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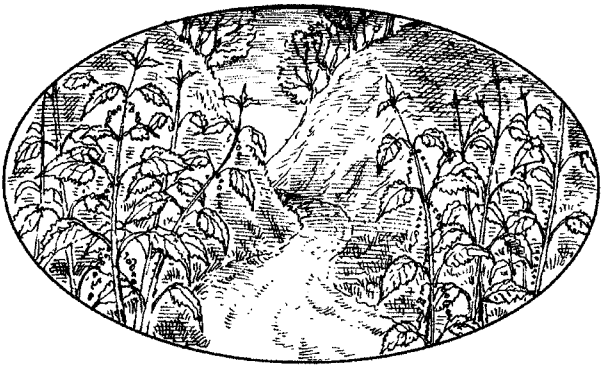
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One

Flight



'They say the south country's creeping with spies.'

Scat Raven wiped the greasy blade of a knife against his sleeve and narrowed his eyes. He scanned the chalk down in the twilight.

His companion, hunched over their fire, prodded the embers with a stick and grunted. Behind their makeshift camp ancient forest gripped the hillside. Before them rose the sheep-cropped turf, scattered with blackthorn and wind crazed trees. Above, the darkening sky was streaked with shreds of lavender and gold.

'Spies for the customs, spies for the filthy French,' Scat

muttered. 'Even honest thieving's a danger now.' He picked a sparrow bone from his teeth and spat at the fire. Both men studied the dancing sparks in silence. A fox slipped through the shadows, tainting the dusk with its stench. Among the hills and hollow ways night creatures stirred; bat, badger, smuggler, poacher, runaway, thief.

The second man, Raker, tipped the dregs from his tin cup, stood up and scuffed out the fire with his boot. He picked up a stout club and weighed it in his hand.

'Time for work.'

Scat rummaged among their few belongings.

'Where's the cider pot? I'll carry that last drop where it'll do some good.'

Suddenly the gorse rustled at their back.

Something hit the grass with a thud. Both men swung round. Scat grabbed a staff.

'Who's there?'

They lunged and stabbed at the gorse. A dark shape leapt across a clearing and dived into the nearest scrub. Scat caught a glimpse of a small, pale face.

'It's a lad, stealing our pot.'

'I'll break his head!'

'No, I'll have him, he's mine!'

The figure fled, careering through a thicket, crashing into the undergrowth. At once Scat and Raker thundered after, bellowing curses as they stumbled on anthills and rabbit holes. Flocks of roosting birds took flight. A startled deer bounded into the cover of a spinney beyond. Reaching the open down Scat raised his hand and the two men paused to catch their breath and listen. The fugitive did not lie low for long. They soon saw their quarry further up the hill,

silhouetted against the last ribbons of sunset, bent double with a stitch.

'It's a girl!' Raker shook his fist. 'Thievin' witch. I'll take a stick to her.' But Scat held him back. The girl glanced over her shoulder, picked up her skirts and darted off over the hill.

'Let her go, she's not worth the screaming,' said Scat. 'Others will beat a thievin' wench out alone – and worse.' He turned back. 'Anyhow, remember, that was the parson's pot before we emptied his cart and filled it with trussed parson!'

But Raker was in no mood to make light of it. He growled like a dog denied its sport.

'Well, it's dark enough for business now,' said Scat. 'Let's be moving on.'



Megan fled from the two men over the dark downland, towards a track which dropped out of sight among the trees below. Loose nuggets of chalk skittered beneath her feet. She ran from danger. She ran from guilt. From everything she'd ever known . . .

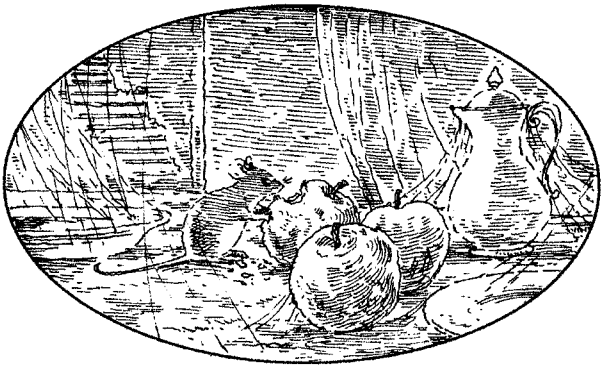
The rutted track sank into a hollow. High banks rose on both sides and leafy branches met above. The only light there seemed to glow from the path itself. Megan's heart thumped so fiercely she thought it would burst. She threw herself at the bank and slammed her fists against the ground. Nettles stung her arms. Megan grasped the stingers

and ripped two fistfuls of leaves, grinding her fingers tight into her palms until, with a gasp, she could bear no more. A mash of torn nettle fell from each hand. Her palms swelled with white weals, maggots of throbbing pain. For a moment the pain obliterated everything. All the fear, the panic, drained into those two stinging fires. She took a deep breath, exhausted but too afraid to pause long. Can't stop. Mustn't stop here. I've got to find somewhere to hide. Tugging her skirt from a snatch of brambles she set off at a run once more, down the track to anywhere.



Two

Safe



Megan followed the path as it sloped through the wood until it met a cart track. Which way to go? To the right a glint of water snaked between tall reeds. To the left, a short distance away, candlelight glimmered in a cottage window. For a moment she considered knocking at the cottage door. There would be food there, maybe a kind word. But she was afraid of revealing herself. Turn away, there'll only be questions. Find a safe place to hide and rest. You'll not feel the hunger if you sleep.

Megan stood awhile, unable to draw her eyes from the

tiny golden glow in the darkness. Suddenly a rat scurried across her foot and she stifled a scream. At that very moment, as if her breath had disturbed the flame, the light in the window was extinguished.

Now only a mean rind of moon punctured the darkness. Megan thought of the two men she had seen, out there in the night. What other dangers haunted the black hills and hollow ways? Spies for the customs, spies for the French, fighting men gathering against the invasion … where was safety? I want to stop running. I want to be still. Slowly, Megan walked towards the silhouette of the house.

As she approached, she found that the house was one of a straggle of cottages at the edge of a village. To her dismay, they were all in ruins, with crumbled walls and tattered thatch. Did I dream the candlelight? she wondered. A dog barked in the distance and she hurried on.

Most of the village was in the same derelict state. A few houses had signs of being inhabited but there was not a flicker of light to suggest anyone stirred within. In the meagre light the whole place had an eerie feeling of misfortune about it. Megan stopped to look over a farmyard gate. The yard was overgrown with weeds and the barns and sheds were neglected. Stable doors hung off their hinges and roofs had lost their tiles. If the farm was empty it might be a good place to hide, she thought. Cautiously Megan pushed the gate open a little and slipped into the moonlit yard. She listened for a whinny or a shuffled hoof, but heard nothing. Like the rest of the village, it seemed mysteriously deserted. Beside the yard was a large house, with chequerboard walls of brick

and flint and tall chimneys. Megan guessed it was a manor house. A long thatched wall separated the farmyard from the house. She walked through an archway in the wall and found herself in a kitchen courtyard. All was dark and silent there too. At last, she thought, a safe place.

Megan searched the outbuildings for somewhere to sleep and chose a small cowshed with enough soft hay to make a bed. Hidden in the darkest corner, she bundled her shawl up for a pillow and rested, for the first time in days, without fear.

As she fell into a deep sleep, two white feathers fluttered down beside her.



Megan woke the following morning, feeling hungry. Where am I? she wondered. Lying in the hay, in an abandoned farm, in a desolate village, she was struck by the utter solitude of her situation. It was four days since she'd run away from home, following the ox-droves and the sheep tracks over the Downs, and in all that time she hadn't seen or spoken to a soul. What would they do when they found she had gone? She thought of her parents, locked away in mourning, silent strangers in a dark house. Most likely they would only feel more sorry for themselves. They hated her. They punished her every day for living. Megan felt the injustice flare, hot and fierce inside, burning the fear away. She wanted to cry out: 'It wasn't my fault!' But

it was. That was the unbearable part. For so long her parents had rejected her because she wasn't the son they so desperately wanted, until, like a self-fulfilling prophesy, she had truly let them down and destroyed all their hope for the future. She could never go back. But could she ever forget? How far would she have to run to escape the past?

Morning bathed the cowshed with light. A cock crowed. It was a new day. It was *her* new day. Her new life. Megan sniffed back a tear and tugged the hay from her hair, twisting the long brown locks tight and tucking them up beneath her cap. Don't cry, she told herself firmly. You ran away from the crying. You've got to look after yourself now.

She peeped outside. The yard was empty as it had been the night before, so she brushed herself down and crept out in search of some food.



The farm looked as though it had been abandoned long ago. Rakes and scythes lay rusting in the grass, and a cart was so smothered with bindweed it seemed to have grown right out of the earth. As Megan walked among the empty kennels and coops, pigpens and tattered bee skeps, she was disturbed by the absence of beasts and bustle. Maybe there had been some plague here, she thought with a shudder. But there was no sign that the animals had died. Even though it seemed deserted she felt she was trespassing. Her

skin prickled and her throat was dry. She didn't believe in ghosts but it wasn't difficult to imagine a pale, hollow-cheeked farm boy rattling his harness in one of those gaping doorways.

Megan decided to investigate the house. Every window she could see was shuttered, except those in the kitchen. She peered inside. A few withered apples lay on the table where a mouse was making a breakfast of them. Megan listened. Not a sound. Nervously she tried the handle. With a flick of his tail the mouse scurried off, but no one appeared. She pushed open the kitchen door and went in. Like the yard, it seemed the house was abandoned. Megan snatched an apple, then pocketed another. She ate hungrily and gazed around; fine dishes and glassware were arranged on high shelves but dirty pots and pipkins were scattered about the room; silver cutlery was strewn on the table, unwashed, a jug lay broken on the flagstone floor and the dusty dresser was draped with cobwebs. It was as if the occupants had left in a hurry, but someone had been here since, disturbing things. There seemed nothing else to eat and the apple had made her thirsty so she went outside to find the well and pulled up a pail. The cool water smelt of moss as she drank from her cupped hands and splashed her face. Feeling a little less apprehensive, now she was sure there was no one about, she waded through a garden of waist-high weeds to the front of the house. Why had such a beautiful house been left uninhabited long enough for thorn bushes to grow around it, like an enchanted fairy-tale castle? There was some story to it and Megan was intrigued. She sat inside the porch and imagined the greetings and partings that must have taken place in that doorway. Now the stone benches were littered

with dead leaves and snail shells, and grass grew through the cracked paving.



Megan retraced her steps to the kitchen. It did seem like a perfect place to hide – an empty house all to herself. But there was a haunted feeling about the place that bothered her, about the whole derelict village. She stood in the middle of the room, motionless, listening hard, willing the room to release a whisper of its past – an echo of gossip or grumble, voices raised, secrets shared.



Two storerooms opened off the back of the kitchen; a pantry, containing crocks of oats and flour, lit by a small window, and a buttery, where she found a barrel of salt and bunches of dried herbs that had long since lost their scent and colour. Suddenly she was startled by a crash and swung round. Someone was there! No – a wicker basket rattled across the stone floor, hit the wall and lay, rocking like an empty cradle. She must have brushed it off the shelf with her sleeve. Megan picked it up and sighed, her nerves rattled. What if the occupants of the house should return and find her here? She ran her fingers through the thick dust on the shelf. No one has been in these rooms for a long while, she reassured

herself. Still, she *had* seen candlelight in the village last night. It would be best to keep quiet and out of sight. In the pantry a ladder rested against the wall. She climbed up and into an open loft above. The loft ran the whole length and breadth of the kitchen. Half of it was stacked with boxes for storing apples, which still contained a few wrinkled fruit. Beside these was a pile of sacks and a straw mattress with a heap of moth-eaten blankets. A hairbrush with ribbon tied to the handle lay beside it. Perhaps this was where the kitchen maid slept, she thought, imagining the delicious scent of apples up there after harvest, mixed with the cooking smells wafting from the kitchen below. Why had the people of the house vanished? If they had moved or gone away surely things would have been left tidy, or packed up. It was as if some Pied Piper had lured them all away . . .

Well, she thought sensibly, picking up the hairbrush, I'll probably never know. What matters is that there's no one around to ask questions. It's a perfect place to take refuge for a while.

Her thoughts were broken by someone whistling for a dog outside in the lane. The familiar sound made her smile – it was a touchstone of normality in a strange place. She hurried back down the ladder to look out of the buttery window. But as she reached the last rung Megan sensed a presence in the kitchen behind her.

She froze.

A voice cut the silence.

'Who's there?'

