The Woolacombe Bird

ANN WELCH

THE WOOLACOMBE BIRD

In the reign of the first Elizabeth, men already knew enough to build a flying machine. History does not relate that anyone did—but who knows? Perhaps, in the West Country, as Ann Welch relates . . .

A man builds a 'great white bird'. Adam has to work in secret for fear that superstitious villagers will accuse him of dabbling in witchcraft. When Margaret and Roger come upon him trying to salvage the 'bird', which has crashed on the cliffs at Woolacombe, he enlists their aid to build a new one. Patiently and secretly, with the help of copies of Leonardo da Vinci's diagrams, another machine is built, and this time it *does* fly.

But they have been discovered. While they are out on the cliffs, angry villagers set fire to Adam's house. How the little party escape the vengeance of the enraged mob forms a dramatic climax to this exciting and original story.

Ann Welch, distinguished glider pilot, designed and built a model aircraft which could fly, using only knowledge available at the time of this story. She also knows from experience what it is like to fly primitive gliders. Who, then, can say that the story of Adam and Roger and Margaret is pure fiction? But however that may be, the outstanding qualities of *The Woolacombe Bird* are never in question.

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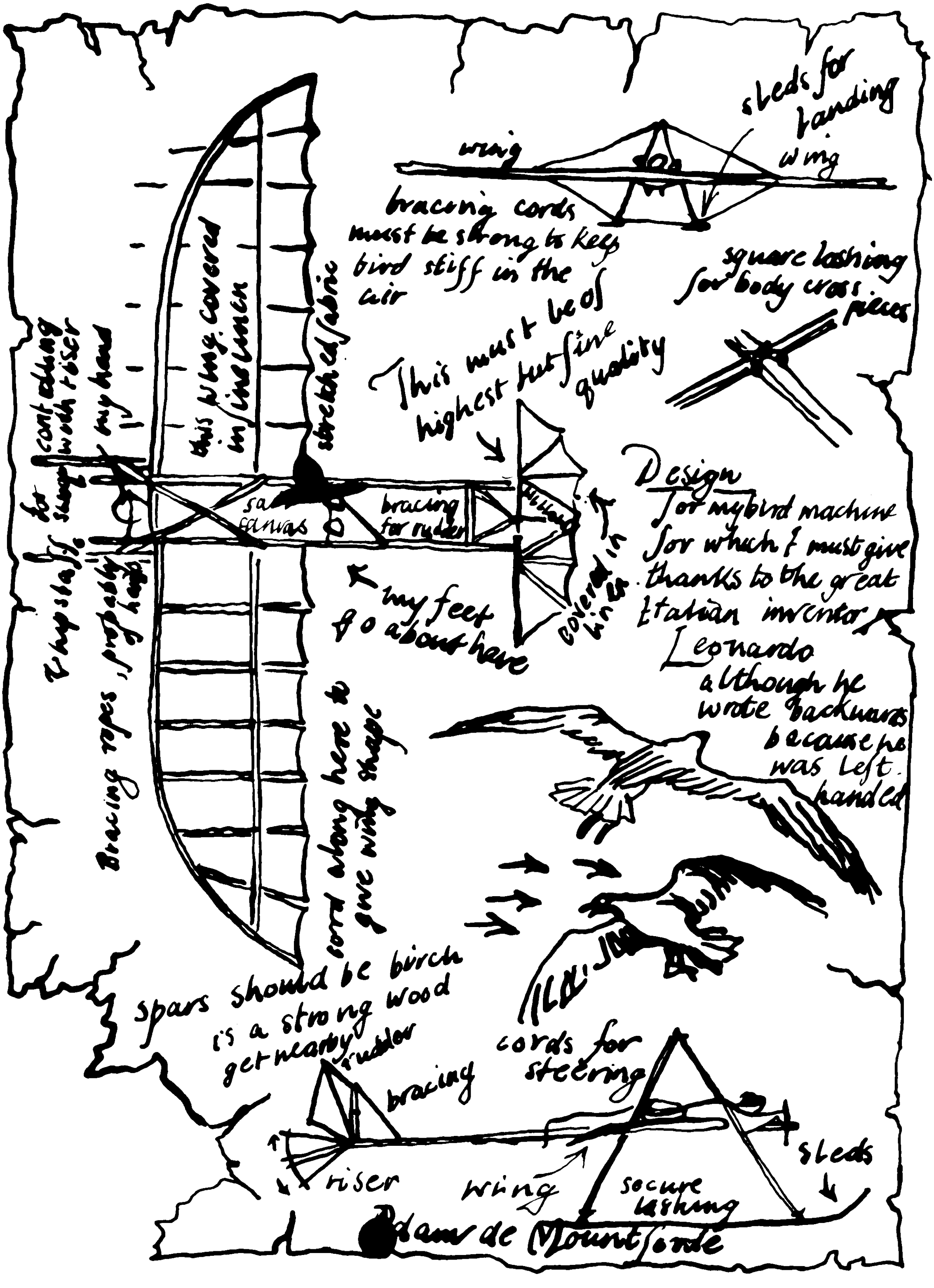
sleds for landing
wing
wing
bracing cords must be strong to keep bird stiff in the air
square lashing for body cross pieces
This must be of highest but fine quality
this wing covered in fine linen
stretched fabric
controlling with riser
my hand
Whipstaff for steering
Bracing ropes, probably hemp
sail canvas
bracing for rudder
covered in linen
my feet go about here
Design
for my bird machine for which I must give thanks to the great Italian inventor Leonardo although he wrote backwards because he was left handed
cord along here to give wing shape
spars should be birch is a strong wood get nearby
rudder
bracing
cords for steering
riser
wing
secure lashing
sleds
Adam de Mountforde

ANN WELCH

THE WOOLACOMBE BIRD

illustrated by Joseph Acheson

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TO DOC. SLATER

Discovery is the finest adventure.

Perhaps the most exciting times in our history were those of the great voyages to discover the world, the age of Magellan and Drake.

All this was three hundred and fifty years ago.

In those times another discovery was possible. Man could have flown in the air. Enough knowledge existed for a glider to have been designed, built and controlled.

But the years of the great discoveries passed, and apart from ballooning man still had his feet on the ground. They stayed there right up to the time of our great-grandparents.

Then the fires of invention flared up once more, and the pioneers Pilcher and Lilienthal, looking into the future, built themselves wings, and sailed down from their hills.

But perhaps, somewhere, some time, in those distant centuries, there lived some man who tried to fly with the birds.

Perhaps he succeeded. His story could easily have been lost as it drifted through the mists of history.

Stories have been lost before.

Perhaps the bold Elizabethan West Country bred just one other adventurer?

Perhaps, in those far-off sunlit years...

1

The morning of February 17th, 1588, was so warm and sunny that Roger and Margaret Hawkesley, the son and daughter of a West Country sea-captain, decided to explore the great bay topped by steep cliffs which is now called Woolacombe Sands. In those days the beach was empty, save after a storm when the villagers would set out on a beachcombing expedition for treasure chests, and return with a few armfuls of battered ships' timbers, which burnt on their fires with a green flame. The cliffs above Woolacombe are a curious shape. First of all the huge, flat beach humps itself into dunes, forming a wonderful place for exploring. Tufts of coarse grass with sharp blades grow in the sand, and in the valleys, where it is more sheltered from the searing wind, there are little patches of green turf dotted with lady's slipper. Stunted tamarisk trees struggle to exist where they can. Above the dunes the cliffs rise steeply, but are still grass-

covered and can be climbed in bare feet without much difficulty provided the sheer places are avoided. This range of cliffs is about two miles long, getting lower and more rounded at each end.

Once on the top it is possible to see the lonely blue curves of Exmoor away in the distance, above the undulating combe country which lies between. Turn to face the sea, and there is the cold Atlantic rolling its great white horses on to the pale sand. Two strong arms of land, Baggy Point and Morte Hoe, protect the bay from the violence of the storms, and point towards Lundy Island lying dark and mysterious sixteen miles out in the ocean. The little village where Roger and Margaret lived, with the widow of their father's old bos'n to housekeep for them, huddled for shelter below the north end of the Woolacombe cliffs, where it was shielded from the fury of the raw wind. The two had a great deal of freedom, as their father was at sea for years on end, and old widow Jenny was so rheumaticky that she could not chase after them. In any case, they rightly considered that they were old enough to look after themselves. Roger was thirteen and strong for his age and at twelve Margaret was wise and sensible, for since their mother died five years back she had largely had to take her place. They were inseparable companions, and loved nothing more than fishing, or roaming the wild, exciting North Devon which was all the world they knew.

On this day they had taken a bag of food for lunch, and planned to walk the five miles out to Whiting Hole and Baggy Point in the hopes of seeing the fierce falcons plunge after their prey, wings tight closed, and with a keenness born of hunger. They got there before noon and lay on the edge of the gaunt cliffs, watching the sea

thundering on the rocks below and sending mists of spray whirling up over them, tingling their faces as it went. There were no falcons, but instead a cloud of gulls screamed and plunged above as they rode on the gusts with wings which were still except for the trembling of their feathers. Roger watched them, fascinated and quite unaware of the coldness which crept over him as he lay there, and when Margaret refused to stay and freeze for another moment, he leapt to his feet, and ran across the cliff-top with his arms outstretched, to get warm, longing to leap over the edge and fly with the gulls.

They ate their food walking back along the highest part of the headland, watching a small sloop with coloured pennants beat out of Bideford Bay away to the south. It was making slow progress against the freshening westerly, plunging and rolling in the shallow, turbulent water over the bar. During the afternoon the air rapidly became colder, so they cut short their investigation of a deserted hut, and climbed the south end of the Woolacombe cliffs to walk home along the crest, to watch the sun grow red before sinking like a flat apple into the sea. They had just reached the highest point, and were kicking through some withered fronds of bracken, when Margaret thought she saw someone moving ahead of them where the ridge plunged steeply down to the beach. Her voice whispered with urgency as she pulled at her brother's jerkin.

"Roger, there's someone else up here, a stranger. Quick, we must hide before we're seen."

Roger stopped with annoyance. He regarded these cliffs as their own preserve, and it was unbelievable that anyone else should poach on their territory. There were

no others in the tiny village who roamed these empty, windy heights.

"I don't see anyone," he said loudly, and was just going to say something else when Margaret gave him such a tug that he fell to his knees in the bracken. He looked round crossly, but before he had time to say anything else Margaret had clapped a hand over his mouth.

"It's a man on the cliff edge, but I couldn't see what he was doing. Let's get closer, and find out who it is." With these bold words she pushed her larger brother firmly in front of her, and, bent double, hurried along behind him, clutching her long skirts so that she would not trip over. Roger leaped down into a bracken-filled hollow, out of sight of the crest, which ended in a shallow gully about a hundred paces back from where Margaret said she had seen this mysterious person. Quietly they crawled up to the lip of the gully, until, well hidden, they could get a good view of the cliff-top.

"There he is," whispered Margaret, and gave a little gasp.

"Look, he's – he's talking to an eagle. And I'm sure it's the same man that we saw dodging out of our way yesterday." Her expression of fear startled Roger, and he crouched low in the bracken, peering towards where Margaret was pointing.

A hundred yards away on the crest of the ridge stood a man. He was silhouetted by the dying sun, and it was difficult to see exactly what he was doing, but it certainly looked as though Margaret was right, and that he had with him a huge bird. He appeared to be talking to it as it stood beside him, with huge feathered wings arched ready for flight. It was the biggest bird they had ever

seen, and its sinister stillness scared them. The man seemed quite young, and was dressed in good clothes, but kept looking round as though he did not want to be seen. "He must be a magician to make any bird tame like that," whispered Margaret. "We'd better go home. If he sees us he'll cast a spell on us too." She huddled up against her brother, but he pushed her away, without taking his eyes off the man and his bird.

"There's something queer going on," he growled. "And I'm going to find out what it is." Margaret glanced at his face and was glad to see that it did not reflect the bravery of his words.

No sound came from the man or the bird, but this may have been because it was drowned by the moan of the wind as it swept over the cliffs. It was beginning to get dusk now, and the man appeared to be struggling with something at the head end of the creature. They watched fearfully. The man, who was obviously in a hurry, clearly did not want to be seen, but neither did they want to be seen by him. Having lived in the wilds of Devon all their lives, they had often watched eagles soaring high over the moors – the fierce brown eagles which had been known to steal babies from outside houses. But this strange bird – it was like an eagle, but bigger, and white, and standing quite still for the man to touch and talk to. If it were magic something terrible might happen if it saw them; they might well be shrivelled into toads. Margaret wanted to cry, and she clung to Roger, but he was so frightened himself that he had to push her from him to avoid giving way to his own feelings. Then the man moved, and the two prickled with fright, for the huge eagle had no head. The cold wind was gusting stronger now, but it was not this that made

Margaret shiver as though she would never stop. Slowly the man walked to the extreme edge of the cliff, standing against the dull red of the sky, looking far out over the sea. Then he held his hands high above his head and seemed to perform some magic rite. They could see him turning his head from side to side, and moving his widespread arms in great sweeps with his body as though he were himself the great bird wheeling and turning in the sky. Then he suddenly looked round, making Roger and Margaret quickly duck back into the bracken. The man seemed to be satisfied with whatever he had done on the hill crest, for he ran back to the bird and started to haul it right to the edge of the cliff. The great creature remained quite rigid, its white wings arched and its little short tail spread fanwise. It was obviously heavy, for the man only managed to move it quite slowly.

"Is he – is he going to make it fly?" whispered Margaret, gripping Roger's arm tightly.

"I don't know, but it looks like it. Perhaps he's going to fly on its back," Roger breathed.

"That's not possible, you know it isn't. I think he's going to make it fly and attack people, because he's wicked." She paused, and then whispered, pressing close against her brother, "If it does fly it'll see us and come and kill us."

"Don't be stupid. It's nearly too dark to see us now." But Roger did not feel as reassuring as he sounded.

The wind was becoming stronger, flattening the bracken in swathes as it swept across the cliff-top. The man stopped pulling the bird and went again to the edge, and stood leaning against the wind in the dying light. He did not wave his arms this time but seemed to

be in doubt about something. He looked back at the bird, and then once more out over the high cliff as though he were trying to assess how strong the wind really was. Then he ran back to the bird and soon had it beside him on the edge. He rested for a few moments leaning over it, and then Roger and Margaret gasped as he crawled under it and lifted it on to his shoulders, his head appearing where the bird's should be and his arms outstretched under the arched wings. Margaret's fingers bit into Roger's arm and her eyes opened wide with fear. He put his hand across her shoulders, but not with any feeling of confidence.

"Is he going to fly off the cliffs like the gulls?" she asked fearfully.

"I don't know. It looks like it, though. But – " Roger was getting really frightened now. "It's – it's impossible without magic."

"I know he'll see us," Margaret moaned. "And he'll swoop on us and kill us."

Roger pulled a few pathetic wisps of dead bracken over them. "Perhaps he'll fly out over the sea to Lundy Island." A sudden thought struck him about that mysterious island. "Perhaps he lives there," he added a little more cheerfully. This new idea gave Margaret a little hope.

"It's the colour of a harmless gull," she observed. "And gulls don't eat people."

Although they tried to convince themselves that all would be well, they had heard too many tales from their father of magic, and strange creatures in far-off lands, not to feel scared.

The man was standing erect now, the great white feathery wings spreading from his shoulders. He was

facing out to sea and looked as though he was about to leap over the edge. Suddenly he stopped as though something had gone wrong. He crouched on the ground, and crawled out from under the bird which he left poised on the cliff. He ran back a few yards looking for something on the ground.

Then it happened.

A violent gust of wind roared over the cliff, tearing through the dead grass and blowing cold in their faces. In utter silence the great white creature rose straight up into the air, hovering like a ghostly bird of prey, cruel and powerful, its great wings outstretched as if it were about to dive and kill. The man flung his arms up, uttering a cry of tragedy, and as he did so another wild gust struck the bird. Caught helplessly in the wind, it hurtled over the man's head and crashed to the ground in a cloud of white feathers. Again the man cried out, and started running and stumbling through the bracken after his bird.

Roger and Margaret froze with horror, for the thing was coming straight towards them, cartwheeling into the air and then crashing to the ground again. Each time it hit the earth another shower of feathers was whipped away by the wind amid the splintering noises of breaking bones. Margaret wanted to run and run, but her legs would not move. She looked quickly at Roger, but he was staring as though faced with all the ghosts of the world. Again a gust lifted the bird, now grotesque and tattered, into the air. For an age it seemed to hang there, and then came twisting and turning straight at them. Roger and Margaret flattened themselves into the soft damp earth as the splintering crash came, and the bird disintegrated into a thousand pieces on a rock

boulder just in front. Feathers and splinters of wood showered all over them, and they lay shaking with fear and quite unable to move.

Then the man came. He stared at them but did not seem to recognize their existence. He tried to pick up everything he could find from the wreckage of his bird and clutched it to him with a look of dazed despair on his face. Then he sat down on the boulder just in front of them and buried his face in his hands.

It took several seconds for them to realize that they were still alive, and that the magician was only an ordinary and very sad man. The spell of the evil bird was broken and they wanted to shout and laugh with relief, but the presence of the man embarrassed them, and for a few moments they just crouched there, wondering what to do. It was Margaret who first timidly spoke.

"Can we help you?" she said.

The man looked up, startled, and saw two faces

gazing anxiously at him through the bracken. His face suddenly looked angry, then he just shrugged his shoulders and sat staring at the broken pieces.

"It's no use," he said, half to himself. "It's all finished now." And he looked so miserable that Roger and Margaret scrambled out of their hiding-place and went over to him. Now that the bird was only feathers and broken pieces of wood, the magic had left it, and gingerly they started to collect some of the bits.

Suddenly the man looked up, worried. "Is there anyone with you?" he asked abruptly.

"No, we're alone. We often come here to watch the gulls flying over the cliffs."

"You mustn't tell anyone what you have seen." The man's voice was fierce, and his hand went involuntarily to the little dagger in his belt. Margaret drew back, but the man's hand dropped to his side.

"It's all right," he said. "I won't hurt you, but no one must know what I'm doing. No one believes that flying is possible except me. They all think it's wicked and sinful. If I were caught, they'd throw me into prison, if they didn't kill me first. But flying *is* possible. I know it is. If only–" And his voice trailed away as he looked at the wreckage spread around his feet.

"We thought you were practising magic," said Margaret. "When you stood on the hill-top and waved your arms about we were very frightened."

The man smiled. "I was just thinking what I was going to do when I had jumped off the cliff."

Roger had been staring at the man, fascinated. "Were you really going to fly like the gulls?" he asked.

"Well, I hoped to. I've been building my flying-

machine for over a year. I *know* that flying is possible, I know it, I know it." The man looked at the wreckage again. "Oh, my beautiful bird," he said half to himself. "All that we were going to do together." And he looked so unhappy that Margaret wanted to comfort him, but she felt shy.

"Can you mend it?" asked Roger.

"No, it's too difficult. Look, there's nothing left. Anyway, people were getting suspicious. They know I'm doing something secret, and I won't tell anyone what it is. Because they can't understand they think it must be magic, as you did."

"But surely if you tell them that you're trying to fly, they'll understand? I would, I'd love to fly," said Roger.

The man looked at him. "Yes, *you* probably would. But that's because you are young. The world today is full of new things, and great voyages of exploration are going on all the time."

"We know that," said Margaret firmly. "Our father is a sea-captain and has been to the other world which Columbus found, and he's told us of all sorts of wonderful things."

"You see. It's as I said. New things are wonderful things to you, but to older people they may be wicked and works of the devil, especially things like wanting to fly. Because we weren't born with wings people say we shouldn't fly, but we go in boats and we weren't born with rafts on our bottoms."

Margaret laughed at the idea, but Roger was very serious.

"I'll help you make another bird," he said.

The man looked at him for a long time, hopefully at first, but then he shook his head. "It has already become

too difficult. For the last three nights I brought parts of my bird up here in the dark, and only this morning could I get it ready to fly. For two years I've been collecting feathers to cover the wings and the tail. The villagers are suspicious of me already, they – "

Margaret interrupted him. "Aren't you the peculiar man who lives in the old manor-house in the combe?"

"Yes, that's where I live, but I am *not* peculiar," the man replied, with the beginnings of a smile.

"All the people in the village say that you're evil, and that we're not to come near you. But you don't look evil." The man's smile broadened as he studied the face of the slim girl with the long fair hair. It was the first time that any stranger had spoken kindly to him for a long time. Then his frown returned.

"They come and spy on me, and peer through my windows to see what I'm doing. A while ago, just after my uncle died and left me this house to come to, I was up on the cliffs here trying to make some dead birds fly."

"But that's impossible," cried Roger. "Everyone knows that when a bird is hit by a ball or a stone, it just tumbles over and over until it hits the ground."

"In the ordinary way that's true," said the man. "But I had to find out what was important about the flight of birds, so I fixed the bones of some gulls rigidly so that their wings and tail were in the flying position, and then I launched them over the cliff in a dive, just as they would do themselves."

"And what happened?"

"The gulls hurtled downwards in a series of swoops until they hit the beach. They didn't just fall like a stone, but neither did they fly as they should. I decided that it was because the birds were not alive that they couldn't

fly. You see, the rigid body of the bird wasn't able to adapt itself to the whims of the air, and the air just blew it about as it would a piece of paper. I decided that it was no use doing any more experiments with the dead birds as they had no aliveness in them, and that I would have to build a big bird which would carry me. I would like to learn much more before I flew myself, but it didn't seem to be possible. There was no one I could talk to who didn't think me mad, and there are no writings which I could find." The man looked thoughtful and for a few moments seemed not to see them. Then he went on:

"Well, one day, when I was flying the dead gulls, someone saw me. I heard a rustling in the bracken, and then a youth ran away in the direction of the village as fast as he could go. Ever since I have been watched and followed. It was difficult enough to build this flying-machine in secret and get it up here; it will be impossible now to build another."

The man looked so upset that Margaret felt very sorry for him, and was no longer in the least frightened. "What's your name?" she asked suddenly.

The man looked up. "Adam de Mountforde," he said. "Never now to become famous." He laughed bitterly, and kicked the fragments at his feet.

"Don't do that," cried Roger angrily. "If you say flying is possible I believe you, and I'll help you to build another bird."

"So will I," added Margaret. "And don't you start saying that girls are no good. There's lots of things I can do to help, and I want to help you."

Adam looked at them both, but he could not see much because it was nearly dark. "Do you really mean that?"

he said. "Are you sure you don't think that I'll cast an evil spell over you?"

"Yes, we're quite sure," said Margaret with determination, "and if we're careful we'll be able to come to your house quite a lot, because everyone in the village is used to us wandering off all day."

Suddenly Adam felt wonderfully happy. The loneliness and the disappointments were past, and there was still a chance that he would fly, as he had wanted to ever since he could remember. But he was not allowed to dream for long.

"We can't leave all this untidy wreckage here," Margaret announced. "Someone's bound to find it and then there'll be a fine old rumpus. We must take it back to your house. It won't be difficult in the dark."

And that is what happened, for no one was out to see the strange procession of one young man and a boy and a girl walking along in the dark, carrying armfuls of splintered wood curiously adorned with thousands of feathers.

2

In the cold light of morning, the happenings of the previous evening seemed unreal, and Margaret doubted whether they had been entirely wise in their promise to Adam.

"Do you think it's really all right going to the Strange One's house?" she whispered to Roger at breakfast.

"Yes, of course it is," he replied, between mouthfuls of porridge. "And don't call him the Strange One like they do in the village." He glanced into the pantry to see if old widow Jenny, who cared for them, was listening, but she was fumbling about with the flour bin. "They don't know anything about him, and we do," he added. But Margaret was still unconvinced.

"But how can we be sure that he was telling us the truth, and won't turn us into frogs when we get there, and then eat us?"

"You saw him, the same as I did," retorted Roger. "We talked to him, and he's a person just the same as us; and we're going to help him do the most wonderful thing in the world." Margaret looked at her brother for a long time. He wasn't usually a dreamy sort of person, but ever since he had found out that it really might be possible to fly, he seemed to have gone far away with his own thoughts.

"Do you really want to fly?" she said quietly. Her brother picked up the milk-jug, and peered round it into the pantry before speaking, but the old woman was still fully occupied with sifting the flour.

"Yes, of course I do," he hissed. "I've never told anyone, but I've always had dreams of floating with the gulls over the cliffs, or climbing up near the sun like the falcons – except I wouldn't kill pigeons like they do. I'd just dive and climb and swoop about the sky all day long with the sun glittering on my wings like gold." And he stretched out his arm and swung it round his head in a great curve – only he forgot that the milk-jug was still in his hand. Margaret squeaked as a stream of milk sailed over her head and splashed down the pantry door. Old Jenny came flying out as though the devil was after her, and Roger and Margaret reckoned that they were lucky to get away with being banished with a chunk of bread and a slice of cheese, while she put the place to rights.

It was a wonderful spring day, with a clean, salty wind blowing in from the Atlantic. The air was very clear and the lonely island of Lundy looked sharp and close, instead of the grey ghost that it usually was. Two small sloops of war, probably on their way to join Drake's fleet, were reaching past Baggy Point, colourful pin-pricks on the shining sea. The two felt intensely excited, and quickly made their way towards Adam's house, by way of the usual track to the cliff-top. Having stood about on the highest point for some time so that someone in the village might notice them, they went on over the crest, and then doubled back. Keeping a good look-out, they made their way into the undulating land of sweet-smelling turf and twisty thorn hedges behind the cliff-

top, down into the combe where the old manor lay. As they approached the forbidding house hidden among its trees, Margaret began to have some more of her doubts. It was not that she was frightened, but she was a rather cautious person, who did not like jumping into new things until she was certain of what she wanted to do. She had felt sure with Adam in the dark, and she still did really; it was just that the idea of flying was so entirely new and unthought-of that she wanted a little more time than usual to make up her mind. On this occasion Roger did not notice his sister's reluctance, because he just went on to the manor as fast as he dared, and Margaret had to follow.

Before they left the house on the previous night Adam had asked them to come in and have something to eat, but they had been slightly scared, particularly of the black-haired, scowling servant. Roger might have stayed, but Margaret pulled him away, and then suddenly they had started running and did not stop until they were halfway home. Then they remembered that they had heard the old pigeon woman in the village saying that the Strange One had, in fact, never turned anyone into a toad, or eaten anyone, and they wished that they had stayed. He was mainly odd, she had said, because he did not associate with the villagers, and did mysterious experiments, and above all was not in the least like his jovial and friendly, but drunken, uncle.

They had both wanted, somehow, to make another visit to the manor, but as they got close to the old trees, which had been planted hundreds of years before as a wind-break for the habitation of the first medieval owner, the house seemed horribly mysterious. When they reached its boundaries Roger paused, crouching behind

a blackthorn which was coming into early leaf, and looked carefully in all directions before striding quickly across the last short gap of rough grass prickled with gorse. Margaret followed at his heels, and together they slipped through the high, creaky gate and into the overgrown garden of the house. The front door was shut, and Roger was just wondering whether to knock, when it opened with a sudden noise. They both jumped backwards, Margaret giving a little scream which was a combination of fright and the weight of Roger's heel on

her toe. The strange servant stood looking at them without saying a word.

"Is your master at home?" Roger faltered.

The man turned without speaking and clumped away into the gloom of the stone passage. Margaret felt for her brother's hand as they stood there. She could hear her heart banging in time to the echoing footsteps, and was beginning to wish that she had not come after all. There was some muttering in the distance, and a gleam of light in the dark house, then Adam appeared out of a room at the far end. He came quickly down the passage to meet them, holding out his hand, and Margaret realized that all her fears had disappeared, and that Adam was just an ordinary and nice person except, of course, for his passion to fly.

"Hullo," he said. "So you've come after all. I wondered whether you'd think better of it when you got home, but I hoped you wouldn't. Come in and I'll show show you my work-shop. Lee!" Adam called into the gloom of the hall, "Lee, bring ale and some of your pies." He looked thoughtfully at Margaret, and added, "Honey syrup, too. I want something to keep Miss Margaret sweet." There was some shuffling in the distance and a heavy door clanged.

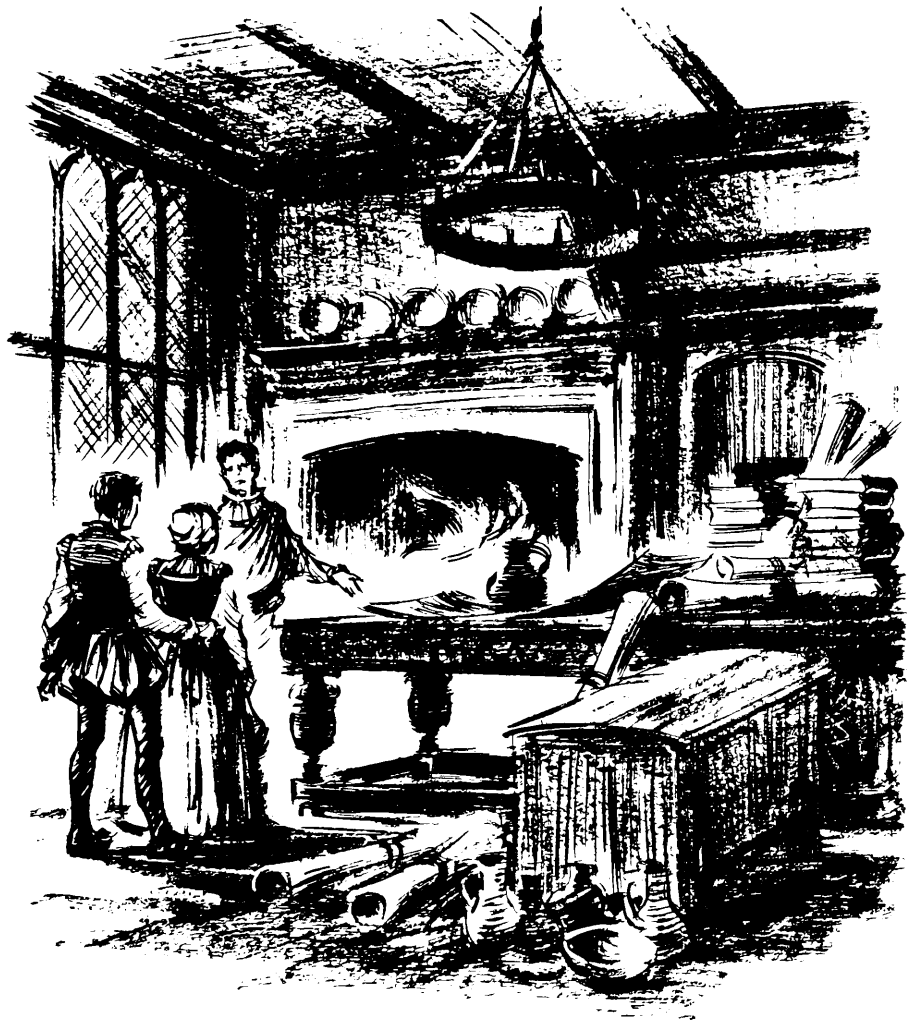
Adam seemed tremendously cheerful and excited, quite different from when they had helped him with his wrecked bird, as he led them into a large high room which made them gasp with astonishment. The windows were big and made of hundreds of tiny panes joined with lead strips and filled with pieces of real glass, some green and ringed like the bottom of a bottle. Under the window was a huge oak table that would take six men to lift. It was covered with paper, pens, and instruments

for drawing and writing. There was also an untidy pile of books. The walls of the room were covered with oak panels, some plain, and some carved and dusty. At one end was a fireplace with a chimney up which it would be quite easy to climb and hide. Some big logs smouldered on a heap of red-hot ashes, and the pleasant smell of the fire pervaded the whole place. At the other end of the room there was a solid work-bench covered with an untidy litter of mallets, adzes, chisels, gluepots, saws and other tools. The centre of the slate-slab floor was clear, and the wreckage of the strange bird lay in a feathery heap in the corner. The curtains and hangings were old, as though they had been there since the first lord owned the place, but the chairs and mats had gone and there was nothing left to sit on. The sun shone through the rippled glass of the windows and made a patchwork pattern on the floor.

Lee came in with a large platter of home-made pies, some pewter mugs and two jugs, and set them on the work-bench, clearing a space among the tools with his elbow. He then stumped morosely out, and shut the door. Margaret gave a little shiver, and understood one of the reasons why the villagers called Adam the Strange One; he must be a bit peculiar to live alone with such a creepy man.

Adam was rummaging about among the papers and books on the table.

"The most tremendous piece of luck I've ever had," he said. "A letter was delivered to me this morning by the messenger from Barnstaple, and – well to start at the beginning, I *am* going to build a new bird. I spent all last night thinking about the old one, and then this letter came this morning." Adam held up a sheaf of



papers on which there was a great deal of writing and drawings, and Margaret could see that he was flushed with excitement.

"About the middle of the night, I became quite convinced that my bird could never have flown, and I felt very depressed, except of course, that I was still alive, and – "

Roger broke in. "But how do you know? If you'd

been in it to work it, it mightn't have crashed, and you could have flown right up in the air."

"I might," said Adam, "but I don't think I would have. You see, I was going to make the bird go where I wanted by moving my own arms, which would be outstretched and strapped under the wings. I would have jumped off the cliff, and, when I wanted to wheel and turn as the gulls do, I was going to move the wings about with my arms. But when the bird whirled over my head just before it crashed I saw that I would never have had the strength in my body to force it to go in the manner I wanted, because I had to have something to push against, and once in the air there would have been nothing. When I was standing on the ground I had the ground to push against, but once I was in the air I wouldn't have had its help, and I would have been at the mercy of the wind, as the bird was without me – well, not quite so badly perhaps, because the weight of my legs hanging down might have helped to steady it a bit."

Adam stopped talking abruptly, but stood for a moment with his arms stretched out, bobbing up and down on his toes, his mind far away as he wondered about the puzzle of flying. He was brought to earth most unkindly by Margaret, who burst out laughing with her mouth full of pie.

"You do look funny, standing like that. I keep feeling that you're going to fly over my head any moment."

Roger turned on his sister. "You keep your mouth shut," he said peevishly. "Girls don't have the sort of brains that understand these things. You won't laugh when I go flying too."

Adam's hands dropped to his sides, and he smiled.

"Your sister's quite right, none of us will ever fly if I just stand here waving my arms about."

Roger turned his back on Margaret. "What are you going to do, then? How will you make the next bird do what you want?" He was puzzled, and did not want Margaret to see that he did not even know where to start thinking. There seemed nothing in his knowledge that would help, not even the flight of the hovering hawks or the sea-birds that he saw every day, because no one seemed to know what kept them in the air, except that they were alive, and they were birds, and live birds could fly. But neither Adam nor he was a bird.

Adam did not answer at once, but sorted through the sheaf of papers in his hand, and carefully extracted one sheet.

"This is why I'm so lucky," he said, holding the yellow paper up in the air. "Just when I was in complete despair, the answer comes and falls into my lap. This is not actually a letter to me, but to my uncle, and since he's dead, I've opened it and studied the contents. It was written by an elderly Italian, a famous experimenter, and a friend of my uncle's. They met originally in Florence, and this letter was sent on after his death. This experimenter was a most marvellous man, not only a mathematician and an artist, but also an authority on medicine and the structure of animals and birds. Some people were afraid of him because they thought that he was a wizard, but Italy is a very civilized country, and there were many who encouraged him to go on with his experiments. This inventor, Signor Leonardo da Vinci, had been experimenting with flying-machines, and particularly with the mathematics and theory of bird flight. He didn't actually fly himself, or build a bird

which could carry him, but his letter gives so much new information to work on that I don't know where to begin."

Adam looked at the page in his hand and started to read to himself, intending to explain the contents in his own words, but he became so absorbed in the writings of the great master that he completely forgot the existence of the others. Margaret waited expectantly for a few minutes and then, shrugging her shoulders, turned her attention to the honey syrup, pouring herself a large mugful. Roger was less patient. He peered over Adam's shoulder and tried to decipher the spidery writing, but could not make head or tail of it.

"What's it written in?" he demanded. "I can't understand a word."

"Italian," murmured Adam and went on reading, without looking up.

Margaret's eyes opened. "You must be very clever to know Italian."

Adam still went on reading. "My uncle took me there as a small boy for a few years," he said, and with this they both had to be content. They ate some more pies and stood looking at the strange tools and pieces of equipment littered all over the room.

Suddenly Adam tapped the letter. "Signor da Vinci says that 'a bird is an instrument working according to mathematical law – within the capacity of man to reproduce in all its movements – though deficient in the power of maintaining equilibrium. We may therefore say that such an instrument constructed by man is lacking in nothing except the life of the bird, and this life must needs be supplied from that of man.' You see, he says that flight *is* possible, just as I believe it is. We've

also reached the same conclusion, that it's the aliveness of the bird that's important. But he has gone much further than I've been able to do."

Without waiting for an answer, Adam pulled out another page and went on reading to himself. Then he cried out excitedly.

"Listen! He has even worked out that there are two forms of flight; one in which there must be power, an engine of some kind. The birds flap their wings using the force of their muscles, and the cunning design of the wings will propel them along. That I knew. But what I didn't know was how birds could go on flying high when they didn't move their wings, as the sea-birds do over the cliffs here. I had hoped to learn the answer with my poor bird, because, like da Vinci, I was sure that a live bird somehow had in it, hidden away, the power to fly, even if its wings could not be made to flap. But da Vinci says that this power is not in the bird, but in the air itself; the bird flies holding its wings still and the power of the air will carry it up. He calls it 'soaring flight'."

"Why do birds ever bother to flap their wings at all, then?" asked Margaret, "if they can fly without doing any work."

Adam looked at her thoughtfully, and again studied the letter in silence.

"It doesn't say, but I suppose that whatever it is that is in the air, or that happens to the air, to give it this power, isn't there all the time. When it isn't, the bird will have to flap, but when it is, the bird can soar on still wings."

"Could this power in the air be the wind?" asked Roger.

"Yes, probably, but I'm not certain."

"But what *is* the wind?" Roger was persistent. "Why does the sky seem empty sometimes, and then the next day you're almost pushed over by something you can't see?"

"The sky isn't ever empty," said Adam a little uncertainly. "It's full of the element air, which is a basic thing like fire and water. You need air to keep alive and breathe; when it moves about it's called wind."

"But what makes the air move about? You said people need air to keep alive, but if all the air moves to somewhere else, why don't some people die?"

Adam frowned, and took a deep breath. "There's always air everywhere for people to breathe," he said, "and – "

"Well, how can it move about if the sky is full of it?" demanded Margaret.

Adam opened his mouth to try to give an answer which would convince his doubtful self, as well as this persistent wench, but he did not have to speak.

"All this chit-chat isn't getting us any nearer building the new bird," Roger said morosely. Margaret took no notice of him.

"Why does the sky sometimes rain?" she asked.

Adam laughed. "You are a difficult girl." Then he grew serious. "I don't know," he sighed. "There's so much I don't know. Clever people make explanations for all the things that happen, and then they don't fit in." Roger, however, did not feel so discouraged.

"Yes, but now you do know for sure," he said, "that the bird must be alive if it's to be able to fly, and Leonardo da Whatsit says that it's possible for man to do it instead of a real bird, and to do it without the wings flapping, and – "

"But even if I can get my bird to fly, how can I make it stay in the air, and how, just how, can I make it go where I want? A real bird knows how to control its movements, but after seeing my poor bird fall last night, I know that I don't." Adam thought for a moment, rubbing his chin. "The idea I had for moving the wings was useless. I've got to find some means of making my tail bend and twist, like the feathers of the gulls, so that even when I no longer have the ground to push against, I'll still have power over my bird to make it do what I want."

"It sounds very difficult," said Margaret.

"But I'm going to do it somehow. I must. I believe that it is possible for men to fly. All my life I have believed this. Now the letter from da Vinci gives me so many new ideas that I'm sure it must contain the seed of an answer somewhere, if only I can find it." Adam leaned back against the heavy table and muttered to himself, re-reading his precious letter.

Roger and Margaret sat silently listening to what they could hear of Adam's mumblings. He had clearly forgotten their presence once again, and was trying to talk with his fingers pressed thoughtfully against his lips. Soon, they too became busy with their own thoughts, and it was not strange that they were similar. They had both imagined at one time or another that it would be fun to float about in the air, and look down on ordinary things, but it was terribly disturbing to think that their impossible dreams might really come true, and that they might suddenly find themselves high in the strange sky. Margaret found herself wondering whether she really wanted to fly after all, and Roger felt horribly sure that he wouldn't know how to begin. There was no

doubt that Adam was clever, but he often seemed so remote and unreal when his thoughts and ideas took charge of him that he did not see what was going on around him. Margaret had a feeling that there was something mysterious, almost mystical about him. He was staring out of the window now, with the sun straight in his eyes. He seemed quite unaware of the dazzling light, and certainly never noticed his two friends creep out, tiptoe across the gloomy hall, inch open the creaky front door, and run helter-skelter down the path, through the big gates, and up over the hills with their wonderfully familiar smell of thyme-scented turf. They ran on until they reached the hill-top, where the great sweep of the bay lay before them with its miles of pale sand and the glittering sea beyond. Roger raced down the steep slope with his arms outstretched, and jumped into the air, landed almost at once, and rolled over and over down the smooth grass slope shouting, "I'm flying, I'm flying."

Margaret came racing down beside him, laughing and shouting, all worries about toads, witches and secrets far from her mind. Abruptly she stopped. There was a face in the bracken topped by tousled brown hair. It disappeared, and a lark flew up crying with rage. Roger saw her staring and frightened, and, jumping to his feet, peered over her shoulder. Together, and silently, they watched a brown-clad figure running along the slope of the hill, back towards the village, dodging among the bracken, his face showing pale as he turned to see if they were still there.

"That's Martin," whispered Margaret, grasping Roger's arm. "We should have been more careful. He's probably followed us all the way, and knows where we've been." She looked at her brother, but he was too

busy muttering curses to answer.

"He'll tell everyone in the village that we've been to the manor. We'll get into awful trouble," Margaret went on fearfully, gripping her brother's arm until it hurt.

"He may talk," said Roger, trying to be reassuring, but not succeeding very well. "But everyone knows that he's a liar."

"Well, I don't like it – or him, the beast," Margaret sighed. "I suppose we'd better go on down to the beach and dig some worms for fishing, which we can take back and then his story will sound less true."

They hurried down to the beach through the great dunes with their long curving shadows, but the excitement had gone from the day, and their dreams were disturbed. They knew that everyone in the village was aware that Martin was a liar, but he could talk so plausibly and he talked so much that some people got to believe what he said, even when they did not want to. Moodily the two poked around in the wet sand, digging out the worms with a piece of driftwood, but even when Margaret found a small dab trapped in a shallow pool there was no pleasure in the discovery. They had remembered that it was Martin who had originally started the rumour that Adam made evil spells, when he had first come to the manor. At that time nobody believed him, but little by little Martin had made chance remarks that caused doubt and suspicion. Now many villagers avoided approaching the manor after dark, and would not speak to Adam on his rare visits to the village.

3

It was quite clear that Martin knew something, and obviously wanted to find out more. Whenever Roger and Margaret left their little timber and reed-thatch house at the end of the village, Martin would be there watching them. Sometimes he would be sitting on the wall of the village well whittling away at a piece of wood, and at other times he would be strolling along the dusty street kicking idly at stones and whistling tunelessly. The two grew more and more angry at the intolerable restriction that this youth, with his red, ugly face and his dirty, torn clothes, forced on them. They had never been friendly with Martin; their first memories of him, years back, were of being hit by stones that he had thrown at them from behind a hedge. A few years later his father had come into a lot of money, and after that he had been even more unbearable, causing trouble in the village but always managing, somehow, to keep clear of it himself. The old father, who had been the village shoemaker, did not work any more now, and just sat around all day gossiping with his cronies. The boy and the father lived in a dirty one-roomed house on the landward side of the village, with their money hidden somewhere inside. No one knew just where, and no one had any chance of finding out, as the old man refused to let

anyone cross his threshold. Martin never did any work, nor showed any intention of ever doing so, idly whiling his days away spying on people, and causing trouble by starting rumours so cleverly that he never got any blame.

Roger and Margaret were determined that Martin should not find out about Adam's bird-machine at all, and certainly not through them, but the difficulty was that they did not know how much he already knew. They were not sure whether he had actually seen them visit Adams' house or whether it was their last visit that had caused him to trail them up to the cliff-top. It was true that they had been rather careless once they had left the manor, and Martin had certainly heard and seen Roger pretending to be a bird and running down the slope. In future they would have to be much more cautious, even if this meant that their visits had to be fewer.

As February faded back into the winter, and March blew great salty gusts off the sea, they made many attempts to reach the manor. All were unsuccessful, for each time Martin followed, sometimes openly, as though it was just a coincidence that he was going the same way, and sometimes secretly, through the bracken and behind the hedges. There was even the occasion when they set off in a blinding rain-storm which drove even the village chickens into shelter. But it was no use. In a gully halfway to the old house, they suddenly came face to face with their enemy as they groped their way through the storm. For a moment they stood glaring at each other, their soaking hair making rivulets down their faces. Then Martin turned on his heel, and with a jeering laugh, loped away and disappeared into a little copse. Roger was furious, and wanted to rush after him

and hit him until his ugly face could laugh no more, but Margaret restrained him.

"It's no use, brother. If you go for him, he'll beat you easily – he's much bigger. And if we go on, we can't be sure that he won't be watching." Roger ceased to pull away from her and stood looking angrily at the copse.

"The beast," he muttered. "Why must he always ruin everything?" His hands clenched and unclenched

with fury, and he was so frustrated that he no longer noticed the rain and the shrieking wind.

Then Margaret took his arm again, and they started back home, looking for Martin as they went but not seeing anything.

There were the many occasions too when they started off in their usual direction to collect shells on the beach, to fish, or look for early nests up on the cliffs on the way back, hoping to be able to branch off down a gully and reach the manor-house in the shelter of the wind-whipped hedge, but each time they were prevented. Sometimes they caught a glimpse of Martin's untidy head in the bracken, and knew that they must turn back; at other times they did not see him, but somehow felt his evil presence so strongly that they did not dare go on. There was so much to lose if the secret was discovered, and so much to achieve if the bird-machine could be built, because neither of them dreamt that the new one would fail. And so the days passed and they went on collecting shells, until their little garden at home was like the beach itself, and old widow Jenny began to wonder sometimes if her two charges were becoming a little queer. Their time was not entirely wasted, however, as Margaret used these dreary expeditions to collect feathers for the skin of the new bird, and now had a large sackful which she kept under her bed.

"Something must be done, and soon," announced Roger, suddenly breaking the moody silence on one of their interminable walks. Margaret did not answer for a moment, and they walked on, ignoring the wonderful sight of the cloud-shadows racing over the blue sea, smudging the beach, and then climbing swiftly up over the dunes to envelop them in pools of cool air. Then the

shadows would sweep on over the green land to merge into the blue of the farther slopes, and the bright sun came warm on their faces.

"We could lay a trap for him," Margarest said at last.

"What sort of a trap? He's a cunning devil, you know."

"Yes, but he's a greedy one too. Suppose we get a letter sent to him from Barnstaple saying that if he goes there he will hear something to his benefit."

"That's no use, we'd have to go there ourselves to arrange it, and how could we manage nine miles each way in a day?"

And they went home very depressed, trying unsuccessfully to think of some scheme.

However, a week later, to their astonishment they saw Martin and his father dressed in their best clothes climbing aboard the carrier's cart, and setting off on the very journey that they had found impossible to arrange. They hid from sight so that Martin would not be reminded of their existence, and, having given him time to get a good two miles away, set off unobtrusively to visit the manor, carrying the sack of feathers.

The house did not seem so strange the second time, and Lee, the servant, did not appear as frightening. He even gave them a slight smile, and brought pies without being asked.

As soon as Adam saw them he jumped up, holding out his hands in welcome. "I really began to think you wouldn't come again," he said, smiling at them each in turn, while Margaret explained the difficulties that they had had.

"Why is he so persistent?" Adam asked, but without waiting for an answer, said, "Whatever happens, he

must not find out what we are making here. If it gets all round the village, we will never be left in peace; they won't understand, anyway, what we are trying to do, and will be convinced that I am dealing with some magic. They are a bit frightened of me, anyway, since that youth told them about my experiments with dead birds." He grimaced at them. "You know what they call me?"

Margaret laughed. "Yes – Mr Strange One, but – but even if they think you are up to some magic, what can they do?"

"Unfortunately, a lot. Country people sometimes get peculiar ideas. Most of them believe in ghosts and fairies, or evil spirits and spells, and, as well as that, everyone is frightened that the Spanish enemy will come. If they think that I'm making magic, they may even believe that I'm in league with the enemy. They hate magic, especially if they think it will bring them harm. In London, where there are new things happening, it is possible to experiment and people do not mind too much, but here in the country anything which people do not understand they think is evil, and something to be destroyed."

"But would they try to hurt *you*?"

"If they felt that I was dealing in the devil's works they would try to burn me, to exorcise the evil – and you too, if they caught you."

Margaret shuddered. "Well, we won't tell anyone, you can be sure of that," she whispered.

All this time Roger had been staring at the floor. Over the slate slabs were chalk marks, some smudged, and some firm and clear. They spread almost from one end of the room to the other, and they outlined a new bird.

It was different from the old one, the wings looking as though they would be quite straight, and not arched like a gull's. The body was longer, and it had a tail like a sparrowhawk's.

Adam watched him as he studied the outline. "What do you think of it?" he asked quietly, and a little anxiously. Margaret thought he seemed like a child with a new and special plaything that he did not quite understand.

"It's bigger than the first one, isn't it?" said Roger.

"Yes, much bigger. I have tried to calculate the weights of birds against the amount of wing they have, and I concluded that my last bird was too small. It was as if a seagull had tried to fly with only half its wings."

"But how will you be able to carry such big wings on your shoulders?"

Adam laughed. "I couldn't, of course. This is something else new. Since I saw you last I have been studying Signor da Vinci's writings – I am going to lie on the back of this bird, and it is going to carry me, and it will have legs of its own."

Margaret laughed suddenly. "But how will you make such legs run? It will look very funny."

"They won't run," answered Adam, so seriously that he did not notice her frivolity. "They will just slide. We will find or make a smooth place on the hill-top, and the bird's legs will have sled runners on the ends, and they will slide down the hill, and over the edge of the cliff."

Margaret's eyes opened in horror. "But what will happen if the bird-machine doesn't fly?" She did not get an answer to this problematical question, because Roger interrupted with further, to Adam, more realistic ones. "But why are you going to lie on the bird's back?

How will you steer it, and make it obey your wishes?"

Adam hoisted himself on to the edge of the table, and leaned back against a stack of wood.

"You remember I told you how dead birds could not fly, because they had nothing alive in them to control them, and you saw how my bird just turned over and over when it went by itself. Well, I reckoned that I must be in the bird so that it would have my brain and my muscles to make it do what I want."

"But – " Roger was puzzled – "Even when you are riding on it I still don't see *how* you are going to make the bird dive or turn. After your first bird blew over, you said that you wouldn't have had the strength to control it, anyway."

"I know, and that's still true, *if* I had to move the whole bird against the air, but I won't."

Roger's puzzled frown deepened as Adam went on.

"I've spent a lot of time lately really looking at the gulls, and I've noticed that they don't try to move or push the whole of themselves against the air, they just bend a small part of their wings or tail. This seems to act against the wind which is rushing past them, rather like the rudder of a boat acts against the rush of water. When the rudder is deflected sideways, it makes the boat turn. The helmsman has the strength to move the rudder, and the water pushing at this forces the whole boat round. So on my new bird I will build small movable surfaces which will act in this way. It will have a rudder just like a boat."

At this pronouncement, Lee gave a great sigh, and wandered out. For the first time he had an inkling of what his master was trying to do. Roger brightened up too.

"Yes," he said. "That's right, the water pushes against the rudder, trying to push it straight again, but it can't, because the helmsman is holding the rudder over, and so the only thing left that can move is the boat itself, and so it turns." Pleased with this observation, he gave his sister a superior smile, but she only looked bored. Then another thought struck him.

"Yes, but even if you can turn left or right in the air, how is the bird going to be made to swoop and climb and come down to earth again? You can't do that with a rudder."

This time Adam did not look worried. "I've thought of that too," he smiled. "If a rudder will work in one direction, it should work in another, so I'm just going to have another rudder lying on its side. Then instead of the bird going left and right when I move this one, it will go up and down."

"But how are you going to move both rudders? Will you have two tillers?" asked Roger.

"I haven't worked it out properly yet," answered Adam, "but I am going to lie on the bird's back, so I shall have my hands free, and then I shall have cords from the rudders to two whipstaffs. With one hand I shall move the whipstaff tied to the ordinary rudder, and with the other hand I shall move the rudder which is lying on its side – let's call it a riser – for soaring and swooping."

While all this was going on Margaret had become increasingly restive. It was not that she was uninterested, but just that she had a practical turn of mind.

"But when are we going to build the bird, instead of just talking about it?" she asked.

Adam stared at her vaguely, and then jumped down

from the table. "The wench is right again, we're just wasting precious time, and we could be starting on the wings now. I've got the wood, and while we are working it into shape, Margaret can be thinking how to make the covering for them."

"I don't have to think," said Margaret, proudly holding up her sack. "This is full of feathers I've collected."

"But you can't just put feathers on nothing, silly. Even birds have a skin to hold their feathers," said Roger.

Margaret's face fell, but Adam was kind, and took the sack and looked inside it. "Have you collected all these for me?" he asked.

"For the bird," she said, laughing, as she suddenly thought of him covered in the feathers.

Adam picked up the plate containing the last pie, and bowed low to her.

"For my kind lady," he smiled.

"Oh, come on," complained Roger.

But Margaret took no notice of him, and curtsied happily. "I will collect some more for my lord," she laughed.

"Thank you, my lady," he said, and then forgot about Margaret, and stood concentrating on the drawings on the floor.

"The front edge of the wings will be solid wood," he said. "Curved in plan at the tip like a gull's wing, but hollowed and gouged out at the back for lightness. The curved ends will have to be steamed to shape. Then there will have to be a spar of wood the length of each wing tied near to the curving end to hold it, and to stiffen the wing. The back edge of the wing will be cord pulled very tight, and this will hold the steamed ends from going straight again. Flattened hoops of willow will give the wing-surface its shape, then they will have to be covered with some light linen and the feathers will go on top of that."

"And underneath the wing as well?"

"Oh yes," said Adam.

"Oh dear," said Margaret.

Roger was staring at the chalk drawing. "Each wing must be over twelve feet long," he said. "Have you got wood long enough?"

"No," answered Adam, "we're going to have to join it, and that's a job we'll do this afternoon."

Adam jumped up and cleared the bench with a great sweep of his arm, then he lit a little oil-lamp under the blackened gluepot.

"Come and watch it, Margaret," he called. "I expect you're a good cook, so don't let it boil over or burn at the bottom. You, Roger, bring me those lengths of birch. They're young trees from the edge of the moor,

which I had quartered in the sawpit at Barnstaple. They thought I was going to build a boat, of course, and were most curious when I had them cut like this, but I didn't tell them anything. Now we'll have to shape the bark side to make a smooth curve for the front of the wing, and then lengthen them with well-fitting halving joints."

Roger staggered across the room with the birch timbers sticking out of his arms in all directions, dropped one between his legs, and promptly fell flat in the middle of the diagram on the floor. Chalk dust bounced up, and settled back making the outline of the bird hazy. Margaret sat back and laughed, and Adam said, "You've got to wait until we're flying before you're entitled to crash like that."

Roger got up, rubbed his shins, glared at his sister, and stood the timbers up against the bench so that they could choose the truest ones. Adam inspected them very carefully, firstly for straightness, and then for knots and flaws in the wood. Finally he took four, two for each wing, laid them along the chalk line on the floor, the ends overlapping by about fifteen inches, and stood back and studied them. Suddenly he shouted,

"Stop cooking the glue, Margaret. We'll have to steam-bend the tips first. Tell Lee to get a cauldron boiling. I'll cut the joints while we're waiting but we won't actually glue the pieces together yet, otherwise they'll be so long they'll be poking out of the windows when we try to bend the ends."

Margaret ran out to the dark kitchen, which still scared her, told Lee to light a fire and boil up some water, and then hurried back to hold the tools for Adam, while Roger steadied the timber.

It took two hours to get the ends of the wood cut so that they could be fitted snugly together, with no light visible through the joint. Then they took the two ends which were to become the curved wing-tips and which they had slimmed down with a small adze, and immersed them in the great cauldron of boiling water. Steam was filling the room, and they were all peering into the seething liquid as though it were a witches' brew.

"If that horrid Martin could see us now, he would really have something to tell people, but with any luck he's just getting wet in Barnstaple, because it's been raining for hours now," said Margaret, and the others grinned.

Every so often Adam would pull out one of the lengths of wood, and he and Lee would try to bend the

boiled end with their hands wrapped in cloths. Roger held the other end so that it could not slip, while Margaret watched the creaking, complaining wood with screwed-up eyes.

It took much longer than they expected to bend the ends round to form the bird-like curve of the wing-tip, but at last the shape was to their satisfaction, and the two pieces of wood were lying on top of each other on the floor with the bends kept in place by lashings aided by a carefully positioned oak chest and two large lumps of granite.

Then they realized that it was nearly dark, and if they did not go soon the carrier would have arrived back from Barnstaple, and Martin would find them missing, and would know at once what was going on, so hurriedly they left, leaving Lee lighting the candles for his master.

The rain had stopped now, with the sky clearing from the west. The stars were being gradually revealed, as the invisible clouds dissolved in the dark sky. They shivered after the steamy heat of the house, and ran over the hill, down into the valley which joined with the wider one carrying the Barnstaple road. Then they were out of breath, and slowed to a walk.

"We must hurry," cried Roger. But Margaret only pulled at his jerkin. "We're too late, they are coming now – listen."

They crouched quickly behind a boulder just before the turn into the road valley. Sure enough, they could hear the plod of the carrier's horse, and the squeak and rumble of the cart's wheels. It passed within a few yards of them, and they could see Ben hunched up in his usual place with a sack over his shoulders. Martin and his father were there, both looking wet and angry. They

were arguing loudly with each other and occasionally shouting at the carrier to hurry up.

As soon as they were out of sight Roger and Margaret ran up the slope of the little hill, down the other side, splashed through the freezing water of the stream, to save going round by the bridge, ran across the scrubby wood with its leaning, windswept thorns, along the hedge on the village outskirts, in by the wicket gate, through the back door, taking no notice of Jenny's complaints and pleadings, and clattered up the uneven stairs to their room. Then, panting for breath, they peered out through the window, and watched the carrier's cart draw up, and Martin climb off. He did not wait for his father, but stalked off along the muddy road.

At this moment old Jenny came scolding upstairs with a candle, and Martin looked up at the house and glared at them with puzzlement and fury on his face. Then he went on and Roger and Margaret laughed so much they couldn't speak; and the old soul thought that they had taken leave of their senses.

"You naughty children – oh, mercy me. Where have you been? You're all wet. I thought you'd been stolen away, what will your poor dear father think when he next comes home from the seas, come downstairs and have your supper before I put my hand where it hurts most." She paused for breath and Margaret, who knew just how to deal with such a situation, simply put her arm round her, and smiled.

"Please don't worry, we're quite all right, and we love you very much." And the old woman patted her head, and her wrinkled face relaxed; and Margaret knew that she would have forgotten everything by the morning.

4

Martin was clearly very angry, and suspected that Roger and Margaret had in some way gained an advantage from his journey of the day before, particularly when Margaret was unable to keep a straight face when he glared at her from his usual place by the village pump. Twice during the morning they tried to go to the manor, but both times they found him on their track, and were forced to go along the beach to look for bait. The worms were no longer dug out with enthusiasm, but hated as smelly and useless, since the fishermen in the village now had more than enough.

At dinner-time they returned home angry and frustrated. Martin ambled back into the village soon afterwards, and as soon as he saw him Roger decided to have it out.

"What do you keep following us for? We're quite all

right without your ugly face spoiling the view," he said.

Martin smirked. "Because you go to the manor and you don't want anyone to know. You go to make spells with the evil man. I know. Martin has buzzards' eyes."

Roger was silent for a moment. He wasn't sure if Martin really knew that they went to the manor. He could swear that no one had seen them actually entering or coming out. He decided to see if he was bluffing.

"Well, I've seen you in the old witch's cottage up over Windcutter Hill," he countered, taking as big a chance as he dared.

Martin was taken aback at this, but Roger continued, looking as fierce as he could: "And you weren't in the village that awful night when there was a black Mass in the temple ruins over towards the moor, and old Pugsley didn't stop shivering for three days."

"That's all lies," he shouted. "I never went there, and anyway, I know there's funny things going on at the manor that shouldn't be allowed." His voice rose to a shriek, and Margaret pulled Roger away.

"Leave him," she urged. "He'll only have everyone out here to listen." But it was already too late. Faces were peering out of doors and windows, and several villagers with nothing better to do were coming to hear what was going on. Martin was pleased with the attention.

"They go to the Strange One's house, and help him with his black magic," he shouted, enjoying the growing audience. "They make spells, so that we'll probably all die."

The villagers looked at Roger and Margaret with puzzlement. They had known them since they were babies, and were fond of them and the old widow Jenny.

Their sea-captain father, too, was someone they understood, and a hero in their eyes because of his voyages with Drake.

"You'm don't want to get mixed up with 'im, me dears," said old Maggie, who lived in the little hovel under the hill. "That Strange One might turn you into something dreadful, and your dear father would never see you no more."

Then old Papa Mably put his hand on Roger's shoulder. "You must keep away from that one," he said. "He's wicked. Why doesn't he ever come into the village except after dark?"

Roger nearly said, "Because he can't work on the bird after it's dark," and Margaret nearly said, "But he's kind and nice and not wicked, or a wizard." But both of them kept their mouths shut.

Martin, however, went on roaring. "Yesterday they went there as soon as I journeyed off to Barnstaple. Why? So they could go and make magic. You don't believe me, but they're wicked ones, these two, you'll see."

But the villagers only laughed at him, and patted the boy and girl in a friendly way. "If you were in Barnstaple, how do you know they were at the manor?" said one. "We're tired of your prattling," said another, and laughed. "We'll wait till we see real evidence of these two making magic before we worry," said the blacksmith. "I'd rather have them around than the Spanish ships o' war any day." They all laughed, but as they went away old Maggie said quietly to them, "It would be better if you did keep away from him; folks is funny when it comes to magic."

When Martin saw that he had lost, he slouched off in a huff, shouting, "I'll prove it to you, just you wait." His

face was glowering and angry, and he was determined on revenge for being thought a fool instead of a hero.

Old Jenny had come out to see what the noisy gathering was about, and without understanding anything of what had happened, took Roger and Margaret back to their dinner.

Several days again passed before they were able, once more, to escape to the manor, and then it was only because Martin had eaten too much egg-and-rabbit pie and lay groaning in his bed.

Roger and Margaret went to the house by a very roundabout way, watching for anyone who might be spying on them in Martin's place.

Lee opened the door in answer to their quiet tap, and led them quickly to the familiar work-room. It was most exciting to see how much had been done to the bird-machine. The skeleton of its framework was almost complete on the floor. The lengths of wood had been joined, and lay covering the original chalk marks, with the curved tips held in shape by long lengths of silken cord pulled taut. The flattened hoops of willow, or ribs, as Adam called them, were mostly bound into place with fine linen thread, and another strip of wood, thinner than the front edge of the wing, lay between it and the silken cord to stiffen up the structure. Some of the bracing ropes with which the bird would finally be rigged would be attached to this spar. The ribs were bound to it as well, so that the wing would be less flexible. The two wings had been lashed firmly to a long, ladder-like frame, which extended a little forward of them, as well as a long way back to where the tail would be. It was made of slender poles, with sail canvas stretched between them like a hammock.

"That's where I will lie," said Adam, and carefully stretched himself face down on the canvas, his toes reaching beyond the end towards the floor. He put his hands on to two rods, in place but yet to be fitted finally at the forward end of the long poles. "These will be my controlling levers," he said. "You see, I am going to build the tail surface I told you about – the riser – and fix it to the stern ends of this pole frame with hinges, and I will be able to move it up and down, like a bird moves its tail in the air, with the lever which will be in my left hand. With it I will be able to swoop up and down." He got up off the canvas, adding, "And the ordinary rudder will be controlled by the lever in my right hand."

Roger quickly took Adam's position on the canvas as

soon as he got up, and gently moved the controlling levers to see their effect.

"Oh Adam," he gasped, full of admiration, "it's wonderful. You'll be able to turn and plunge like the gulls, and – " A puzzled look came over his face. "But I still don't see what is going to keep you up in the air. We know now that birds can't fly unless they are alive, because they can't balance themselves, and fall tumbling over and over. But even when live birds are flying and are able to balance themselves, what enables them to stay high in the air? Signor da Vinci says that birds can fly without flapping, and man can too, but I don't understand why. Anything else that is heavy which is in the air comes straight down to earth. Why doesn't a bird?"

Adam leaned back, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I'm still not quite sure myself, Roger," he said slowly. "I've been reading through all Leonardo da Vinci's experiments till I know them backwards. He says that in order to fly a bird must move fast enough for the air to flow like a stream over its wings, and when it does, the wings will in some way support its weight. But if the bird stops moving forward, it can't fly any more, and will fall from the sky."

"That's all very well," Margaret chipped in, "but what makes a bird move forward in the first place?"

"We know it can do this by two means. It either uses its muscles to flap its wings so that they beat a way through the air, or – "

"But – " Margaret looked confused – "what is the difference between air and wind?" Adam stared at her, frowning.

"Air is a sort of gas, very thin and invisible," he said slowly. "But if air moves fast, it becomes wind. Then it is powerful and hard, and full of strength; so if the air is moving fast enough past a bird's wing, it can support it. And, therefore, if the bird can somehow move forward fast, it will draw this power out of the air, and be able to fly."

"But what happens when the wind drops?" asked Margaret.

Adam put his hand to his head. "Please don't make it all more difficult than it already is," he pleaded. "But as I was saying: either the bird can flap to stay up in the air, or it can keep its wings stiff and still and dive downwards to keep enough speed to fly; but by diving it will, of course, soon reach the ground."

"The gulls don't," grumbled Margaret, who was

nowhere near being convinced. "They fly above the cliffs for hours without flapping their wings, and they don't come down until they want to. They just stay up there screeching at you, and making you feel like a fish or something."

"Oh, Margaret," cried Adam, "all you do is to make it seem impossible to find a right answer. What Signor da Vinci says seems sensible. After all, if you roll a ball down a hill it keeps speeding on until it reaches the bottom. Anyway," he sighed, "no one else seems to know anything at all, so we must try what he says. I don't know how the gulls fly for hours above the cliffs, perhaps they have some special power in them that we don't know about, or perhaps, as da Vinci suggests, there is sometimes some extra force in the sky which doesn't exist on the ground. I don't know," he sighed, "but I do know that until we find out what this unknown power is, my bird will just have to fly downhill from the cliff-top to the beach while I learn to control it. After that, perhaps I might discover how to soar with the eagles and gulls upwards to the sun."

Adam stood staring out of the window at the distant cliff, and seemed to forget their presence. The mist of the early morning had disappeared and the sky was clear blue with a wind from the sea. It was too far to see the gulls which called raucously to each other, wheeling and diving in the sunshine.

Roger looked at the plan chalked on the floor, with the lengths of wood, the willow wands and the canvas laid or lashed carefully in place. It looked ungainly and quite unlike the beautiful, graceful sea-birds. Could this heap of timber ever fly? Why should the man Leonardo da Vinci be right? Hundreds of people,

clever people too, had wanted to fly, including monks, and they had failed, or had decided that it was not possible. He tried to visualize the finished bird in his mind, but it was difficult to dress the drab wooden skeleton up in feathers. He picked up Adam's working sketch of the bird. It didn't really look like a bird at all, although it somehow had a practical air about it. After all, a wooden ship doesn't look much like a porpoise, but it floats and moves through the water all right. The new bird somehow looked as though it might work better than the old one, even though it was actually less like a real bird. It was odd, this. He couldn't explain why it looked sort of all right, but the sketch in his hand made him feel hopeful.

For the next few hours they all went on with the work of building the fan-shaped tail of willow wands and strong waxed thread, shaping the wood to fit closely, and then soaking the joint in glue and putting on a whipping that any mariner would feel proud of. Lee brought in ale, honey syrup and a large cake, and Margaret sat on a heap of reeds sorting big feathers from small ones, singing softly to herself. They were working quietly, oblivious of time, snatching mouthfuls of cake as they could, when suddenly there was a crashing knock-knock on the door, and voices shouting to be let in.

They all jumped to their feet, and a cloud of feathers rose from Margaret's lap. Adam whispered immediately, "It'll be the villagers, led on by your friend Martin."

"He's not our friend," Roger scowled.

"They'll have been drinking at the Barnstaple fair and ripe for any sort of mischief." Adam pushed Margaret before him. "Come quickly, you must hide

in this cupboard." He pressed a panel in the wall, pushing it inwards with a rusty creak. Beyond was a black hole smelling of damp. They darted in, but Margaret, the practical one, ran out again to snatch up their mugs and platters to hide them too. The shouting was getting louder now, and Lee's gruff voice and intimidating manner was not enough to prevent a stampede through the doorway. From behind the panel they could hear Adam hurriedly moving about the room. The voices grew louder as the drunken villagers slowly forced Lee backwards down the long corridor, and then they all burst into the room.

It was difficult to distinguish words among the shouting. Martin's voice could be heard, and that of the blacksmith demanding that Roger and Margaret be given up.

"We know 'ee's stolen 'em," they heard him shout. "And we'm come to 'ave 'em back."

They could not hear Adam's answer and this worried them, but gradually the hubbub died down. Suddenly there was silence, which was quite mystifying. Then they heard the blacksmith's voice again.

"We're sorry, zur," he said. "But Martin here said you were a magician making spells with those children, and – well, with their father being at sea, and no mother, well, zur, we didn't want no 'arm to come to them, like."

Then they heard Adam speak in slow measured tones: "I can, of course, quite understand your feelings, but I must not be disturbed in my work. If you wish to see me at any time, you may call on me in the proper fashion. Go now; Lee will see you out. Oh, and as for the children, I suppose you mean the two who wander

around all day spying on me through the trees. Well, I haven't seen them since this morning when they went off in the direction of the cliffs, having stared through the holes in my great gate."

"Thank 'ee, zur. We won't disturb 'ee further."

Then there was a lot of shuffling and heavy breathing as the villagers left. Martin was still muttering, but no one was answering him. They heard the oaken door slam, and then there was silence.

Roger and Margaret were bursting with curiosity and could barely contain themselves when they heard Adam start laughing. Being shut in the black cupboard was more and more exasperating as he went on as though he would never stop. And he was still laughing when the panel creaked open and the light dazzled their eyes.

The two clambered out, staring about them in astonishment, for the room looked quite different, and very much smaller. The work-bench, the heaps of feathers and the drawing on the floor were invisible. An enormous tapestry divided the room in half, hiding the piles of timber and feathers and the bench with all its tools, and everything else had been covered with carpets and brocades. Adam's desk was no longer littered with sketches of the bird, but covered with a pile of huge and learned-looking books and pens. But Adam himself made them gasp. He was robed in a splendid cloak of scarlet velvet edged with white fur, and, with a quill pen in his hand, looked like the most learned dignitary in the world, except that he was laughing his head off. They could not believe their eyes. Adam had only had a minute or so to do all this. It was not possible. He could see how startled they were at the change and this made him laugh even more. At last he stopped to explain.

"My uncle hung all these tapestries," he said, "and when I came here I just left them on the walls, but rolled up. The big one hanging across the middle of the room he used to keep off the draughts in winter, and I just had to let it down to hide everything at this end of the room. Everything else was in this cupboard, it wasn't difficult to cover the bird on the floor, and pull this desk in front to hide the lumps. You have never seen this cloak before, but it lives in this closet, for I often wear it at night when it's cold and I feel I have finished my day's work. The villagers were very worried, because I must have seemed so different from what Martin has probably been telling them about me. But," he added, with a worried look coming on to his face, "we'll have to be even more careful from now on. They will obviously become suspicious again when they really start to think about what happened."

Margaret stared around the room. It smelt dusty and there were still one or two baby feathers floating about. Surely one of the unwelcome visitors would have noticed that the room had been recently disturbed, and he would talk, and then their suspicions would grow again.

Roger was impatient. "Well, they're out for the present, so let's get on." The tapestries were soon rolled up, the splendid cloak and books returned to their closet, and quickly the room once more became the familiar work-place. It still smelt rather of dust and camphor, and no longer had the settled and timeless feeling of the room they had come to know so well. Adam too felt a sense of urgency, and feverishly started making the leather hinges which would hold the rudder, and his new riser, to the rest of the tail structure. Margaret looked in despair at her feathers – no longer in two neat

little piles, they had been wafted around the end of the room and lay in drifts in the corners and under the table. With a resigned sigh she started to gather them up once again.

Without looking up, Adam asked Roger to open the precious Leonardo da Vinci writings, and read aloud all the notes that he had written in English in the margins, and particularly all that he had found out about how birds could control themselves. He was still not sure that, if the whole tail was flexible like a bird's, it would be possible to make it strong enough, nor was he in the least sure whether his idea of vertical and horizontal rudders would take the place of the sensitive quick-moving feathers of a bird's tail.

For the next hour they worked on, Roger reading, fascinated by the wonderful ideas of the Italian inventor. Mostly he read to himself, but sometimes, when Adam reminded him that it was *he* who wanted to know the answers, he read aloud.

Margaret collected her precious feathers, and eventually had them back in the two neat heaps of little fluffy ones and long quill pinions, except, of course, for the feathers in her hair, down her neck and tickling her nose. She was hot and utterly fed up with the wretched things.

Suddenly Roger called out, "Adam, listen. This is most important – I'll read what it says. We can make the bird quicker than we thought if this is really true. What a wonderful idea – " he paused – "but perhaps it won't work."

Adam straightened his back, wiped the back of his hand across his brow and smiled.

"Well, go on. What is this wonderful idea? Read it

out. Don't just go on keeping us in suspense."

Roger pushed his finger slowly up the side of the page until he came to a break in the closely-written notes. "This is it," he said. "Leonardo writes, 'You are to remember that your bird ought not to imitate anything but the bat, because the membranes form an armour, that is to say, strength to the wings'. This means that we can just cover the wings with a skin or parchment, and not bother sticking all those old feathers on."

"Does it really mean that feathers are not necessary?" cried Adam. "Those wretched bits of fluff have given me sleepless nights ever since it took me six months to stick them one by one on to my old bird. How wonderful." He peered at the writing over Roger's shoulder, and read it all over again to make sure that it was true, and the two of them were so engrossed that they didn't notice Margaret burst into tears, fling her precious piles of feathers into the air and rush from the suddenly hateful room. It was only when the writings of the wonderful inventor disappeared under a strange snowfall that they realized what had happened.

5

When Roger and Margaret eventually got home that night, old widow Jenny was nearly beside herself, thinking that something dreadful must have happened. They had waited until well after dark before daring to leave the manor and had then come a long and devious way back, dodging what they were convinced was Martin's shadowy form behind every bush. She had, of course, heard a lot of commotion when the group of villagers, having arrived back from Barnstaple after too much ale, were being excited into a witch-hunt by Martin. When they finally set off for the manor, shouting and angry, she had kept to the house with the door barred until they were out of sight.

Then she had slipped out to ask Mother Perrin what the fuss was about, and was so terrified when she heard that her precious charges were supposed to be at the house of the Strange One that she had rushed back to her kitchen, thrown her apron over her face, and wept and prayed alternately.

Now that they had come in, wet to the knees and cold, she was so relieved to find them safe that she burst out with anger, and sent them straight to bed with only some hot soup. She could not understand what was happening at all, poor old soul, and fervently hoped that

their father would return soon and take them in hand. He had been due back for some time, but she understood the ways of the sea, and realized that he could be delayed for months, if not years. She tried pathetically to find out something from Margaret, but all she could get out of her was an affectionate hug, and a plea not to worry, everything was all right, they had only been beach-combing, collecting shells, and walking on the cliffs to see if they could see their father's ship coming back. With that she had to be content, and soon her kind but feeble mind had wandered away to other thoughts.

The days passed and grew longer with the warming sunshine of early spring. The villagers watched the two of them with a sort of kindness tinged with suspicion; old Jenny watched them, and Martin followed them like a hungry wolf. It seemed quite impossible ever to get to see Adam and the new bird-machine. One day they decided that the only hope was to separate. They knew that Martin was down in the combe watching, so together they ran up on to the skyline, and along the ridge towards a small valley filled with bushes and scrub; here Margaret doubled back along the thorn hedge while Roger went on, visible, and laughing and talking as though his sister was still with him. Margaret ran along the hedge until she reached the manor, and then slipped through a little gate in the wall. She hurried up the path and into Lee's kitchen. He smiled as she burst in.

"The master will be glad to see you," he grinned. "He really has got something to show you now."

Margaret ran along the corridor and into the work-room without knocking. Adam was standing in thought,

silhouetted against the light which gleamed through the bottle-glass window, and scratching his ear with a chisel. In the middle of the room was the bird, which took up much more space than she expected and appeared to be finished. To Margaret it did not look a bit like a real bird, or even as good as the first one with its beautiful feathers, but Adam seemed lost in admiration for it. The machine was so big, surprisingly big. It had stiff wings, quite straight except for the bird-like curve at the tips, which stood about three feet from the floor. They were covered with yellowish linen painted with size to shrink it tight, like a skin, over the wooden bones beneath. "Like a bat," Leonardo da Vinci had said, and like a bat's were these skinny wings. Margaret thought sadly of her beautiful feathers, but only for a moment. Between the wings the couch of sail canvas was stretched, attached to the two long poles, from the end of which the tail spread wide like a fan. The wings, the body and the tail were held up off the ground by four legs which stuck down under the wing, with skids on the ends, rather like those on farm sleds. The legs had upward extensions which joined together above the wing, and from the topmost point of which the rigging and bracing cords ran out to each wing to hold it rigidly in position. All the wooden parts had been rubbed with oil and gleamed gently in the evening light.

"How do you work it, Adam?" asked Margaret, awed by the presence of this stiff ungainly thing.

Adam climbed on to the canvas hammock, and lay on his stomach with his head and arms sticking forward over the end.

"Look, my system for steering the bird is complete now." He took hold of the two wooden levers hinged at

the front end of the two long body poles. From each end of both of them ran strings, leading to short arms projecting from both sides of the moving tail surfaces.

"If I move these levers they, in turn, move the hinged surfaces at the tail. If I move the right lever, the rudder at the end of the tail moves left and right, and the whole bird is pulled round into a turn to left or right. Real birds can manage without a rudder, because they can twist their tail about exactly as they want. But with wood and fabric bound together I can't do this, and so I must have separate controls for turning, and for going upwards and downwards." He moved the lever in his other hand.

"If I want to dive down to keep enough speed not to fall from the sky, I push the lever in my left hand forwards, and the head of the bird is forced down. If I pull the lever back, the head of the bird will come up towards the sky."

Margaret found this all rather difficult to understand, but it was fascinating watching Adam lying there pretending to control his bird, and she could almost imagine this stiff creature riding up into the clouds. She had hardly heard what Adam was saying.

"Can you climb up towards the sun, then?" Margaret asked, wide-eyed.

"No, because my bird must always be flying downwards if its wings are to work, because it isn't a flapping bird."

"Well, what's the use of being able to point upwards towards the sky if you mustn't do it anyway?"

Adam laughed. "Oh Margaret, when will you stop asking the most difficult questions? You see, the bird might fly down more steeply than I wanted it to, and if I did not have a way of making the head of the bird

come up to make the dive less steep, I would plunge to earth."

"But what *would* happen if you made the head of the bird come up too much?"

"My bird would fly slower and slower, until it became like a dead bird and fell down to earth, like a brick thrown out of a window."

Margaret eyed him solemnly. "And then you would die?"

"Yes, I would die."

"But you won't, will you? I mean, you will be careful not to die?"

Adam smiled at her. "I don't want to do that, Margaret. Not with a pretty maid like you as my friend. Life's too much fun."

She watched him as he lay along the spine of his bird, moving the little levers which would, he hoped, let him manoeuvre the bird to his desires. He didn't talk again for a long time, but lay there thinking and dreaming, while Margaret leaned against the big table and unconsciously ate her way through a plate of little cheese cakes that Lee had thoughtfully left there. Suddenly Adam got to his feet.

"Where's your brother?" he asked.

"He couldn't come. It's terribly difficult to get here. We tried all afternoon, but Martin followed us, and Roger had to lead him away on a false trail, so that I could get here unseen."

Adam looked worried. "The bird is now ready to fly," he said. "All we want is a west wind and no one to interfere with us. The wind is easy, it will hold from off the sea for several days yet; but keeping those stupid villagers away will be much harder."

"How about Sunday morning at dawn?" Margaret suggested. "People get up late on Sunday, and Martin is later than most. Then quite a lot of them go to the church over at West Down."

"Can you both get away early?"

"Oh yes. We'll creep out while it is still dark – even Martin won't believe we'll come here at five o'clock in the morning."

Adam started pacing up and down, thoughtful but full of suppressed excitement, his slight figure tense with nervous energy.

"We'll start from the same place where we first met." He looked at Margaret and laughed as the memory of her horrified face came back to him through the cloud of feathers when his first bird crashed nearly on top of them.

"Lee and I will take the wings off the night before, so that we can get it out of the house, rig it in the garden and then carry the bird to the hill-top before first light. Then Lee will run on down to the beach where he must meet Roger, because we will have to hide the bird as soon as I land, and it will take three of us to carry it quickly into the shelter of the tamarisks among the dunes." He did not say out loud the thought in his head that, even if he crashed and lay injured, there must still be enough hands to hide anything that was left of the bird. Instead he smiled at Margaret and said, "Will you come up to the hill-top and help me fly off the crest into the air?" Margaret nodded a little fearfully, not saying anything.

"Don't worry. It won't be too difficult, I have an idea of how to start, and expect to be able to manage it myself, but after I've gone I would like you to stay on the

top, and if you see anyone coming you must warn us, and then try to keep their attention while we hide the bird. You could pretend to be picking flowers, or something."

Margaret was just going to say that picking flowers would be difficult on a windswept cliff, but got no further than opening her mouth, for Adam went on:

"I will plan to fly before the sun rises and as soon as it is possible to see the beach. If we are lucky, the bird can be hidden again before it is properly light; and when night comes Lee and I can carry it up again, ready for dawn the next day." Adam stopped pacing, and stood looking at Margaret.

"Go now," he said. "Tell Roger everything very carefully, and whatever you do, avoid being seen on the way home. Nothing must go wrong." He thumped his fist into his other hand.

"These fools will stop us if they can." His voice was loud and hard. "They think my invention is something dreadfully evil. They don't realize the wonder of being a bird, and sailing through the air. If they find my bird they will destroy it – tear it to pieces, and us as well, probably. We *must* be careful. Nothing must be allowed to go wrong now."

Margaret shivered suddenly. "Nothing will go wrong," she said quietly. "I'll tell Roger all you have said, and we'll be waiting for you while it's still dark." She looked once more at Adam, and at his bird, still, lifeless and incredible.

"I still can't believe you're really going to fly into the sky," she said.

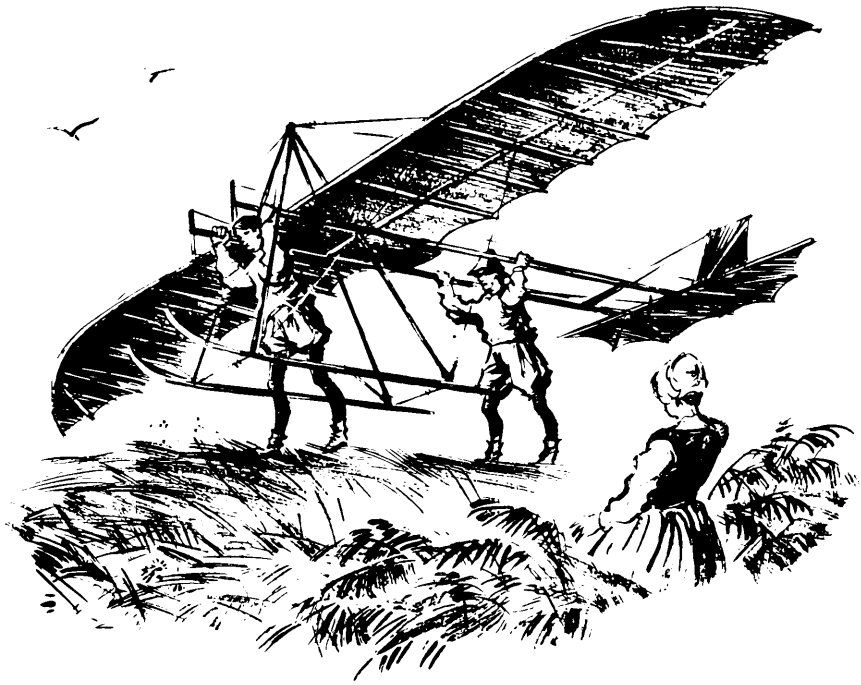
"Dear Margaret. I can't either, and anyway I haven't – yet. Perhaps the bird won't work; it might

break to pieces in the air, or dive into the earth, or – "

"Don't talk like that. You'll spoil everything if you get hurt."

Adam laughed and this time it was full of gaiety. Then he gave her a kiss on top of her head.

"Go on, wench," he said, "and don't be late. Sunday is going to be the most wonderful day of our lives."



6

Roger and Margaret took it in turns to stay awake all night so that they would not be late getting up on the Sunday morning. The weather, when they went to bed, was wild, with dark ragged clouds whipping over the cliff-top, and the salt spray put a tang into the air of the valley. During the dark hours the wind lessened and the air grew colder. Then the village clock over the blacksmith's forge struck three and startled Roger. It was his turn to be awake, and he realized that he had been dozing off. Quietly he climbed out of bed, tried to avoid the boards that he knew would creak, and crept across the draughty floor to where Margaret slept.

"Come on," he whispered. "Time to go. It's fine, but cold, so bring your cloak."

Roger dressed hurriedly and put on both his jerkins, with the dark one on top. Then he stuck a little dagger

of his father's into his belt. Together they crept down the stairs, listening for sounds indicating that old Jenny had been disturbed, whenever the boards made more squeaks or groans than usual. Margaret carefully opened the kitchen door, and after a good look round they ran silently across the little garden and out into a sunken lane. Then they hastened away from the village, until they came to the beginning of the dunes, where Roger slipped away down the slope towards the long empty beach and the subdued roar of the sea. As he merged into the velvet shadows Margaret started the long climb to the crest of the hill. Although it was still quite dark, she made great efforts not to get on to the skyline, and half walked and half ran, bent nearly double, through the bracken and in between the wizened thorn bushes. She reached the place where Adam should be, but there was no one there. Crouching down by a stunted bush, in a position to look down over the dunes to the wide sweep of the beach, she waited, breathing as quietly as she could. The line of surf far out glimmered and sighed in a great arc, but that was all she could see. It was very cold and Margaret began to feel frightened. She looked inland over the dark valley towards the eastern horizon, just paling into the new day. Once she thought she heard voices above the banging of her heart, but it was only the rasping of the old bracken fronds against each other. The horizon grew clearer and the far hills of Exmoor curved out of the night, but still no one came.

Margaret really began to worry now. In twenty minutes it would be light enough for prying eyes to see anything moving on the hill-top. Once the bird had flown and was safe on the beach – if it were safe – the

daylight would not matter so much, as the dunes were hidden from the village.

"Oh hurry, Adam, hurry," she found herself saying, digging her fingernails into the palms of her hands.

Suddenly she heard heavy breathing and the brush of feet through the dry bracken. Cautiously she looked out from behind the thorn and saw two shadowy figures carrying the ghostly shape of the bird-machine on their shoulders.

"Adam," she whispered. "Is that you?"

"Hullo, Margaret," the familiar voice gasped. "Who do you think? Is Roger down on the beach?"

"Yes, he went by the dunes. No one saw us."

With great care they lowered the bird to the ground. Lee stood mopping the sweat from his forehead and then clenched and unclenched his hands, which were stiff and cold from carrying the hard-edged timbers.

"I'll go down to the beach now. Will you manage all right, Master?"

"Yes, Lee. Run on now, we've none too much time. I plan to slide down this slope here, dive over the edge and then – if I can – fly straight out over the dunes. With luck I should reach the beach all right, and as the tide is far enough out it will not matter if I get further. As soon as I alight, come to me straight away and we will carry the bird quickly in among the tamarisks in the dunes."

"Right, Master. I have my knife if anyone comes to interfere." He touched his shaggy hair and loped away down the steep slope in his irregular clumsy gait.

Adam looked around him at the pale lemon light of the east, and then out over the still twilit beach. He turned his head from side to side so as to get on his face

the true direction of the light breeze, which was growing fresher with the new day. He looked so slim and light that Margaret could not help feeling that a really strong wind would blow him away just as it had his first precious bird. He was wearing a straight leather jerkin and dark homespun hose. Round his waist was his usual belt with the silver buckle. He wore no hat.

He and Lee had placed the ungainly machine at the very top of a steep slope of short smooth turf, facing out to sea. The skids of the bird had been polished and freshly oiled so that they would slip easily over the grass, still damp with the night's dew. Below the steep slope, which was some twenty-five paces long, the cliff fell away almost vertically for about one hundred feet, when it gently rounded out, gradually breaking up into the grassy dunes; these became sandier with less and less grass as they got closer to the beach itself, now lying flat

and grey in the pale light a quarter of a mile away. The sea was still, colourless and dark in the receding night.

Then Margaret noticed something she had not seen before. On the edge of the cliff and straight in front of the bird was poised a heavy block of granite, propped from falling by a billet of wood. To this was tied one end of an untidy heap of rope. Round the block of granite itself was securely lashed a length of much thicker rope.

Then Adam came up and put his hands on Margaret's shoulders, looking her full in the face.

"There is something very important for you to do," he said with a seriousness that made her feel suddenly fearful. "If you can do it properly I know I shall be able to fly. If you fail me, I shall probably be killed."

Margaret's eyes opened wide and she stared hard at the pale face, seeing the far-away look of the dreamer, and the urgent look of a man facing great danger.

"I'll do anything, you know that," she said. "But please don't get killed. I'll try not to fail you, really I will."

Adam smiled at her. "I know that," he said, and then his eyes seemed to look past again into space. "Oh Margaret, men have wanted to fly since the world began, and now I'm going to. Many have tried, and been rewarded only with failure, but I'm sure that my bird is right, and if I'm lucky I will be the first human being ever to sail with the birds and master the air." His fingers bit into her shoulders. "I don't know what I feel. It's not fright and yet it's fear. It's not ambition and yet the desire is so great."

The sky lightened with the greenish glow that precedes the sun, and gently the new wind, salty and fresh, ruffled his hair.

"Adam," Margaret's voice was urgent. "You must go. It will be quite light soon and you will be seen. Hurry, tell me what I must do."

He looked round, startled from his dream, and began to uncoil the thick rope, the end of which was tied to the granite block. There was an iron ring spliced to the end, and this he drew towards the front of his bird, and looped it over a little inverted hook on the bar between the skids, with the rope quite taut. Then he went to the granite rock, and picked up the cord which was tied to the billet of wood. Very carefully he unwound it so as not to disturb the billet, pulled it straight well out to the side of the bird, and handed the end to Margaret.

"Hold this very lightly," he said, "for you will see that by pulling it hard you will jerk away the wood which is propping up the rock. When I have got on to my bird and am ready, I want you to pull hard and suddenly on the cord. The rock will then topple over the edge, and, by falling, its weight will pull me forward. When the bird runs or flies over the edge the rope will fall off the little hook, and I shall be free in the air."

Margaret was growing desperately afraid, now that the moment had at last come. It had been fun building the bird, and eating pies, but this was different. In the cold air the bird had a sinister, almost evil character, and she felt for a moment that it was wrong even to try to fly. Perhaps the villagers were right, and she had been making magic – evil magic. In a few moments the contraption of sticks and thread and frail linen would plummet earthwards, taking Adam with it. What if it didn't fly, or was not strong enough, and tumbled to the ground like Adam's dead birds, crashing in a splintering flurry on the dunes far below? Adam would die, and it

would be her fault. By pulling the cord she would kill her friend. It dropped from her hand, and she felt herself shivering.

Adam was climbing on to the bird's back now. As in a dream Margaret saw him wriggle himself through the framework into a comfortable position on the canvas and do up the leather strap across his back, which would stop him falling off. Carefully he moved the controlling levers, turning to watch if the tail surfaces also moved as they should if he was to have any hope of manoeuvring his bird in the wild swoop down to the beach. For a moment he stared out over the cold sea, assessing the strength of the wind, thinking out his plan – perhaps the last thought he would ever have. At this instant two gulls swept low overhead, screeching in derision, and plunged away towards the dunes, superb in their effortless power. Margaret felt more miserable than ever. How could this puny thing of wood wheel and fly like that? It looked almost laughable, like a toy.

"Are you ready Margaret?" Adam's voice was quiet but clear.

"Yes." She picked up the cord at her feet. "Oh, and Adam, God speed, and please be careful." Her last words trailed off as she felt her eyes smart and the tears well up.

Adam smiled. "I'll be all right – you see. Now, are you ready? When I say pull, haul at that cord with all your strength. *Pull!*"

Margaret felt her arms take the strain, although her mind was aware only of Adam, and the terrible danger he was in. She hadn't his faith in the bird, or the outlook of the experimenter. She only knew that he was her friend.

As the wood billet flicked out from under the granite and recoiled towards her, she saw the rock vanish and the bird jerk forward and then slither, it seemed quite slowly, down the slope. In a sickening silence it lurched helplessly and disappeared over the cliff. Appalled at the suddenness of events, Margaret was too dazed to move for a second, then she rushed to the edge still

gripping the end of the cord in her hand. At first she couldn't see the bird, only half hearing in her mind the sound of a terrible crash. Then, suddenly, there it was. Far below her, just faintly visible, it appeared to creep with dreadful slowness over the dunes. She realized that it must still be flying, although every second it looked as though it would touch the sandhills.

Now it was no longer facing out to sea, but curving away in a sweep to the left. Margaret could just see Adam's arms struggling with the controls as the bird swung back on to its original course, but not for long: soon it fell away again to the left and passed over the last dunes before the beach. Then, quite suddenly, it just stopped. For an instant she could not understand what had happened. Then she realized that it must have landed in the soft sand, and that Adam was alive and climbing off. He was safe, the bird-machine had worked. Suddenly, in a moment of incredible excitement, the truth came to her that Adam had really flown, and she had seen the unbelievable miracle. Now she could see the dwarf figures of Roger and Lee running along the beach, and without a thought of secrecy she started racing down the steep slope, singing with joy.

Adam looked pale when she arrived, breathless, but he was tremendously excited. The three of them had already rushed the bird into the shelter of the dunes, and they were speechless with exertion. It was only when the previous bird had been hidden in a little gully fringed with tamarisk bushes that anyone was able to speak.

Roger was the first to regain his breath. "Great snakes!" he cried. "When you came hurtling down the cliff after the rock, I thought you would be killed. But then you stopped diving, and it flew without any noise. It was the most marvellous thing in the world."

"Well, almost, Roger, but – " Adam looked worried. "I couldn't make it go straight when I wanted to. It was terribly difficult. Somehow the bird wanted to turn all the time, and slide away to one side or the other. At one moment I thought I couldn't hold it. What have real birds got that this one hasn't?"

"A lot more practice," said Roger stoutly, refusing to believe that the bird wasn't perfect.

"Yes, that's true, but I feel that I want more rudder or something. Flying the bird feels like sailing a boat that won't answer the helm."

"Birds haven't got rudders at all."

"No, I know that, but they can flex their wings and body and tail much more than I can. Perhaps I must design some way of flexing my wings, too, or have moving parts on them, or something."

"But how would you work them?" demanded Roger. "You already have two controls for your hands."

Adam looked worried. Even his nimble brain could not work out a quick answer to this, or how, in fact, any movable parts on the wings could give him the result he wanted.

"I could work the rudder with my feet, and my right hand would be free to deal with the wing flexing." Then he frowned again. "We have so little time to think out how to make the wings help control the bird, and then we might even have to make new wings. No, I must think of some other answer." And he stood looking at his bird, a real bird which had carried him on its back like an eagle. Then Lee broke into his thoughts.

"Begging your pardon, Master. Everyone's been talking very loud, and you ought to get away from here. I have my victuals and my knife, and I can keep guard here till nightfall, when we can get the bird up top again. I don't think no one saw us, and so it shouldn't be more difficult than just carrying the bird five hundred feet up the cliff." Adam laughed as he looked at his servant's gloomy face.

"Cheer up, Lee. We'll manage all right – we'll have

about twelve hours of darkness to do it and get the rock back for another start tomorrow morning. I think our secret is still safe from prying eyes."

"But what about the wings and the rudder?" asked Roger.

"I'm going to try a bigger rudder first of all, and see if that will help me keep straight. I'll make it in my work-shop today and fix it on tonight. I'll use the leather hinges of the old one, and give it an extra one as well. Hurry now, you two, we must all go back by separate ways. At dawn tomorrow my bird will fly again."

7

All the rest of that day Roger and Margaret sat around the village, listening and looking for any sign that the bird had been seen or suspicion aroused, but the little place was just its dull, gossiping self. Even Martin seemed bored and cross that the two stayed at home and did not have to be followed. They had arrived just as breakfast was put on the table, and their story of an early morning walk to look for baby rabbits had been believed. By afternoon they were convinced that no one knew about the wonderful events of the cold dawn. They longed for the night to come again, and as soon as it was dark they went to bed and lay there thinking about Adam and the faithful Lee, who would now be puffing and blowing as they laboured up the cliffs under the unwieldy weight of the bird. The night was fine and the wind, now gentle, came from the same direction. Roger could tell this by the trembling sound of surf that it carried.

It was a lovely feeling to be warm under the blankets and think about all that was happening, except for one thing: the worry about how long the bird-machine could possibly remain undiscovered, and what would happen when the villagers found out, as indeed they must sooner or later. Roger rolled the blankets even

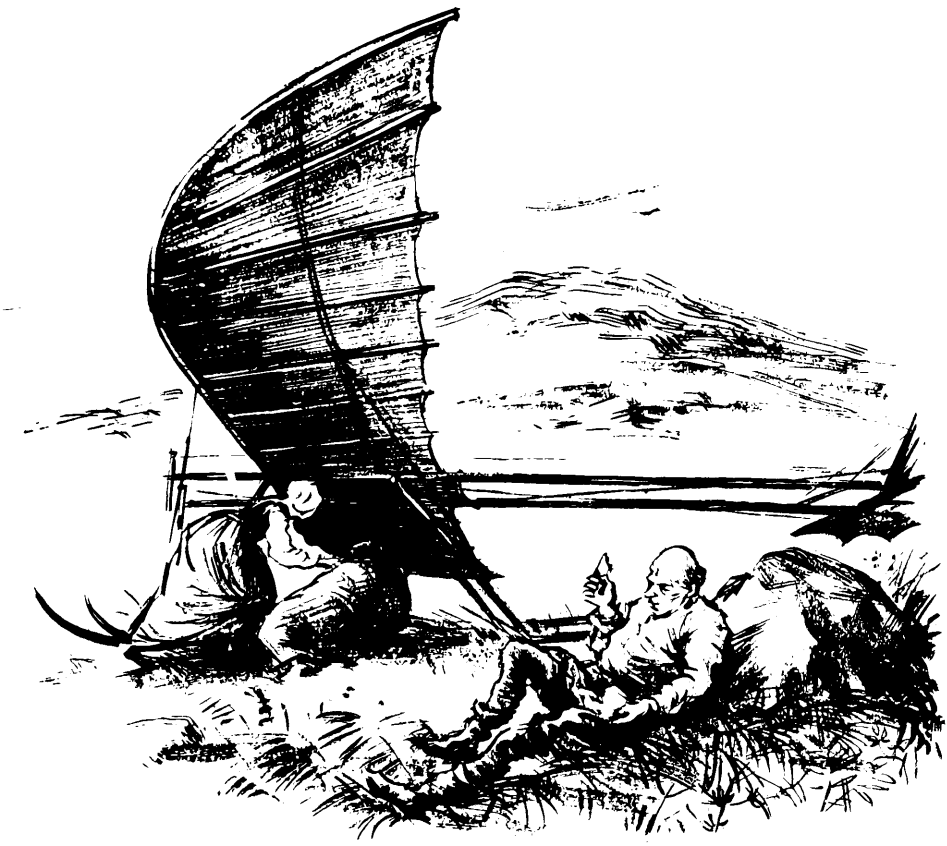
more closely around him as if to keep out the unwelcome idea.

Margaret was thinking the same thoughts. It was impossible to assume that they would ever be believed, even if the villagers saw the bird fly successfully. She was sure that they would take fright and destroy it, and possibly them too. She wished more than anything that their father would come home soon. He had seen wonderful and strange things all over the world. He would understand, and believe in the bird, and perhaps he might even be able to convince all the others, because they would expect that he would know about strange things.

He had been away nearly three years now, and should have returned several months before from his voyage to the frozen southern seas to try to discover a way to Cathay and the rich spices of the East. But there had been no word. The dear old soul who looked after them was useless as an understanding person in this sort of matter. She would simply throw her apron over her face, sway to and fro in the ashwood rocking-chair, and declare that it was wicked to meddle in such things.

Very soon they both fell asleep – not heavily, because they were so afraid of awakening late – and all too quickly it was time to rise and go. Once again they separated at the beginning of the dunes, Roger trudging through the soft sand, occasionally stopping to smother his tracks or leave a short false trail, and Margaret to climb to the cliff-top, hiding behind hummocks or bushes to watch for unwelcome followers. This time, Adam and Lee had arrived first. Lee was sitting in the bracken by the bird, eating a hunk of bread, and Adam lay asleep under its wing, wrapped in a cloak.

"Quiet, Miss Margaret," Lee whispered, as he saw her approach in the half-light. "We ain't been to bed all night. First the master goes home and makes his big rudder; and then he comes back to the hidey-hole to fix it, taking hours binding it on so carefully with thread, and then rigging new lines to the whipstaffs, and soaking the fabric in size, and covering it so tight. It took till



after midnight, and for hours I held shaded candles. It was a wonder the light weren't seen. Then if this weren't enough we had to traipse up here with the thing, and then we fetches another perishin' rock and sets everything up. Then, Miss, you wouldn't believe it, he just rolls himself in his cloak and sleeps like a baby. I were so

tired I couldn't have slept if I tried, which was just as well."

"But we must wake him now," Margaret said. "It'll be getting light soon and we mustn't be seen whatever happens." She knelt down and shook Adam's shoulder gently.

"Adam, Adam," she whispered. "Wake up, it's nearly dawn." Adam turned on to his back, his eyes still closed, and Margaret was startled by the pallor and tiredness of his face. His body tensed and he stretched his arms and yawned.

"It's nearly dawn," said Margaret again.

Slowly he opened his eyes and then as suddenly jumped to his feet and stood looking round him sleepily.

"How's the bird?" she asked anxiously. "Will the big new rudder work all right?"

"I hope so," said Adam, and stroked the fresh upright surface which he had bound carefully to the stern post on the fan-tail. The new part, like the rest, was shaped with bent willow wands and covered with fine linen. It was fixed to the tail with silken cord whipping, and the two slender ropes led from the cross-piece fixed to the frame of the rudder forward to the controlling whipstaff at Adam's right hand, so that if he moved his hand to the left the rudder would be deflected to the left, and the bird would turn away to the left. If ever the bird started to yaw on its own, Adam would be able to keep it straight and prevent it slewing away sideways uncontrollably, which had been impossible with the old small rudder.

"Come on, Lee. Let's get the bird to the starting-place," Adam cried, putting his shoulder under the spar end between the left wing and the body. Lee

scrambled to his feet, stuffing the remains of the food into his pocket, and got his shoulder under the other wing. Gently they carried the bird out of a little hollow, turned it round and set it down facing out over the sea. Lee then touched his forehead and without a word went scrambling off down to the beach. This time Margaret straightened out the launching rope herself, while Adam hooked the thick rope from the rock to the bird's nose. Once again he climbed on to its back, and once again Margaret felt terribly frightened and excited at the same time. Adam carefully made his preparations and then turned to her, his hands gripping the little levers, which seemed pathetically flimsy for controlling the bird in the great winds which filled the air.

"I'm ready, wench," he said, and smiled at her. She smiled back at the slim figure lying on the stiff bird, grey in the early light.

"God speed," she said once more, and, with all her strength, tugged frantically at the cord. Again the bird seemed to hesitate, and then slithered uncertainly forward and vanished, diving, over the edge.

To Adam this plunge was terrifying. His stomach seemed to leave his body and his shoulders came hard up against the strap across them. His feet, flying upwards, caught against the cords to the controls, and jerked them frighteningly. Downwards he fell, until the dunes seemed appallingly close. The air, like a roaring wind, tore at his face and clothes. Pulling on his hand-levers as hard as he dared, Adam fought to prevent the bird-machine hurling itself into shattered fragments amid clouds of sand. Slowly, desperately slowly it seemed, the bird answered to his efforts, and he was able to pull it out of the sickening dive, and float over the dunes with

height to spare. He found that it was not too difficult to keep the bird diving steadily by gently altering the angle of the riser with his left hand whenever the air seemed to want to upset it, and this time he could, as well, keep much straighter with his larger rudder when the bird tried to slide away sideways. At this moment he felt that he would be able to fly on for ever, when suddenly, as on the first flight, the ground seemed to rush without warning towards him, and he had to pull hard on his tail-control to prevent himself from diving straight into it. Again he arrived safely, his skids grooving two furrows in the soft forgiving sand, and climbed out to find that his hands were wet with sweat, and his body weak and trembling from concentration.

Lee and Roger ran up to him and without waiting even to congratulate him or marvel at the wonder of his flying, grasped the bird and ran it backwards into the dunes, where they stood for a moment panting in the sighing cover of the tamarisks.

In the meantime Margaret had been very, very frightened. After the bird had shot, lurching, over the brink, she had rushed forward to watch it, standing on the very edge of the scented turf. She had seen it recover itself from the first awful plunge, swoop out over the dunes, and was waiting for its lanky shadow, made by the dawn sun, to race up towards it and, by merging with the bird, tell her that it had once again reached the beach safely. Suddenly she was startled by a rustle in the bracken behind her. She looked round, afraid, and there was Martin, an ugly leer on his red and spotty face.

"Ha," he cried triumphantly, "now I've caught you at it, and you've no handsome men to help you now. I know what you've been up to, making magic birds and

filling them with the power of the gulls. I'll bet it was you killed those old blackbacks to get their brains and their eyes for your witchcraft. Martin knows all, and Martin is going to see that you're punished this time." He leapt forward to grab her arms. "Come on now, I'm taking you back to the village."

"You're not, you're not," shrieked Margaret, as Martin came lumbering towards her, his great rough hands outstretched. She twisted and turned as Martin seized her shoulders.

"You've made a fool of Martin long enough, and this time it's you who's going to be shown up as the fool – or the devil."

Margaret did not dare to call for help and even if she had been heard, which was unlikely, she did not want the eyrie of the bird-machine to be known by everyone.

Martin's fingers dug into her shoulders and little by little, in spite of all her struggles, he was pulling her back up the slope. She fought desperately, kicking and hitting, but it made no difference. Then suddenly his arm came near her face, and she bit it, hard. With a roar of rage and pain Martin momentarily relaxed his cruel grip and she broke free. Then, bellowing like a bull, he came at her again, towering above her as he reached out with his good arm. Margaret backed away, cowering before his fury. Without warning she slipped on the smooth grass and fell, rolling over. For a second she saw Martin's furious face against the pale sky, and then only the sky. She realized, with no emotion at all, that she must have fallen over the edge of the cliffs and was plunging towards the dunes below – like the bird, in fact, except that she didn't feel that there was any hope of her flying. She was thinking that it was funny

how her thoughts were quite detached and dreamlike, when the raw sandstone of the little scarp flashed by. She shut her eyes tight in terror, and then, without warning, she was bouncing and rolling in a whirlwind of sand, finally coming to a sprawling stop in a sandy gully ridged by tufts of dry heather. She did not move, because although, surprisingly, she had not been hurt badly, she did not have any breath or energy to move with. This was just as well, as at this moment Martin had crawled to the edge and was lying on his stomach peering down to look for her. When Margaret began to realize what had happened, she found that she was lying on her back looking up at the sky, and thinking how pretty were the little gold clouds which had begun to sail overhead. Then she guessed that Martin would be looking for her, and that she would stay hidden best if she did not stir. So she lay quite still, moving only her eyes, searching the cliff-top for him. Yes, there was his head against the grassy skyline far above. It turned from side to side as Martin searched the whole area of the cliff and dunes for any sign of her. The tufts of heather at the edge of the little gully would help hide her body, and her hair was the same colour as the sand. In fact she was probably the colour of sand all over, as she could hardly breathe for the amount of it that was up her nose.

For a long time her enemy looked down over the empty dunes and the wide sweep of the bay, and then disappeared. Margaret gave him time to change his mind and return for a further quick look, and then sat up in the shelter of the heather clump and tried to get rid of some of the sand, and felt herself for cuts and bruises. She wanted to burst into tears, but dare not

give in, because at all costs she must warn the others. As soon as she felt it was safe she started making her way down the lower cliffs, and over the dunes to the tamarisks. She moved slowly, partly to use the shelter of the clumps of coarse grass and the hollows in the sand, and partly because her ankle hurt every time she put any weight on it.

It was quite easy not to leave a trail. Footprints in the soft sand could be scurried over with a tuft of dead thrift that she had found blowing along with the wind, and the frequent patches of turf or bracken helped to break the line of her path. After half an hour she hobbled into the shelter of the tamarisks, where Adam ran forward and caught her.

"What happened, girl, are you all right? We heard shouting, but dared not show ourselves in case we gave away this hiding-place."

Margaret sat wearily down on a tussock, holding her ankle with both hands. "It was Martin," she gasped. "He must have seen the bird fly. As soon as you had dived into the air he came rushing at me, and tried to capture me to take me back to the village." She put her head in her hands and sobbed, "I struggled to get away from him, and fell over the edge. I fell for ages, but he couldn't see where I landed in the soft sand."

"But did he see you come here, sister?" Roger shook her by the shoulder.

"No, I'm sure that he didn't. I crawled under the bracken bank along the gully, keeping out of sight of the hill-top. But Adam," Margaret sobbed again, "he'll spoil everything. He was terribly angry."

Adam patted her shoulder. "Don't cry," he said. "It wasn't your fault. You did your work of launching

me safely into the air. If you hadn't been there the bird couldn't have flown at all. But you're right about his causing trouble. He'll stir the village up now like a bee's nest." He looked around as though Martin was already creeping up on them through the tamarisks. "You're sure that he saw the bird fly?"

"He must have done. At least he must have seen it start, although after that it was probably hidden from sight by the edge of the cliffs. By the time I escaped from him, the bird could almost have been brought back in here."

"Hmm." Adam nibbled at his lip. "So he won't know where the bird has got to; it might have flown around Morte Point, or out to Lundy, or anywhere. He doesn't know how it works or anything."

"That's true," said Margaret, still rubbing her ankle. "But they're all bound to search for it – they'll probably start with your house, and then spread out over the beach. Martin was so wild with anger and excitement that they'll be bound to believe him a bit. If they search around here, they're sure to find us in time."

"We're pretty well hidden, Master," said Lee. "If you hadn't been a kid who'd played all his life in these sandhills, like Master Roger here, you'd never know this hollow existed. From outside it looks like a clump of wind-blown tamarisks not big enough to cover a horse." He surveyed the surface of the wing critically, and, breaking off some branches, laid them on top as extra cover.

"Maybe." Adam sounded doubtful. "But if they really start hunting in these dunes they're bound to find us."

"If only father were here," moaned Margaret. "They would listen to him, but at the moment there's

no one in the village who is sensible enough to stop them rushing out with pitch-forks. Martin will *make* them believe him this time. I know he will."

Adam was feverishly trying to think of some solution in the little time which seemed to be left to them.

"You know," he said, "if the villagers could actually see the bird fly, they might believe it was something real and ordinary, and not witchcraft or black magic. After all, people don't go rushing round attacking boats and sailors just because men can sail the seas."

"That's true," said Roger, "but everyone's sort of used to boats. They think of big birds as being cruel things that attack, like eagles, and because no man has ever flown before it can only be done by someone who is in league with the devil. I don't think we dare fly it when we can be seen."

"But what can we do?" Margaret sounded despairing. "If we stay here long enough, the bird must be found and we shall all be attacked. If we try to fly, someone will see us. Martin will never give up watching now."

"Our only hope is to try to get the bird back to my house, and hide it until things have quietened down and everyone gets bored with Martin's chatter."

"But when can we possibly do that?" asked Margaret.

"We'll have to take it back in the dark tonight – if we haven't been found first," interrupted Roger.

"That's a risk that we'll have to take," said Adam. "We can't leave the bird here."

"Quiet, there," hissed Lee, who was peering through the tamarisks. "There's some of them now. Look up on the hill-top."

Carefully Adam and Roger parted the feathery branches and saw several men from the village moving

about on the skyline, peering down over the dunes, or gazing out to sea. A few others had appeared near the far end of the long beach and were standing together as if uncertain what to do next. The sands were quite empty. Fortunately the tide was turning and would soon come in fast, with tossing white waves tumbling over each other, which would race in foaming streams over the tell-tale mark of the skids on the beach. Soon they would be obliterated for ever. Lee had scuffed over the soft dry sand near the tamarisks when they first rushed the bird to safety.

The men on the skyline could not have seen the tracks from the distance of the hill-top, for strong winds had rippled the beach along the tide-line with deep undulations, and the hundreds of little shadows and puddles would obscure their marks from any distance away.

The villagers were now together in a bunch and were obviously discussing what to do next. The four in the tamarisks crouched motionless, hardly daring to breathe, although against the noise of the sea they could probably have talked quite loudly without being heard. Then the group on the crest dispersed, disappearing in the direction of the village, with the exception of two. These men stood a little longer on the ridge, and then started to make their way, very slowly and carefully down the face in the direction of the hide.

"That's Martin in the dark garments," whispered Margaret. "But I can't tell from here who is with him."

"It's Jake, the blacksmith's son," said Roger. "He's no real friend of Martin, but he's all for any adventure."

"If they find us we'll just have to capture them," Adam said, uncoiling a length of rope in readiness, "and

keep them till they promise to keep their big mouths shut."

"Martin couldn't do that even if he wanted to," said Margaret.

"I've got my knife, Master," grinned Lee. "I could slit their throats."

Adam looked angry. "You certainly won't," he growled. "Put that thing away at once." Lee looked quite sorrowful as he slid his favourite knife back into his belt, but happier when he fumbled in his pocket and pulled out another length of cord.

Slowly Martin and Jake worked their way down the cliff and across the higher dunes. They seemed to be coming straight for the tamarisk clump, where the four stayed in absolute silence. The two hunters disappeared behind a large dune about two hundred paces away, and several seconds later appeared again standing on top of it, where they stopped and stared all round them, and then separated. Martin walked slowly along the high dunes parallel to the beach, stopping every few yards and examining the ground, while Jake made for the sands in such a way that would bring him very close. Slowly he came on and, in spite of his master's orders, Lee could not help getting his knife out once more. Margaret moved closer to Adam, and felt happier when his hand gently gripped her shoulder. Roger carefully bent down a tamarisk frond to cover a thin place in their screen, and they could do nothing now but wait.

Jake came nearer, his hands in his pockets; he was whistling quietly. He examined the ground as he went, but not with any great care. Adam felt that, luckily, he wasn't making any real effort to search for anything at all. Perhaps Martin had not really convinced him, and

Jake was using this jaunt as an excuse to get out of blowing his fierce old father's bellows for an hour or two. He was kicking through the soft sand now, so close to the tamarisks that it did not seem possible that they could remain undiscovered, strolling in the direction of the beach. He was looking around him in an idle sort of way, and punting pebbles out of his path. Then he stopped. He stared at the copse for a long time and Adam felt sure that he was looking straight at them and could see the bird-machine as well. He seemed to stand there for ages, obviously undecided as to whether to bother investigating the windswept bushes or not. Suddenly he picked up a stone, and flung it with all his strength at the tamarisks. It glanced off a branch and hit Margaret hard on the cheek. The sharp pain made her cry out, but quick as light Adam stifled the sound with his hand over her mouth. Jake stood staring for a few moments longer and then ambled on his way, kicking some dry seaweed in front of him.

The four relaxed their tense muscles and gulped in some big breaths. Adam took his hand from Margaret's mouth. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I hope I didn't hurt you more than that beast did, but it was our only hope."

Margaret dabbed at her cheek to wipe away the blood. The cut did not hurt much but it would not quite stop bleeding. "It's all right, Adam," she said. "I'm glad you did stop my cry. He would have found us for sure."

For a further hour they waited, but no one came near, and no more heads appeared on the skyline. Adam hoped that, once more, the villagers would think that Martin had talked a lot of nonsense. All the same, he was very worried. Too many rumours had flown about, and

this excursion would obviously not be dismissed entirely, even though everyone seemed to have returned to their homes for the time being.

"We *must* make a plan," he said, half to himself. "We must get the bird back home, and hide it away for a few weeks until all this fuss is at least partly forgotten. Gather round, all of you, as we must be very quiet in case that unwelcome Martin comes creeping by."

"We dare not carry the bird up in daylight, so we'll have to wait until it is dark," said Roger.

"I know that, but unfortunately there is an almost full moon tonight and we can't all stay here for the next three or four days until we get a longer dark spell."

"Perhaps it will rain tonight and heavy clouds hide the moon," Margaret suggested.

Lee stood up and stared at the sky. "I don't think so," he said quietly. "The wind's nor' of west and dying with a cool air. 'Twill be a fine night, but no rain and not enough cloud to help us."

"We'll just have to risk it." Adam sounded anxious. "At dusk there will be about half-an-hour before the moon is fully risen, when it will be difficult to see properly. If we are careful, and when we reach the top take the bird along in the shadow of the thorn bushes, we may manage all right. If Margaret will hide in the bracken on the hill-top and call like an owl if she sees signs of anyone, we might get home."

"And if we don't?" asked Roger, while Margaret's heart sank at the possibility of coming face to face with Martin alone once again.

"If we don't – " Adam started to speak and then fell silent. They all knew the penalties of being found by an excited and possibly drunken mob who were convinced

that works of evil must be destroyed.

"We must get home somehow, and that's all there is to it," said Margaret firmly.

"That's all very well," cried Roger, and then, remembering the need for silence, whispered, "but wishing won't get us to safety."

"We don't want safety for ourselves," retorted his sister, "but for the bird."

Adam looked at her with surprise and affection. "I always thought you just tolerated my bird, and here you are standing up for it more than anyone."

Margaret blushed. "Well, having got as far as this, it would be silly to be defeated," she answered.

"Master, she's right," grumbled Lee. "We aren't getting on very much. We've got to make up our minds what to do."

"I think we must do what Adam says," Roger said. "Get Margaret to the top as a signaller before dusk, and then try to rush the bird home before the moon rises."

"All right," said Adam. "Here's the detailed plan – now listen carefully, all of you."

The whispering of the tamarisks in the west wind hid the sound of the planners from any who might pass by; but no one did, because back in the village there was another meeting, and at this meeting, held in a house rather too well stocked with home-brewed ale, quite a lot of rather noisy men were also making a plan for the evening.

8

The hours passed dreadfully slowly for the four in the tamarisks. Fortunately the little hollow was sheltered, and the early April sun shone warmly on them, so they did not begin to feel cold until towards sunset. But they were very hungry. From time to time small groups of people had appeared against the sky-line, and then disappeared again, and shortly after noon two farmers had stumped along the narrow strip of soft sand between the dunes and the breaking waves of the spring tide. They looked glum and a little apprehensive, and were obviously not keen on poking their noses into something that they did not understand. Adam reckoned that they had been dragged away from sowing their fields to take part in the search, and felt uncomfortably out of their element looking for black-magic birds on the beach. Later Lee thought he heard shouting, but they could see nothing.

As the sun drooped towards the blue shoulder of Lundy, Adam went through the plans once again.

"We'll only have half an hour of dark, at the most, before the moon rises, and in that time we've got to carry the bird all the way up the cliffs, get across the exposed ridge into the lee of the thorns, then carry it along the shadow side of the little valley and back to my house, by the sunken lane. It's quite a long way, and we

mustn't be observed at all. At the moment they do not know where the bird is, and as no one has ever seen it, apart from Martin, they won't know what they are looking for, and this is our best hope. But if we are spotted, we can't expect much quarter. Martin really got them roused this time, and they will be specially angry thinking they've been harbouring two dabblers in black magic, instead of innocent children, in their village.

"Now, Margaret." Adam looked at her seriously. "I hate the idea of putting you in danger, but we are all in danger already, and we've got to have someone hiding up on the cliff who can signal to us when it is clear. Being a girl, you would not be as much use as Roger in carrying the bird up the face, but you might save our lives by warning us in time of anything suspicious. If you get caught we won't be there to help you, but, being a girl, they may not harm you."

"They'll just burn you at the stake," said Roger cheerfully. Margaret made a face at him, and turned to Adam.

"I know a very good hiding-place in an old rabbit warren," she said. "But how shall I signal you? Owls don't live so close to the cliff usually, and the gulls stop flying and calling when it's dark."

"You'll just have to sound like a lost owl," said Adam. "Give one hoot for stop and two hoots to mean all clear." Margaret nodded, and gently pressed her fingers all over her ankle, which now fortunately felt better.

"One means stop," she muttered to herself, "and two means all clear."

"That's right. Now you had better set off soon. In about ten or fifteen minutes the light will have faded

enough for one person to move carefully and not be seen. We won't leave until we hear the lost owl." He grinned at her, but then became serious again.

"Oh, and if you get caught, call 'help' loudly, but do not call our names, or run in our direction. You will have to trust us to do all we can to come to your assistance. When we reach the top, I hope some twenty minutes or so later, you join up with us, and we will get to the house together just as fast as we can."

The minutes before Adam judged it safe for her to leave went by very slowly, and Margaret's growing nervousness was helped little by listening to the rumbling noises in Lee's hungry stomach. The small ragged cumulus clouds had died with the sunshine, and the sky was clear, with a steady west wind blowing. The clarity of the air was disturbing, but the noise of the wind would help to cover up any sounds that they made. Margaret looked up through the tamarisks at the steep curving face of the cliff above her, trying to decide which would be the best way to go. The big dunes near the foot, with their tufts of wiry grass, were now grey in shadow, but the steep grassy ridge at the top still gleamed in the last of the sunlight, glowing orange against the deepening blue-purple of the sky. At one point there grew a large patch of bracken, and Margaret decided to make for it on her way up, as it would provide a good hiding-place for a few minutes' rest and survey. Imperceptibly the sunlight faded from the crest, and the wind gusted coldly into the hide. It was time to go.

"We haven't seen anyone for nearly half an hour now," Adam said, "so this looks like your chance. Don't hurry, and take great care, for Martin may well still be lying in wait."

Margaret scrambled to her feet, and hitched her long skirt up into her belt. She turned in the white collar of her bodice so that it would not show up, and then patted the ungainly, precious bird standing mute beside them. "Dear bird," she said, "we'll keep you safe somehow."

"Be careful, sister," warned Roger, "and if you run into old Jenny, tell her it isn't bed-time yet."

Adam grinned. "Don't listen to your fool of a brother, just try not to meet with anybody."

Quietly Margaret scrambled up the sandy bank on the cliff side of the tamarisk hollow, pulling herself up on the scrawny roots of the bushes. Then she was lost to sight. The others strained their eyes to follow her progress, but did not spot her again until she was above the dunes and quite near the patch of bracken. She was moving with great caution, and the watchers felt that time had come to a standstill. Suddenly Roger saw a shadowy figure standing on the crest. He nearly shouted a warning to his sister, but just stopped himself in time, and tugging at Adam's jerkin, pointed him out. Margaret must have spotted him, too, for she simply merged into the bracken and disappeared. The watcher on the top stood still, looking out to sea, and idly watching the tide as it slowly receded once more, leaving the beach firm and unmarked.

"Oh, Margaret, be careful," Adam breathed. He knew that it was asking for trouble to send a weak girl into such a position of danger, but there was no alternative if they were to get the bird safely back to the house.

The figure vanished as silently as he had come. Soon afterwards Lee thought he could just see Margaret near the final ridge, but it was too dark to be really sure.

Then it seemed ages before anything else happened, and they wondered if the owl's call could have been carried away on the sea wind. It was as dark now as it would ever be on this night, and in half an hour the moon would rise and its baleful light display them to whoever cared to look. They had so little time.

Then they heard it, a faint "whooo-whooo". Quickly Adam ran to the left wing of the bird, and, crouching down, put his shoulder under the spar end. Lee went to the other wing, and Roger to help lift at the tail. Then, with a quick, last look round, they eased the bird out of the tamarisks on to the soft beach, and started the long climb up the dunes. The steep lower slopes were the worst, as their feet sank deep into the loose sand which tumbled dustily on to the person below. There was nothing to hold to help their balance, except the sharp grass which cut at their fingers. Soon they were sweating with the exertion of carrying the bird-machine and, at the same time, trying to breathe quietly.

Quite suddenly they heard the owl again, a single mournful hoot. Abruptly they stopped, looking slowly round them in the dark and seeing nothing. Roger felt felt the hair prickling on the back of his neck.

"Look," he whispered. "Over there, on the crest, but farther north than before. I'm sure someone's standing there looking."

By staring into the gloom, Adam thought he could see a shadowy form, but it did not seem as though the watcher had noticed anything, as he was standing quite still, not waving or pointing.

"We must hurry, Master," urged Lee. "It looks as though the moon's rising already, and earlier than we thought."

Adam looked at the faint yellow glow in the eastern sky, beyond the looming ridge. Then the watcher vanished. Almost at once they heard the all-clear, faint, but somehow with a note of urgency. Against time they fought their way up the steep ridge, slipping now on the patches of smooth turf, sweating and stumbling in unseen holes, but all the time taking the blows on their bodies that their precious burden might not be harmed.

Every moment the sky lightened beyond the ridge.

"It's a funny sort of moon tonight," panted Roger. "The glow seems to be getting redder, not whiter."

No one answered. Adam too had noticed the yellowy light as the time for moon-rise passed, but thought it must be due to the effect of the sand in his eyes, blown and kicked up from the dunes, and to the exhausting effort of carrying his bird. As they reached the foot of the very steep face over which the bird had been launched, they stopped for a quick rest, and then turned along a little sloping ledge to go up a gully on to the crest. This part was particularly difficult, as the bird's wings stuck out so far that it had to be canted right over on its side with Roger supporting the lower wing tip nearly out of reach above his head. Without warning, Adam tripped on one of the boulders they had used for launching. It must have been precariously balanced, because with a noise like a midsummer thunderstorm it tumbled and rumbled away down the slope.

It seemed minutes before the rock ceased its menacing racket, and all was once again quiet. The three stood in frozen silence, appalled at the noise. Scarcely daring to breathe, they waited for the call from above which must tell them that they had been discovered. But it never came. So they went on, struggling up the last fifty

feet, until they were just below the crest itself. Then Adam gently lowered the bird on to the grass, and raised himself over the last bank to have a good look around the hill-top before they finally lifted up the bird.

There was no one there, only something much more horrifying. The moon had not yet risen after all. The glow in the sky was caused by flames which erupted in fury from the windows and roof of his own house. Crowds of people were standing or running round the building and its garden, tearing down the gates and chopping at the bushes to throw them on the flames. The sound was no longer blanketed by the hill, and he could hear that they were shouting and yelling as though hoping that all the witches in the world were trapped inside.

As Adam stared, oblivious of anything except the wanton destruction of almost everything that he possessed, he felt a tug at his jerkin. It was Margaret.

"What shall we do now?" she cried. "Your poor house. But where can we hide the bird? They mustn't find it – they mustn't."

"Or us," Adam muttered grimly, realizing only now the ferocity of feeling which must have caused the peaceable villagers to work themselves up to this. He looked round desperately. Their hiding-place was burning and behind them there was only the sea. As long as they were not seen on the cliff-top they had a few moments of safety, until the moon rose, and then – nothing.

"Oh, if only I could get my hands on that Martin," cursed Roger, "he would never smile again. I'd, I'd – " He was shaking with fury.

Adam put his finger to his lips to quieten him, and

tried to think, to find an answer, but as he did so there was a sudden rustle in the bracken close by, and out of it rose a shape, tall and sinister, uttering a blood-chilling laugh. "Ha, ha, ha, you can't touch me, but I can kill witches and devils."

It was Martin, and he was either mad or drunk. His hair was wilder than ever, and the whites of his eyes glinted in the light from the flames.

"Ha, ha, ha, just you watch. I've got you now, at last, at last, at last." With these words he jumped up and ran away in great leaps across the cliff-top towards the crowd around the fire.

Margaret ran to Adam and buried her head in his shoulder, sobbing. Gently, he pushed her away. "By God," he muttered, "and they think *we* are the devils." Then with one movement he leapt towards the bird.

"Hurry, hurry," he shouted. "Our only hope is to get my bird to the top and fly it. We've only got a minute. They'll be back like a pack of wolves."

He shoved his shoulder under the bird and heaved it on to his back, so that the others could haul it over the crest. Margaret, terrified, watched Martin's running figure. He had leapt on to a cairn of stones and was shouting and screaming at the top of his voice.

"They're here, they're here. Come and help me kill the devil-bird and the witch too." He jumped up and down on the stones shrieking with maniacal laughter as the crowd first hesitated, then turned, and started to surge up the sloping land behind the hill.

Margaret watched them in terror, and then looked back down the sheer cliff, and the cold steely sea far below. There seemed no hope at all. In a few minutes they would be torn to pieces by people she had known all

her life, and who had gone mad for their blood. She was so frightened that she did not hear Adam's quiet orders as they struggled to get the bird on to the cliff-top, and facing out to the far Atlantic.

"It'll have to do here," he said, as they lowered the bird on the still steep bank. Roger rammed a large pebble under each of the skids to stop them slipping, and Lee unravelled the rope he always carried round his waist in case it was needed for pulling the bird out of soft patches of sand.

"Our only hope is to get back into the tamarisk hollow for the night. They haven't yet seen the bird, only us. There is still just a chance to save it. I'll fly the bird, and land on the beach. The tide is not very far out yet, so I will probably have to travel in a curve, so that I don't get too near the water. The wind is more strongly against us than usual, and this will help."

"What about the launching weight, Master? We haven't got more rocks," interrupted Lee.

"I know, you'll have to do instead, Lee."

"What me, Master, be a perishin' great stone?"

"That's right, Lee." Adam's eyes were shining with a strange excitement now, just as if he were going into a battle. He was no longer frightened of what could happen, but was exulting in the chase, and determined to beat the stupid fellows who were pounding breathlessly up the slope after them.

"All you have to do, Lee, is to hook this end of the rope on to the bird as usual, get yourself just over the steep face of the edge – you can use the ledge we came up on – and then hauling on the rope, run for your life down the cliff."

Lee's eyes opened in astonishment, but he was not

used to disobeying his master, so he just sucked a lot of air in through his teeth, and said, "Yes, Master " and laid the rope out on the ground.

"Make haste," shouted Roger. "They're nearly here and Martin's running back to get at us first. Quick, oh, be quick. I'll run along the cliff-top to try to draw them away from you. I know lots of bolt-holes." He started, then stopped. "But Margaret," he cried, "what will happen to her?" Adam looked steadily at him.

"I'm taking her with me. I don't know if my bird will carry more weight, but it's the only hope."

Roger gasped. "You mean she's going to fly with you in the bird?"

"That's right. Come quickly, Margaret, get on my back and hold to my waist tightly; hang on, now. Are you ready, Lee?" And without waiting for an answer, he shouted, "Pull, *pull*."

Adam's orders were drowned by a shriek from Martin as he flung himself at the bird. Roger, though smaller, went for him with a strength that he did not know he possessed, and Martin crashed to the ground. He quickly got to his feet, however, and ran in front of the bird, holding out his hands to try to stop it flying.

"Lee," Adam roared again. "Pull, pull, *pull*." This time Lee heard, and, hauling the thick rope over his shoulder, hurled himself blindly down the slope. The bird jerked forward with Adam gripping his control levers, and Margaret clinging on to him with her head buried in his shoulder. Martin stood yelling in front of them, waving his arms.

"Stop!" he screamed, but as he saw the strange stiff bird advancing straight towards him, he stepped backwards in sudden fear. The bird came relentlessly on, its

skids sliding faster and faster over the dew-damp grass. Martin stopped shouting – at least no more sounds came from his mouth, although his lips were still moving in horrible grimaces. He looked not only wild now, but terrified too, as he backed away, retreating before the oncoming sinister creature.

Margaret had shut her eyes with fear when the bird jerked forward, and so did not see Martin take the last fatal step back, and, with his fingers clawing the air, disappear over the steepest bit of the cliff. She only heard his terrible scream as the bird plunged after him with a sickening lurch into the dark nothingness below, and the breath seemed to leave her body.

Adam had braced his stomach for the horrible seconds of falling before the bird gained enough speed to fly properly, and in this void he could hear the frustrated shouts of the crowd, above the rush of the wind. Then he felt the grip of the wings on the air, and his bird became part of him, and his thoughts became its brain. He was surprised that the extra weight of his passenger did not seem to make the bird sink down much faster than usual, but he did not have time to worry about this, as he was having more trouble in controlling the bird. He hoped that this was only because the wind was stronger and gustier than any he had flown in before, and that the gusts were buffeting his rudder, and not because Margaret was upsetting its trim.

The air was streaming past fast enough to make his eyes water, but as he looked out ahead over the sweep of the beach, he was horrified to see a small group of men running towards the place where he had hoped to land. One of them had already stopped and was looking up and waving what was probably a pike.

Instinctively Adam turned the bird away, using the rudder to pull it round. Waveringly the bird answered the controls, until he was flying parallel to the great ridge and very close to it. The crest was above and in black shadow, and below were the dunes, great uneven heaps of sand where a safe landing was impossible even if it had been light enough to see clearly. Now the rising moon was giving a ghostly light to the beach, but Adam was sure he couldn't reach it, and anyway the enemy had got there first. Desperately he looked ahead for somewhere safe to steer his bird to; they were sinking down so fast, there could only be seconds left before the ground must rush up underneath them. He could feel Margaret's head heavy on his shoulder, and her fingers gripping him tight. But there was nowhere to go, only the dim undulating dunes, so close below them now. Adam felt a moment's panic, but fought it off; the only hope was to try to keep his bird in the air long enough to fly along the line of the cliffs, and reach the far end before the pursuers. Perhaps then there might be a chance to land safely, and to escape – just a few seconds for him to get Margaret into hiding somewhere, leaving the bird to be torn to pieces by the angry crowd – if they didn't crash first.

Through half-shut eyes Adam stared ahead, searching desperately through the dim light for some place where he could land his bird. Then down again at the dunes below. But something was different. He stared once more at the shadowy dunes. They were no closer than before. This was odd, for if anything they were farther away; somehow the bird must have risen upwards, but how could it? A feeling of utter strangeness came over Adam. Quickly he glanced up at the dark line of the ridge

against the moonlit sky. It was only just above them, whereas half a minute before he had felt that the bird was far below, only just creeping over the dunes. He couldn't believe it, but they must be climbing and soaring up into the air like the real gulls. It was not possible. Only real live birds could rise up on the sea wind. Adam tried to force his brain to think clearly. Now the bird had surged upwards until it was level with the crest, and Adam could just see the leaping flames of his house dull beside the great silver disc of the moon. With a feeling of such exultation that he lost all thought of their peril, or of his lost house, he gently controlled his wonderful bird so that it went on gliding at the same speed, tracking straight along the line of the ridge. Somehow, he thought, the wind must possess some force near the hill which was making him soar there like the birds – it wasn't only that there must be life in the bird, there was this power in the air too. If only he had thought of this before, instead of just flying straight out from the hill and down on to the beach.

The bird was trembling in the turbulent gusts as though it was as excited as he was, and Adam wanted to sing in tune with the whistle of the air as it flowed through the rigging on his wings. Sometimes the bird rose upward and he could see the face of the moon peering at him over the ridge, and then it would sink down below the crest again on the unevenness of the air. Adam glanced back under the taut and thrumming wing; their pursuers had stopped far behind, but across the beach in their direction galloped a single horseman. This worried Adam for a second, but was forgotten as he suddenly realized that they were almost at the end of the great bay. The ridge was lower here and they were full

in the light of the moon. He did not know what to do next. At this moment Margaret wriggled slightly on his back and grasped him even more tightly round the throat so that he almost choked. The bird was still just above the crest, and for the moment seemed to be gaining and not losing height. If he turned back along the ridge he could possibly still stay soaring up in the air, but this would take him back again to the maddened villagers. If he landed on the beach here, it would not be long before they were discovered. But there might be one other chance, and Adam wondered if he dared take it. Ahead, at the end of the bay, the cliffs swept round in a great curve, lying out to sea as the great headland of Baggy Point. The waves could be seen lashing white out of the dark sea on to the darker cliff, and there was no place where it would be possible to land. But the bird had shown that if it were flown *along* a line of cliffs it would rise on the air. If it would soar along the cliffs of the headland as well, then it might be possible to get round into the Barnstaple estuary, and then, provided that he could find somewhere to land among the empty sands, they would be safe from their pursuers, and would have a chance of saving the precious bird as well as themselves.

Adam glanced back again and saw the horseman still galloping along over the now moonlit beach. Whatever he was going to do must be done at once, and he knew that there was no other chance; so with a mixed feeling of fear, foreboding and elation, he carefully moved his rudder control so that the bird was swung to the right to follow the curve of the cliffs out towards the headland. Margaret's fingers tightened on his neck again as the bird yawed and then leaned over on its side like a stiff

and monstrous gull, but Adam barely noticed it: all his awareness was in his hands as he sensed through the controls the feel of his wonderful bird. It was still flying just above the level of the cliff, but the change of direction seemed, somehow, to slow up their progress, and his bird was flying along the headland covering the ground only very slowly. Adam was not unduly worried. The bird seemed to answer the controls well, and, more marvellous than anything, minutes after the first plunge over the cliff they were still in the air. The first two flights had been so brief, only twenty seconds down to the sands below. This one was so marvellous – but his hopes did not last long. The buoyant air vanished without warning, and it became turbulent and rough, and Adam could feel his precious bird sinking, almost sagging, as it dropped downwards. A sharp shadow on his left showed that the cliffs were once more above them, and that the bird was rapidly, inexorably, getting lower and lower, sinking towards the cold sea. Wildly Adam looked round, and tried desperately to think clearly at the same time. Along the Woolacombe cliffs they had soared, now along the headland they could not. What was the reason? Was it because there was water underneath them now instead of land, or was it – ? Suddenly the truth dawned on Adam. It wasn't only a question of flying along a cliff when a wind was blowing, it was necessary to fly along a cliff which the wind was blowing directly against. He realized now, too late, that it was not going to be possible to soar along the headland in this wind, a west wind. The bird, now, would not be able to stay up in the air more than a few seconds longer, and below there was only rough surging water, gleaming with cold moonlight. The hard sea that for

ever flung its white waves on to the jagged rocks. This was the end. Adam's stomach hurt with fear, and he look round for some salvation although he knew that there was none. Wildly, rapidly, the bird sank down. Margaret's fingers grasped Adam's throat as though they were made of iron.

"What's happening?" she cried. "We're falling into the sea. Oh! – oh!" But her last words were swamped in the sheet of spray which hit them like a flail of ice as the bird-machine struck the water, and cartwheeled, stark and helpless, on to its back. She felt Adam struggle as she was flung away from it, and then, gasping and fighting for breath, she fought her way to the surface. As she burst into the pure night air and drew in great gulps of it, waves splashed in her face, filled her mouth and stung her eyes. Half drowned, she felt herself crash against something hard, and grasped at it, not knowing what it was. Her hands closed on seaweed, and she hung on while the waves swayed her body to and fro. With her last strength she pulled herself on to the rock and lay there spluttering and shivering. After a time – how long she did not know – she managed to sit up and look round. She was quite alone, and all that moved was the surging sea.

"Adam," she cried, with fear in her voice; but there was no sign of him or the bird. Terrified now, she shrieked his name, again and again, not stopping until she ran out of breath, and sat sobbing and gasping while the waves and spray splashed over her. The moon was high now and its cold light glittered on the water. The far glow from the burning house had died to a glimmer beyond the cliff, and the world seemed empty of people.

"Adam," she screamed again, but, answered only by the sighing and surging of the waves, she buried her face in the wet seaweed and sobbed with fear and exhaustion.

9

Along the north coast of Cornwall, past the coves of wreckers and smugglers, and towards the Bristol Channel ran the brig *Lady Sue*, making good time with the fresh April wind at her heels. By the noon change of watch she had passed Lundy Island on her port beam, and began reaching towards the low sandy shore of the Burrows towards Appledore and Instow. To the north lay the blue hump of Baggy Point.

In the shelter of the land the *Lady Sue* steadied, and her crew could spare a moment to stand and look long at the soft coast of their native West Country, from which they felt that they were always parted too much. Far inland they could see the pale hills of Exmoor, with the nearer, brighter land dappled by the cumulus shadows of the superb spring day. The brig had been far from home for three years, until a few weeks previously, when she had limped into Falmouth in a gale, her crew exhausted and sick. On inspection it was discovered that she could venture no further without

repairs. Her master chafed at the waste of time, but he had been brought up to know how the sea repaid carelessness or pride, and so the work was done there and then. When it was finished, the crew, refreshed and prepared for another long voyage to the South Seas, set forth without delay round Land's End, and up channel to pick up cargo and further orders in Bristol.

On the way her master was determined to make just one short call. Three long years before he had left his two small motherless children in the care of his old bos'n's widow, in a small cottage in the village of Woolacombe. He tried to visualize how the little things had grown, which is what he supposed they must have done somehow in the meantime, but his imagination was not practised in such things. He would have liked to have had them at sea with him, but the rough living on board a brig would, he felt, have been too much for their tender years.

Barnstaple was ahead now, and, with low water past, he would soon drop anchor in the little port on the flooding tide, and be rowed ashore in the gig. He would obtain horses from the ostler at the Bell Inn for himself and three of his officers, who would jump at the chance to stretch their legs and come with him. Then an hour and a half's ride over the hills would bring them to the long beach at Woolacombe. His little children would be just going to bed, and he would be in time to kiss them good-night, and give them the strange trophies of his long travels. Then he would sup at one of the farms and enjoy a good moonlight gallop back to his ship. His duty would be done, and he could sail out on the morning tide reassured. It was not that Captain Hawkesley was a hard or unloving father. It was just

that he had seen so little of his children that he did not know them as well as the lowest boy in his crew. A sailor who had never stayed ashore for more than a

few weeks in his life, he had forgotten the realities of family life. He lived for the sea, and the respect given to him by his crew showed what a fine sailor he was.

It was calm in the port, with gentle cat's-paws riffling

the reflections of the harbour wall and the wooden houses along the jetty. There was the familiar smell of tarred rope and fish. A group of youths leaned over the wall idly watching the gig rowed to the seaweedy steps, and as the bearded Master and his handsome young sunburnt officers ran cheerfully up the stone steps, women came running out of the cottages to discover whom the sea had brought them. One sailor, rather downcast, who was being left to deal with the work of the ship, started quickly to make the best of his lot by bandying jokes with the locals, while Captain Hawkesley, with Peter Penwith, Courtenay John, two Cornishmen with black curly hair, and apple-faced Mark Hannaforde who came from Brixham at his heels, went off to acquire horses at the inn, and to drink a jug of scrumpy while they waited for them to be harnessed.

It was five o'clock when they set course for Woolacombe, feeling suddenly unfamiliar with the independent and spirited mounts under them, instead of the familiar rolling deck. Mark, who was a terrible rider, slopped from side to side of his mare roaring with laughter, and drawing shouts of scorn from Peter and Courtenay, who were fine horsemen, although somewhat out of practice. Their leader set a spanking pace northwards, and soon they were climbing the hills which lay between themselves and their destination. After an hour's hard going their laughter and conversation died away, and they rode on, each busy with his own thoughts. Mark's were that the saddle was getting uncommon hard, Courtenay and Peter were not really thinking at all, except that any ship's captain that gave his officers the chance of a jaunt over the scented downs was a lot better than one that did not. Captain Hawkesley was just gazing at the soft

Devon county, happy that he could relax his stern shipboard discipline, and vaguely thinking about the little dears that were at this moment being tucked up in their beds.

Mark jogged up alongside his captain. "How does the village lie from here, sir?" he asked.

"It's away over Oxe's Cross, the next big hill, near enough another four miles. We should arrive just after dark."

"Is there an inn where we can get refreshed while you talk to the little ones?"

"There's a village pump of good moorland water," grinned his captain, "better than all the rum in the world. But I won't be long at the house, just enough to show the children that their father has not forgotten them, although it must be a dull life for them with old widow Jenny. In a few years they'll be at an age of sense and I'll take them to sea."

The sun sank silently into the colourless sea, and slowly the purple hood of night rose from the shadowy moors. The land grew sombre and dark, and the quietness of the spring evening was broken only by the chink of hooves as they kicked flints in the soft turf, and the rustle of the old bracken fronds as they were tousled by the wandering breeze.

"The moon will rise soon, thank the lord," said Mark through his teeth, "and then I'll get this brute under control again. At the moment she's worse than a little barque in a tide rip." The others laughed.

"You're better off in the dark," grinned Peter. "You can't see how funny you look. When the moon comes up you'll die of shock."

"You wait," roared Mark. "If you aren't more polite,

I'll start telling a few tales of someone I know who thinks he's good at navigation."

At this Courtenay let out a huge guffaw, but was silenced suddenly by his captain, who ordered: "Halt, and shut up, all of you."

They reined in and stopped close to their master, the horses breathing hard, and Mark jangling his vacant stirrups. They had reached the crest of the hill, and Captain Hawkesley was staring ahead over the combes and slopes towards the lower ground near the village. The land there was shadowed by some high ground, and it was difficult to distinguish details, but somewhere in the middle of it there was a fire. It was a new fire, yellow and flickering, but growing as they watched. It was some sort of building like a large house. The four of them sat their horses, motionless, except for the swishing of the animals' tails, and stared. They could hear distant shouts and could see people, little dots of men, running round the flames. Soon the pale flickers changed to a red glow of fearsome brightness, with a cloud of dark smoke above which reflected the glow. The rising moon seemed dull and insignificant.

"What is it, sir?" asked Courtenay in a hoarse whisper.

"I don't know; it's a dwelling of some sort, but there's something very odd going on. All those people seem to be trying to help that fire – not put it out."

"Perhaps they set it alight?" suggested Peter.

"It's not your children's house, is it?" asked Mark.

"No," replied Captain Hawkesley thoughtfully. "No, their home is in the village away to the left. But I seem to remember that there was some building about where the fire is, but I don't even know if anyone lived in it." He

stared for a moment longer, sucking his teeth in concentration, then kicked his heels into his animal's flanks and galloped off down the slope.

"Come on, men," he shouted. "There's wrong being done here, and I want to know what's going on."

The four horses pounded over the rough ground, three riders sitting their mounts with ease, and Mark, the fourth, hanging round his mare's neck, stirrups flying, but still determined to be in at whatever kill was involved, and certainly not to miss any fight which might be going.

"Come on, you beauty," he roared, but the words were bounced to pieces as the breath was galloped out of his body.

As they grew closer they could see that it was indeed a house on fire, and that their captain was right, it was being burnt purposely. There seemed to be about fifty people round the building; they were throwing stones at the windows and thrusting brushwood in at the doors. They were all shouting like maniacs, and seemed beside themselves with fury and excitement. Captain Hawkesley drew up in the shadow of a big thorn hedge, a few hundred yards from the fire, and his face was worried.

"I don't like the look of this," he whispered to the others. "Those people are so mad and angry about something, they might be on a witch hunt. If we ride in suddenly, they might well turn on us, and we are only four – " he eyed Mark still clinging to his horses's mane and his eyes twinkled – " well, perhaps just three and a half. We wouldn't have a chance against them, particularly since we don't even know what we would be fighting for."

"Let's ride up slowly, then, as though we're just

interested travellers on our way. Perhaps someone will tell us what is happening," suggested Courtenay.

"Yes, then we can decide whether to fight or not." Mark drew his sword and ran his thumb along the blade.

"Put that thing away at once," frowned his captain. "We want to look peaceable at least."

Sadly Mark slithered his beautiful blade back into its sheath, and nearly slithered off his horse with the effort.

"Now, listen," said the Captain. "We'll go in at a walk. Peter, ride alongside me, with Courtenay and Mark behind, and remember, no fighting unless I give the order."

Slowly the four horsemen left the shadows, and crossed the field towards the fire. The animals were difficult to control as the acrid smoky smell and crackle, and the crash as part of the roof fell in, made them

nervous. So far they had moved unnoticed, so busy were the people running round the fire and shouting at the tops of their voices, and they were within fifty paces of the fire before anyone saw them.

Then a fearsome thing happened.

Above the roar of the flames, a voice shrieked, "There's the father of the witch, kill him, kill him, kill him." With horror Captain Hawkesley saw faces turn towards him, angry faces streaked with sweat, red in the fiery glare. Then they were all staring at him, and moving closer. The horses plunged and reared, but somehow their riders managed to keep them facing their adversaries. The crowd advanced inexorably, suddenly silent.

Captain Hawkesley sat erect, and drew a deep breath.

"What is the trouble, my friends?" he asked, his voice clear and commanding. The crowd hesitated, and for a moment it looked as though he would hold them long enough to talk, but the high shrieking voice broke in: "Kill him, kill the witches, why do you wait for them to escape us?" and with that the crowd swept forward.

Quietly the Captain spoke, his eyes never leaving the rabble. "Draw your swords, men, but don't kill unless you have to. There's something very odd going on."

The glitter of the blades caused the crowd to pause for a moment, but it was in that instant that another strange thing happened. A man's voice this time, deep and resonant, bellowed, "Wait, there are the devils themselves, look, up along the cliff-top. It's they we want."

"The devils, the witches, come on, come on." The crowd took up the cry, and, turning away from the astonished sailors, surged away up the slope towards the

sky-line. The four followed their stampede, sitting the horses sword in hand, with the glow of the fire flickering on the bright steel.

Peter Penwith turned to his captain. "That bit about the father of the witches – sir, they meant *you*." His voice was incredulous.

"I know that, and I don't understand it." Captain Hawkesley's voice was hard. "But if they hurt a hair of my children's heads, I'll kill the lot with my bare hands." And clattering his sword back into its scabbard, he kicked at his horse's flanks with his seaman's boots, and galloped off after the shouting crowd. They kept along the shadow of the thorns, aiming to arrive at the same time as the panting runners.

As they reached the cliff-top they rode up into the full glow of the yellow moon, and saw the spare figure of a boy running for his life along the edge, pursued by yelling men. To the Captain there was something oddly familiar about the boy, something –

Suddenly he realized.

"That's Roger, that's my son," he shouted, and, lying along his horse, he raced straight for him, closely

followed by his men. They beat the pursuers only by an arm's length, and Captain Hawkesley, leaning from the saddle, grabbed the boy by the back of his jerkin, and with a massive heave had him across the front of his saddle. Cheated of their quarry, the angry villagers turned blindly on Mark, the last of the horsemen, still clinging round his animal's neck, but Courtenay and Peter frightened them off by turning on them with waving swords. Suddenly, there was more shouting. The crowd hesitated, and then swung away towards the cliff edge and disappeared, scrambling and leaping over the steep face out of sight towards the dunes below. The last few were easily kept at bay by the young officers, while Captain Hawkesley tried to find out something from his son, who was shouting incomprehensibly at his father without stopping.

"Hurry, hurry!" he cried. "Oh, don't ask me questions. They'll be killed. Look down at the beach, please, oh please. See that man they're after? He'll be dead if they catch him."

His father persisted. "Where's Margaret, you young fool?" he demanded angrily.

"I don't know, she's with Adam, but save Lee, please – please." It was no good. He was clearly going to get no sense from the boy as long as that tiny figure fled across the sand.

"Peter Penwith," he roared. "See that man running along the beach? Well, rescue him somehow, and ride to the south end of the bay. I'll meet you there when I've got some sense out of this lunatic son of mine." Without questions, Peter wheeled away and galloped along the crest to where the shoulder of the cliffs rounded out, and then set his horse down the slope.

By the time Peter had cajoled his panting mount over the powdery dunes and on to the sand, the pursuers had reached the beach and were in full cry after the man. They were steadily gaining on him, and were about to fall on their quarry in a wild fury. Peter spurred his flagging horse, and, thundering along, crashed his way through the pursuers, scattering and confusing them. He reached Lee, shouting that he was a friend, before they could recover themselves, and with him up behind, cantered steadily away to the south end of the bay.

Roger watched, silent, until Lee was safe and the crowd were left behind cursing and frustrated. Then he fainted.

His father propped the limp body up against his own, and was surprised to find how big and strong his son had grown. Then he turned to Courtenay and Mark, who were still flourishing their swords at a few sullen men.

"We must get after Penwith. The fresh air will soon revive the boy, and then perhaps we'll get some sense out of him. The sooner we can find that wench of mine and get out of this idiot village the better."

And he turned his horse and rode fast along the spine of the cliffs, followed by Courtenay and Mark, who were wondering what else was going to happen on this strange night.

10

"Father!" Roger had recovered somewhat and found himself leaning against his father, wrapped in a cloak. "Father," he cried more urgently, flinging the cloak away, "what's happened to the bird?"

"Bird? What bird? Boy, whatever are you talking about?"

"The bird that Adam and Margaret flew just before you came."

Captain Hawkesley looked at his son, startled. "Bird? Flew? You must be ill, boy. Sit quiet a bit and then tell us where Margaret is."

"I am telling you. Please believe me, sir. She flew with Adam to escape. They were going to land on the beach."

"Well, there's nothing down there except Peter Penwith and that man you wanted collected, and a few crazy people who were left far behind."

"But there must be, there must be." Roger struggled desperately to get free of his father's arm. "Let me look, Father, please – "

Captain Hawkesley was worried, but even more angry at this absurd nonsense. Nevertheless he went with Roger to the edge, where they stared down at the empty beach. "There you are," he said gruffly. "I told you there was no one."

"Lee," again Roger shouted suddenly, "we must get to Lee. He will have seen what happened from the beach. Please, Father, hurry. Oh please. It's our only way to find Margaret, otherwise she may be killed."

"Is the lad delirious?" asked Mark, staring at the agitated boy.

"I don't know. He keeps talking about birds and flying, and now he wants us to gallivant off down there to find Penwith and this Lee, whoever he is."

"Sir," Mark suddenly looked worried, "don't you remember, the crowds were shouting about birds when they were denouncing the witches – perhaps there is something in what he says?"

Captain Hawkesley looked at his son again.

"Where's your sister, lad?" he said sternly. "What has happened to her? Give me the answer with no lies."

"I don't know, sir, but she flew off the cliff with Adam in his bird, and if anyone knows what has happened to her, it's Lee, because he was down there and must have seen."

Captain Hawkesley looked sharply at his son, and then decided. "Courtenay, ride as fast as you can to meet up with Peter Penwith and this Lee fellow and see what you can find out. I'll follow as quickly as possible with Roger, and" – he indicated Mark with his thumb " – old stumble-hoof here will follow me as best he can."

"Sir, I go at once," and Courtenay John swung away to try to find a quick way down the tumbling slopes.

Captain Hawkesley, with Mark trying to keep up, cantered along the crest for another four hundred paces, until the cliff was lower and gentler, and then held in his horse's head for the steep and rough descent to the sands. Mark's horse, of course, took charge, and if the

occasion had not been so serious Captain Hawkesley would have had a good laugh at the ungainly rider's expense. As they arrived on the hard but empty sands they paused, not knowing where to start searching. Then they thought that they could hear faint shouts coming from the stark rocky face at the south end of the cliff, which ran out towards the headland, where the waves crashed unceasingly.

"That's Lee's voice, I know it is," cried Roger. "He must know where Margaret is."

They galloped across the sand into the teeth of the wind, and soon came upon the other two horses tethered to a waterlogged spar lying among the jetsam of the tide-line. Of their riders there was no sign. Captain Hawkesley reined in his horse and stared about him. Suddenly Roger pointed urgently.

"Look, sir, on that rock beyond the waves, about two hundred paces out. I can see Lee. And up on the cliffs, aren't those your men?"

"What the – ?"

Captain Hawkesley stared out over the water in disbelief, then, without taking his eyes from the faint figures, he pushed his son from the pommel. Mark, using this as an excuse to be rid of such a frightening means of travel, clambered quickly off his own horse.

"Look after the boy, Hannaforde," the Captain ordered, "and use your sword if any of those mad people come near. I don't know what is happening around here, or where my daughter is, but I know the sea, and it will have no one of mine if I can help it." And, turning his horse towards the water, he rode it into the moonlit surf.

* * *

When Peter Penwith and Lee had reached the south end of the beach some twenty minutes earlier, they had found Adam wet and shivering. He was shouting Margaret's name again and again with despair in his voice. He told them through chattering teeth what had happened – how in the crash he must have been knocked out for an instant, and had come to half drowned but luckily supported by the broken remains of one of the wing spars, and how he had searched and called for Margaret, but had not been able to find her. Then he had swum to the beach through the surf, while he still had strength left, and searched the shallows and the rock pools in case she had fought her way out of the sea and then collapsed. He was terribly upset, and Lee and Peter Penwith needed all their strength to restrain him from going back into the water to search again.

"Where did you land the bird, Master?" asked Lee.

"About two hundred paces out, I should say, and under the rock face along the headland. My bird was rising marvellously on the wind, and I had hoped to soar right along, but as soon as I left the Woolacombe cliffs it just sank right down, and I could do nothing. We hit the waves with a great crash, and the bird broke into a thousand pieces."

Peter Penwith looked from one to the other, mystified and slightly alarmed at this strange talk. Fortunately the tough and familiar figure of Courtenay John turned up at this moment, and the two sailors stood side by side trying to size up an unaccountable situation.

Adam and Lee went on talking urgently.

"There's rocks out along there, Master," suggested Lee. "Perhaps Miss Margaret got to one of them. The tide's falling, so she'd be safe if she could hold on. You can get along near there by a rabbit track part of the way up the cliff."

"I hope you're right, Lee, but I don't have much hope. Come on, we'll go anyway." His shivering had stopped, and he ran, with Lee at his heels and Peter and Courtenay close behind, to the end of the beach, where they scrambled up a short sand face which led to the steeply sloping turf of the lower cliff. It took them some time to work along above the jagged rock face while the waves crashed and swirled below them, but the moonlight helped and they soon reached the jutting rocks, now higher out of the water. But they could see nothing. The cold waves crashed and foamed below them, bursting over the rocks and then washing clear in unceasing movement, but that was all. Adam ran farther along to another group of rocks, but there was nothing there either. Once he thought he saw something, but it was only the swirl of seaweed. He stared miserably at the unthinking sea, hating it. The only chance was that Margaret had reached these rocks, but she was not there. He could not believe that she must now be dead, but there was no other possibility. Lee came up behind him and said quietly, "She's gone. It's no good waiting longer, Master."

Adam shut his eyes for a moment, too unhappy to speak, then turned away and walked slowly back along the track. Lee followed him closely, not knowing how to help his master, or what to do next. Courtenay John met them, and, tough seaman though he was, put his hand across Adam's shoulder to comfort him.

Suddenly they heard Peter Penwith shout. He had lagged behind them, and they looked to see him staring down at a small rock in the shadow right in under the cliff face. They ran back and stared down to where he was pointing. There was something light on the rock, but it did not move, and the moonlight and spray could well be making their eyes play tricks. Peter Penwith had by now scrambled down to the very edge of the overhanging cliff to get a better look. The seaweed swayed as the water ran back into the sea, but as the spray cleared he saw the light thing again. Then he realized that it was a body.

"Come quickly," he shouted. "It's her, we've found her."

As they scrambled closer they could discern the shape of a girl lying face down on the rock. It was indeed Margaret, but she was so still. At that moment another wave broke, and for a moment she was hidden from sight as the frothy whiteness surged over her once again. They were full of fear that they had found her too late and she must have drowned. Adam clambered to the very edge, but it was too far to jump to the rock.

The two sailors were more mystified than ever. How could a girl ever get to this rock out in the sea? There had been no boat. There was still deep and surging water between it and the cliffs, although in an hour or so the rock might be high and dry.

"We can't wait for the tide to fall," said Lee. "She'll be dead of the cold, even if she's still alive – which I doubt. I'll swim to her and try to revive her, but I don't have the skill to swim back with her."

"Perhaps we can make a chain in the water," suggested Adam.

"I don't think so," said Peter Penwith. "It's too deep yet, and the current under the cliff will be strong."

But Lee hadn't waited any longer. With a leap he was off the ledge, and landed in the sea with a great splash. Almost at once his head reappeared and he paddled his way over to the rock like a huge dog, clambered up on to the seaweed, and, still like a dog, shook himself.

They saw him bend over Margaret, turn her over gently by the shoulder, and lay her in his arms. Then they saw him rubbing her hands to try to revive her.

"She's alive," they heard him shout, "but she must have warmth soon, very soon. See if you can find a boat, there used to be one in those sand-hills."

Peter and Courtenay had just turned back to start searching when they saw an astonishing sight. Down the path of the moonlight on the water swam a horse. Lee saw it at the same moment and was afraid that it was one of their enemies, until he saw Peter Penwith wave and shout in greeting. Slowly the horse, its rider in the

water alongside, swam in close to the rock, surging about in the waves, and tried to clamber on to the mass of seaweed, but the rider held its head away and shouted at Lee.

"If you have my daughter there, give her to me."

Lee had no idea how to hand a half-dead and frozen girl from a slippery rock to a strange swimming horseman, and his brain was trying to work out what was best to do when the bearded man shouted again, with command in his voice.

"I'll swim the horse as near as I can, and you sling her across the front of the saddle, and" – he shot a piercing glance at Lee – "if you want rescuing as well, hang on to the horse's tail."

Lee lifted Margaret carefully in his arms and waited for the animal to surge up on the next wave. Just before it broke he half handed and half heaved Margaret on to her father's horse, slipping on the seaweed as he did so. He felt himself fall into the salty water against the wet but warm animal, and caught at its tail, as the wave sucked back out again.

Instinctively, and slowly, the animal made for the shore with its heavy load, Captain Hawkesley keeping Margaret's limp body from slipping, with his spare hand. Fortunately the falling tide had reduced the distance to go, and soon the big chestnut rose dripping from the water as its feet found the sand. It was followed out, in the same way, by Lee, still clinging to the tail.

Quickly Mark Hannaforde ran forward, and, gently lifting Margaret down, wrapped her in his great cloak, and laid her on the sand. He and John rubbed her hands, hoping to bring some warmth into her, but were frightened at the extreme paleness of her face. Captain

Hawkesley cushioned her head on his lap, desperately hoping that he was not going to lose the daughter that he now realized he did not even really know. Then Adam and the two sailors arrived, running. Adam was terrified that Margaret would die. He knelt beside her, whispering her name with urgency, while Captain Hawkesley stared at the young man who seemed to have been the cause of all the trouble, but said nothing. After a few minutes the girl stirred, and then opened her eyes. She stared round her uncomprehendingly, and then saw Adam's face. Slowly she smiled at him.

"It was the most wonderful thing in the world," she whispered, but all that Adam could reply was, "Thank you, thank you, for being alive."

Everyone felt a wonderful sense of relief as soon as Margaret showed signs of recovery. Lee took off his shirt and ran round in circles to dry himself, and Mark remembered to look about to see if any villagers were stealing up on them. Peter Penwith went off to collect the horses. But Captain Hawkesley just glared at Roger and at the two men. He was wet, cold, and now very angry.

"It seems that it was most fortunate that I came home when I did," he said coldly. "I don't know what you have been up to, or who these two damp rogues are, but what I do know is that I am not going to leave you here any longer to get into more trouble. You're coming with me, and if we're to be mixed up with the sea, we'll do it with a sensible ship under us."

"But what about old Jenny?" asked Margaret. "I hope someone will tell her we've gone."

"She'll know all right, miss," growled Lee. "There won't be any secrets after this night's work."

"But Adam and Lee *must* come with us," cried Roger. "We can't leave them here. Adam's house has been burnt, and as soon as dawn breaks those villagers will hunt them down and kill them for flying the bird. They think it's the devil's work."

"I've heard enough of this nonsense," said Captain Hawkesley. "You know men can't fly. I'm not surprised they talk of devils."

"But we did, Father," said Margaret quietly. "We rose high on the sea wind and looked down on the earth below." Her seriousness was disturbing.

"It's true, sir," Adam added. "We built a bird-machine, and flew with the gulls, and soared higher than the hills." He gazed up at the great shadowy ridge, the faint glow beyond the crest. "But now all is lost. Everything has gone." He paused for a moment unable to speak. "My wonderful bird is smashed and under the sea, and my drawings and calculations are all burnt, with everything else I had." Margaret took his hand as she saw the sadness in his face.

"Please, Father, let Adam and Lee come with us," she pleaded.

Captain Hawkesley looked at his daughter, the child he had left years before, now grown so tall, and he smiled at her.

"All right, they shall come. Tomorrow we sail for Bristol on the dawn tide, and then" – he looked far over the moonlit sea – "and then we sail for the great South Seas, to explore and find new lands. You'll see the albatross there, a real bird, and none of your fanciful nonsense. There's many new things waiting to be discovered by men bold enough to explore the unknown." He got to his feet and brushed the sand from his clothes.

"Come on now, we've got to get the morning tide, and dry clothes and food for us all."

They shared the horses, Mark being delighted to give his up to Adam. Margaret rode with her father, and Roger was up behind Peter Penwith. And as they went, winding slowly up through the dunes and on to the high ground towards Barnstaple, the four of them looked back to the great lonely Woolacombe cliffs, to the smouldering embers of Adam's house, and to the timeless moon. And as the soft wind died away with the night, Margaret realized the truth.

There was nothing there. There was nothing any more to show that they had soared with the birds in the empty sky. No one would ever believe their story, and no one would ever know.

Only to them it was not just a dream.

THE AUTHOR

Ann Welch was born in London and has been flying and gliding almost all her life. She founded the Surrey Gliding Club in 1938. During the war she was a ferry pilot and flew Spitfires and Wellingtons, and since 1948 has been the Team Manager of the British Gliding Team. She holds the British National Women's record for a Goal Flight (328 miles; Poland, 1961).

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