boots with silver buckles and glorious hats plumed with long feathers. Wealthy women wearing blue and red cloth with lace and gold thread. Ordinary folk like himself, in brown and black. All shouting, jostling, talking, laughing. Pigs tethered on ropes. Cows, children, chickens, pigeons. Hundreds of tradesmens' signs, squeaking as they blew back and forth in the breeze: a cradle showed a basket maker's, a bag of nails for the ironmonger's, Adam and Eve, sharing an apple, advertised the fruit seller.

The noise was incredible! Reuben covered his ears with his hands. In his tiny village there was nothing louder than the church bells – though Mister Smith was famous for his rowdiness after drinking too much mead and the cattle made a terrible noise when their calves were taken, still it was quiet compared with this.

The smell! Reuben pinched his nose with his fingers. A long, narrow gutter ran down the centre of the road, piled with rotting food scraps, bones, stable manure and human waste. When Flyte and Baggs saw him trying to block out the offending smells, they laughed and elbowed him roughly. He'd almost forgotten them – now their nearness and strangeness sent his heart hammering.

I was a fool to have come! A fool to have taken their offer of a ride! Look at this place! Oh, what's to become of me? Where'll I go, Granny? Where?

How poor some of the children were! There were ragged, homeless boys and girls like him, like shadows, hanging back, clutching the walls, lurking in darkened doorways and corners, watching through half opened, shifting eyes. His heart lifted suddenly: why I could disappear here easily, like a rat down a hole – if I was brave enough to try.

'We'll be stopping the night. I've some business here,' Doctor Flyte said without looking at him. 'You stay with Baggs. Buy the boy a thick cloak, Baggs. Spare no expense. He's cold and the nights are colder.'

'I haven't money to pay you back,' said Reuben quickly.

'That's not a worry.'

'Are there places here that sell cloaks then?' he asked, peering around.

'Yes,' said Baggs. 'Plenty of shops.'

There weren't any shops in Birtwell Priory.

Why would they buy me a cloak? Reuben wondered. He tried not to care, not to thrill at the idea, but a cloak! A new cloak! Despite everything, it was exciting.

They drove first to an inn. It was a low-roofed building with black timbers making a pattern of diagonals and uprights against white-painted walls. The wagon went through an archway and into a courtyard at the back

where several men and boys were busy with horses, carts, bags of provisions and barrels of beer. A red-faced maid with no front teeth leaned out of an upper window and waved her cloth at them.

Flyte waved back and blew her a kiss with a wet, smacking sound.

Reuben had never seen a building so grand. He looked up at the letters above the door.

'The Longford Arms,' he read slowly.

Doctor Flyte grabbed his arm. 'You can read letters, boy?'

'Oh, just a bit, sir,' said Reuben, nervous that he might sound superior. 'My grandmother – I never went to school, but she taught me so I could study. The Bible,' he added, though in truth it was to read her recipes and potions.

'You can read. Write too, eh?' Doctor Flyte eyed him with suspicion. Reuben nodded. 'Well, mind you don't let anyone else know,' Flyte snapped. 'You're not the sort that should be a-reading and a-writing.'

At the side of the inn was a large barn with stabling for horses. They left Nellie and the wagon there.

Flyte signalled to the stable boy to approach. 'Boy! Here! Name?'

'William, sir.'

'William. That's a fine name. You're to watch my horse, William, and my caravan here. Nobody must touch

my belongings,' he told him. 'Do as I say, and I'll give you two pennies now and another two tomorrow.'

'No, sir. Yes, sir.'

'Very valuable herbs, books and the like.' Doctor Flyte tapped the side of his nose. 'Needs watching.' He turned to Baggs. 'I've an appointment with Mister Wilkes for bottles,' he said. 'Mister Smith for a new shirt and Mister Gifford, the apothecary, for some interesting powders . . .'

Apothecary. Apothecary.

In a sudden rush, Reuben saw the gnome-like old apothecary in Lower Birtwell; a gnarled old man, colourless like a dried up root and just as useless. He clenched his fists. If only I were bigger and stronger and older, he thought, I'd go back and kill him! If only . . .