

A Good Night to Run Away

This would be a good night to run away. The fog was thick.

Johnny looked out his bedroom window. He knew that outside were the gardens, and beyond them the stone walls that surrounded his father's huge house, and beyond the walls, the green hills of Scotland. He smelled the clover, wet and fragrant, and the new-mown grass. Though he could see none of it through the fog, he smelled it and he felt it. He had planned this for a long, long time. For Johnny belonged to what was known as a 'God-fearing' family, and he was weary of the rules that went along with it.

He was weary of going to church, and of being 'preached at' at home. For years now, he had been skipping school whenever he could get away with it, and had spent his days wandering through the damp woods, lying on his stomach beside a stream, staring into the water at the fish – and dreaming. How wonderful it would be to get away, far away, and actually see a city – a big city - and to live a life of undreamed-of adventure, so that everyone who knew of him would say, 'Ahhh, Johnny Welch – there's a lad who's not afraid of anybody!'

Anybody?

The truth was, Johnny was dreadfully afraid of his own father. His father was the lord of the manor house – wealthy, respected in the neighbourhood – and very, very stern, with piercing eyes and a beard that seemed as long as a yardstick. Johnny stood by the window and shivered at the very thought of him. He had to run away. He was nearly fourteen; it was time to do it. He had to do it tonight.

He turned from the window and went back to his bed where he had his clothes all carefully laid out along with a leather flask for water, and a large plaid shawl spread out flat to put his few provisions in. He dressed hurriedly, trembling in the dark; he did not dare light a candle.

Moments later he opened his door carefully and stepped outside. He started down the hall past his father's bedroom. His father was snoring.

He started down the steps. And stopped. They creaked. He tested each step after that, wondering why he'd never noticed before that they creaked. At last he was safely at the bottom. He started across the enormous living room, past the huge stone fireplace and into the kitchen, where the oatmeal was slowly bubbling on the back of the kitchen stove for the morning's breakfast. He very carefully took the cover off the huge cauldron and laid it alongside. Then he tiptoed to the cupboard and brought back a bowl. He ladled a big blob of oatmeal into it and set it on

the table. He put the cover back on the cauldron and tiptoed into the pantry. He scooped up all he could find – some biscuits, a jar of honey, some cheese. He skipped the butter and the cream. He could not carry them, and besides the butter would melt and the cream would curdle in the heat of the day. He tiptoed back out to the kitchen and gulped down the oatmeal. Then he spread his shawl out on the table, put his provisions in, and tied it up. He went toward the back door, undid the lock, and started to open it – and stopped.

It creaked too, louder than the stairs had. He had never noticed it before. In the daytime he'd never heard it creak; why did it have to creak now? He pulled it a little farther.

Creeeeak. He listened, his hands trembling. Was his father still snoring? He was too far away to hear. Right now, Johnny was more afraid of his father than he was of God.

He got it open just wide enough to slip through, and then ever so carefully – creeeeak – he closed it. Outside, the fog was so thick he could scarcely see, but he could smell the pungent odour of his mother's herb garden near the kitchen. His mother loved herbs. The food on their table was always fragrant with them.

He paused, thinking of his mother. She was a quiet little woman who had never, to his knowledge, spoken back to his father. Nobody ever spoke back to his father. His piercing eyes and bristling beard frightened everyone about him into silence. But his mother. She would be brokenhearted that he would turn his back

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on everything he had been taught from his childhood – that he would actually run away. She would cry. His father would be angry. He would storm about and rant and rave and disown Johnny forever.

Johnny closed the door softly behind him and walked down the path that ran through the middle of the herb garden. He could think behind; he must think ahead. He walked past the herb garden, through the lawns and shrubbery beyond, down to the gate. He didn't need to see; he knew every step by heart. The dogs lying by the outside gate whimpered as he drew near, but they did not bark.

'Quiet,' he whispered, and he petted them one by one. 'Quiet. It's all right. It's all right.' They wagged and whined and he shushed them again. He opened the huge gate and closed it softly behind him.

He was on the road at last. He fancied he heard his father snoring even from this distance. At any moment his father would waken, snort, and leap out of bed and come bellowing to the window, like some giant in a nightmare, to order him back.

But none of this happened. Everything was silent. He sighed with relief and started nimbly down the road through the blanket of fog. He knew every rut, every turn, every inch of it by heart.

He covered the first mile easily, sometimes running, on to his freedom. Then he settled down to a walk, past all the sights of his boyhood, past the sign TO DUMFRIES that led to his Aunt Agnes' house.

Aunt Agnes had always made him think of a sparrow in her plain grey dresses, bobbing about and chirping. He thought of her house, rambling and comfortable, set in the midst of a garden, beautiful beyond words, with her herb garden outside her kitchen, and flowers everywhere else, right up to the stone wall that surrounded it. He stopped a moment by the sign and leaned against it. He loved his Aunt Agnes. For a moment he thought of side-tracking, just to stand outside her house. He was sure he wouldn't hear her snore. Aunt Agnes just wouldn't snore.

He sighed, and then trudged on down the main road. He hated to leave Aunt Agnes; he hated to leave his mother. But he had to go. He had to get away from his father. He had to get away from school. He had to get away from all the things that held him back and fenced him in and bound him down. All the rules, rules, endless rules. He had to get away from the rules.

He walked with new determination, into the foggy night.

The sun was shining through the fog when Johnny awoke. At first he didn't realize where he was. He had trudged through the fog all night, not daring to stop, until the black night had turned to grey, and then, unable to keep on his feet any longer, he had crawled into some bush by the side of the road and fallen asleep at once.

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He struggled to a sitting position, stiff and damp, and opened his shawl. He chose a biscuit and munched it slowly. He must not eat too fast – he had to make it last. When he was finished, he got up cautiously, looking about him for any sign of life. He was halfway to his feet when he stopped suddenly, his blood frozen.

There was a rustle in the grass.

He waited, motionless, hardly daring to breathe, and then let out a long sigh of relief, blowing through his mouth.

A rabbit! It scampered by, less than two feet from him, and ran for its life. He's more scared than I am, Johnny thought, breathing hard. And then, very cautiously, he tied up his shawl and stepped out onto the road.

There was no sign of life anywhere, no one in the fields as far as he could see. Stone wall fences stretched out in the distance, but he could see no sign of a house or a barn. He started trudging down the road. The worst was over, he thought. He'd be all right now. He was far enough away from neighbours – wait a minute.

The clop-clop of horses' hoofs, slow and heavy – work horses, probably. Were they ahead? No. He looked back. They were behind, off in the distance. His guess had been right. It was a huge wagon pulled by work horses, slow and plodding, saving energy for the hot day ahead. He turned and walked again, staring straight before him. All his muscles strained to send him flying

into the bushes. His reflexes said run, but his mind said no, and he forced himself to keep trudging up the road, looking straight ahead. What if it was a neighbour? Or someone who knew his father? His blood ran cold at the thought. Maybe he'll pass me by, he thought, maybe he'll go on.

'Make him go on, dear God,' he muttered under his breath, 'make him go on,' forgetting that it was his parents' godly life that had made him run away from God in the first place. 'Make him go on –' He kept muttering it right up until the clop-clop got slower, and then stopped.

'Where are you going?' a rough voice called. John forced himself to turn. Where was he going? He didn't even know where he was.

'Ah – just down to the – next – just down a way,' he stammered, as he looked up into the gruff face of a farm-hand. The man was a stranger. Thank God, John thought.

'Climb up,' the man said, indicating his high seat. But John sprang nimbly into the wagon behind him instead. That way he wouldn't have to talk. The man clicked to his horses, and they started slowly onward. John scrunched down in the wagon, his back to the man.

'Going any place in particular?' the man called over his shoulder.

'Going to visit my Aunt Agnes,' Johnny lied. Aunt Agnes was snug in her little cottage, many miles behind, but it was all he could think of to say. 'She lives – a

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long way down, a long way from here.' He did not dare to name a town. To his relief the man said no more. The loud rumble of the wheels and the clop of the horses' hoofs drowned out all further attempts at conversation. He rode on for what seemed like forever, looking backwards at the road stretching out behind. Every mile was taking him farther and farther away from his father.

It was early afternoon before the man pulled his horses to a stop. 'Got to drop you off here, lad,' the rough voice called back. 'I'm turning off.'

John scrambled off the wagon and muttered his thanks. The man nodded and turned to the left. John stood there a moment, stretching his cramped muscles, and then started stiffly on down the road. The day was hot now, but his spirits were still not dampened. He was on his way to freedom.

Throughout the rest of the long day he did not stop when he wanted to, only when he had to, out of hunger or sheer exhaustion. When night came he scrambled off the road and into the bushes again. He sank down and opened his shawl. He ate sparingly and forced himself only a little of his precious water. Then he sank gratefully into sleep. It was a sleep filled with hobgoblins he'd dreamed of as a little child. But when he awoke in the morning, the dreams vanished and he realized suddenly that much of his fear had gone. After all, he had survived that first scary day. The man in the wagon had swallowed his story about visiting Aunt

Agnes without blinking. Lying to strangers was easy, he thought; they had no reason not to believe you, or else they did not care. The trick was to talk as little as possible and if anyone persisted with questions, just use the story of Aunt Agnes again.

Days later Johnny was still going south. By now he was not bounding along, or even trudging; he was staggering. He got rides from one farm to the next and sank down by the roadside at night to sleep. He had no idea how far he had gone. His meagre supplies had given out. He travelled as far as he could as long as he could see, but each night, earlier and earlier, the fog settled in and he curled up to sleep.

And then one night he saw the campfire up in the hills. People by now were snuggled safely in their cottages, the candles lit. He sank back beside the road, looking up at the campfire in the distance. He was so hungry he was wobbly. He had to make a decision. He could either wait and try to hitch a ride in the morning, or he could go up to that campfire.

He rested awhile, then stood up and crossed the road. He plunged into the bushes and started up the hill.

It took him an hour to get up there, and by that time he was so ravenously hungry he could hardly stand. He crept up to about a hundred yards from the campfire, crouched in the bushes, and watched. Beside the campfire were the remains of a sheep that had been

butchered and dismembered. Around the campfire was a group of men chewing on huge chunks of the lamb that they had roasted over the fire.

And their faces were more terrifying than his father's face had ever been!

They were grizzled and worn. And their eyes – not the stern eyes of his father. They were something else – what were they? They were cold and unfeeling. They were evil.

He crouched there staring at them, half in fear, half in amazement. And then one of them looked up and saw him.

'Well,' he cried, chewing on a leg of lamb, 'and who have we here?' They all looked at him, staring suspiciously.

'Who are you, lad?' another one said. 'What's your name?'

'My name is Johnny,' he began, and then stopped. Obviously, Johnny could no longer be his name if he was going to embark on a life of adventure. 'My name is John,' he said as forcefully as he could. 'And I'm hungry.'

They looked him over. 'Look at 'im,' another one said. 'A mere stripling of a lad. Still has peach fuzz on his face.' They roared at this. Johnny took a step forward to show them just how brave he was, but his knees buckled and he fell. 'I'm hungry,' he said again.

'And look at the fine clothes the lad has,' another said. 'From a rich father, no doubt.' And he threw Johnny a piece of meat. Johnny caught it easily and began to eat

as he'd never eaten before. He chewed away at the meat until he got down to the bone. Then he laid the bone on his trembling knees and sat on his heels.

'What d'you want, lad?' the first one said, 'Come here to spy on us?'

'No,' John said impulsively, 'I came to join you.'

They roared again.

'Join us!' They said, 'Well you've got a lot to learn, lad. But no mind. We'll teach you. Come on over.'

He crept forward and joined their circle. And that night he learned to laugh when they laughed, though he could not see what was funny. And when they fell silent, he learned to keep his mouth closed. Before the night was far spent, he learned from their talking that he had joined a band of thieves. Well, wasn't this, after all, adventure?

Wasn't this what he had been looking for? And wasn't all this why he had run away?

He curled up beside the fire, too exhausted to even think about it. Except for one little twinge, just before he fell asleep. It was just about the hour when family prayers would be said back home. Would they be praying for his safety? He pushed away a feeling of guilt. He would not think of it. After all, he had, at long last, reached his goal, his heart's desire. He'd run away from his father.

He was free!

What he did not realize was that he had also run away from God.