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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Flight of Birds**

Written by Alan Howard

Published by Raven's Quill Ltd

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of  
**BIRDS**

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## A Strange Bird

“Where d’you think you be headed to, me little lady?”

Kate Pegler jumped. That scabrous voice from the briar hedge tore a bloody rent in the smooth skin of her solitude, and beads of sweat, like blood, welled up in the wound.

“Who... who’s there?” she started, “what do you want?”

“Just me. What I want to know is what you be doin’ in these here woods,” the voice grated.

Kate peered anxiously sideways, yet could see no human shape in the matted undergrowth. She was about to run when the voice, as if sensing her growing panic, chuckled harshly, but with an unthreatening and almost comical whine, “You ain’t goin’ to run out on me, are yer? I ain’t goin’ to hurt yer, now. Only goin’ to tell yer, warn yer, like. These here woods ain’t always right friendly to them what don’t know their ways about.”

A figure unravelled its tasselled form from the shadowed leafiness of the unkempt hedgerow. It emerged, crowned with a shredded top-hat from which lank dark locks hung dense, framing a pinky-grey, uncouth visage, swarthy yet not bearded, cocked to one side above sloping, powerful shoulders as the figure stooped to part the dense tangle of thorns in which he seemed to have been taking his ease.

As he straightened up, she noticed that a black patch covered the man's left eye. But as the light struck his face, the iris of his right eye dazzled her with its cerulean blue, enchanted her and overrode her instinct to flight, so bright and cheerful it was. The creases about it were playful, laughing even, in the friendliest way, while his swarthy brow arched quizzically.

"That's better. I can see yer ain't affrighted by the outer form like a fool be. Yer can see right through to the inner virtue, I reckon." The stranger at his full height towered like a sooty chimney over Katie. She stood her ground, matching him eye-to-eye, for there was a strange becomingness about this grubby figure that excited curiosity more than fear.

"But I shouldn't talk to strangers alone, like this," she replied with a calmness which surprised her.

"Ha! You're the stranger hereabouts, me little spatchcock." The stranger laughed, exposing a full set of perfectly white teeth totally at variance with his ragged outer demeanour. "Y' ain't been here barely five minutes, and yer callin' me a stranger already?"

"I didn't mean that," she admitted, laughing. "What I meant was, outside one's family..."

"I knows yer meanin', but it makes little difference, because your family's the outsiders hereabouts. You're the strangers here, definite. The villagers, now: them's family. Them's family like what yer never reckoned on. Them's tighter than a banker's braces. Yer won't get nothin' outer them insider ten years, if yer foller my meaning'. Yer the foreigners here! My advice ter you's this – yer'd do well to listen to good heed when it's offered. An mine's good heed."

"I'm sorry," Kate offered him a small hand of conciliation, "I didn't mean to be rude or unfriendly, it's just that my dad..."

"Parents is parents, and I don't blame yer. I cut a rude jib, I reckon, an who'm I to warn yer agin them what's sails

are set fairer than mine, apparently? They says the eye's fer sein', but I says the eye's fer deceivin'. Yer best watch out for them in particular what looks good ter the eye, if yer take my meanin'. Yer heed me on this and I'm satisfied. There's been strange goings on in these here woods of late. Signs, they says... Omens."

"Omens of what? What's been happening?"

"There's tell of unrested souls in these there woods, awaitin' of the lord's doom in the second comin'."

"Oh, rubbish! Omens, indeed. You're just pulling my leg. That's obviously a tale to frighten away strangers like me; to keep us out."

"I don't say I believe it, and I don't say I don't," the man grinned wickedly at her and winked. "There yer go then. I done my duty. I warned yer. Don't say I didn't. I only done it because there's somethin' special about yer; about yer comin here at this time, after all the other appenin's of late."

"What things?" Kate was perplexed by the contradictions embodied in this old man: her trust of him and his friendliness set against the mysterious nature of his warnings and predictions.

"Well, there's the birds. Them birds been actin' mighty peculiar of late. Missin' where they ought ter be and then suddenly appearin' where they didn't ought ter. Like the seasons are out of kilter."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the other day them birds suddenly appears all along the roof ridge of the east wing of the house."

"Surely birds quite often gather and perch together."

"Not like that! Not all different types together, singing."

"Singing?"

"Yes, and then they all goes silent, like, as if in mourning, then as sudden all departin' with a mighty flappin' of wings over into these here woods. I never seen its like afore. An then..." The old man paused, as if for dramatic effect.

Kate obliged and asked, "Then what?" She found herself being drawn into his world against her better judgement.

"That roof were the wing of the house what burnt down, and with them all in it, that's all." He looked at her intently.

"Who?" She was beginning get the hang of his style, now.

"The lord and lady. An, they say, his mistress."

"His lover?"

"Yes. T'is said she haunts the house on account of what he done to her." The man looked at Kate keenly, sizing up her reactions. "T'is said she was his prisoner. Prisoner and mistress."

Kate suddenly felt uncomfortable with the way the conversation seemed to be going. "I've just remembered. I'm late. I've got to..."

"But of course you have, me dear," he said, fetching her a gentle clap across the shoulder from which she strangely did not wince, and added: "I can see yer uneasy, gel. I'll be goin' off, then. Now, if you ever needs me urgent, like – for anything. Any emergency; whistle thrice, like this."

The man put two fingers in his mouth and, pursing his lips, let forth a shrieking blast. "Go on then. Try it."

To humour him, Kate tried. After a couple of feeble attempts she got the hang of it and laughed as he clapped her on the back, crying: "Well done, gel. I reckon you got the hang of that, now. I'd better be off. Don't forget."

"But how will you hear me? I mean, you're not always going to be within earshot."

"Don't worry about that. I'll hear you, one way or t'other."

As he turned his back to go, Kate, unable to comprehend this last suggestion at all, hastily asked: "What's your name?"

"Don't go under a partickler name, I don't," he replied, "there's them as calls after me, 'Shabby Tattler', on account of me appearance, like. That's as good as any, I reckon."



Before Kate could collect her wits to question him further, he was gone. She was left with a strange impression of the man. He was as a shaft of warm sunlight cutting through the gloom of this dismal uncivilized place to which her father had so recently dragged her from the buzzing familiarity of the city.

But why did he say that about her whistling if she needed him urgently? Why would she want to? Why should she need to? And how would he hear her if she did? Was he following her? He didn't act like one of these weird stalkers she had been warned about. There was nothing tense or neurotic about him. But what was he warning her about, she wondered.

A shadow spread across her path and she shivered involuntarily as she made her way back towards the cottage her father had rented on the outskirts of the village.

## A New Life

“How long have you been here, then?” Kate asked Robert Ruddock, as they ambled slowly along the lane that led from the bus stop towards her father’s cottage on the Eastern outskirts of Yarnfold.

Robert was a sturdy handsome youth, with blondish hair and very pale blue eyes. His clothes were very ordinary, countrified in her eyes, and his general bearing was slightly uncouth, yet attractive in its masculinity.

Kate had met him one morning at the bus stop and found that he took the bus to the same school and they had agreed to meet on the bus home.

“I only arrived at the start of the year,” answered Robert. “My Dad took a job as a woodsman and gamekeeper at Fugglesham Court – that’s the big estate – and we’ve got a cottage at the edge of the woods. So you’re in old Tom’s cottage, are you?”

“I don’t know. It’s the last one as you leave the village along this lane.”

“Yeah, that’s the one,” said Robert, “the old man died a couple of years back. The cottage has been rented out since. He was a right character, so they told me. He used to ride an old nag into the village on a Thursday evening after he’d

been paid, go to the pub and get completely hammered, spending at least half his wages. Then they used to throw him across his horse and the old thing would plod home with him, unconscious, hanging over it. And his wife would lift him off and put him to bed and take the rest of his wages. She was a big woman, so they said, and Thursday was his only chance to have a drink before she got hold of his money. So he used to make the most of it.”

Kate laughed. “What happened to his wife, then, once he died?”

“They chucked her out. It was a tied cottage, belonging to the estate and the management reckoned he could make a lot more renting it out to the likes of you. No offence. If you’re from London, how come you’ve moved here, then?” Robert grinned at her in a challenging way and Kate smiled back.

“None taken. We’re not exactly rich, you know. My Dad came down here to live, to be somewhere near my Mum’s grave.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” said Robert.

“He couldn’t bear to stay in the house where she died, and felt that living in the country would do me good. I’m not so sure. I had to leave all my friends behind.”

“Well, you’ve got one here, now,” replied Robert, looking sideways at her. “If you want one, that is.”

“Thanks, you’re very kind. It’s a bit difficult, arriving halfway through the Spring Term in the second year of A-levels. Everyone knows each other and I feel a bit out of place.”

They arrived at a junction where another lane crossed theirs. “My house is down that way,” said Robert, “beyond Fugglesham Court. I’ll show you around at the weekend. My Dad being gamekeeper means I get free access almost everywhere around here. So I know my way around pretty well by now. And I’ll introduce you to some of my friends at

school, too.”

“Thanks. Don’t you want to go home, now?” asked Kate, already hoping he wouldn’t.

“No. I’ll see you home first.” Robert skipped a pace or two in front of her. “Anyway, there’s a shortcut through the woods from your place to mine I can take.”

The pair of them walked unhurriedly towards the now-visible whitewashed timber framed cottage where Kate now lived.

“It’s really rather nice. Our cottage, I mean. It’s all higgledy-piggledy. You have to walk uphill to bed in my bedroom. And when you get up in the dark, it’s a bit like being drunk, difficult to stop yourself falling over. I’ll get used to eventually, I suppose.” Kate was warming to this affable lad, with his pleasant blue eyes, blondish hair and rather rangy frame bounding around her like an eager puppy.

They had reached the cottage now. “Come inside and meet my Dad. Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?” asked Kate as she opened the gate.

“Are you sure? Won’t he mind?”

“Of course not. He’s probably out in the orchard at the back. That’s where he works when it’s sunny like this. We’ll take him a cup.”

“Ok. Fine. Great.”

Kate took him through the long living room to the kitchen in an annexe at the back. They made some tea and she gave him a tray to carry out into the garden.

Her father was sitting in a canvas director’s chair, crouched over his papers on a folding table. He was wearing a woman’s wide-brimmed basket-weave sunhat and a pair of wrap-around sunglasses. He had no shirt or shoes, only a pair of shorts.

Kate laughed at the incongruous sight he must present to someone who didn’t know him, and turned to Robert:

“That’s my Mum’s sunhat. He insists on wearing it. He says it’s so much cooler than a normal hat. That’s my Dad for you. He doesn’t care what people think.”

“Good for him,” laughed Robert, and, to Kate’s father, “I’m Robert Ruddock, Sir. Pleased to meet you.”

Kate’s father rose and shook his hand. “John Pegler. So you know my daughter? Are you at the same school?”

“Yes, and I live only just over the way,” replied Robert, pointing across towards the woods to the South. “So we get the same bus.”

“Good. I’ll be pleased to know she’ll have someone to accompany her home in the evenings, especially once winter sets in.”

“Dad! I’m not a baby, you know. I can manage quite well on my own,” replied Kate.

“I know that dear. But these long dark lanes: it’s not like the bright streets of London. So, yes, Robert, I will welcome your keeping my daughter company home from school.”

“Rob, sir. Call me Rob. That’s what my friends call me.”

Fetching two more chairs they settled to a relaxing tea in the orchard. It was more than an hour later that Robert announced he must leave. Kate’s father had engaged him in such an animated interrogation about the village and surroundings that Kate was able to sit passively and glance at them amusedly in turn, only occasionally throwing in a remark or two.

The two shook hands once again as Robert left, sealing what had been a very fast-growing friendship.

Kate was surprised. It had been the first time her father had shown any sign of high-spirits since Amelia had died two months earlier. Maybe this is a good sign, she thought. Maybe this marks a new beginning for him.

This contrast in him cast her mind back to that awful day in January.

Kate had been awakened suddenly one morning by a cry for help from her father.

Her mother, Amelia had, with her husband's help, got out of bed that morning, taken two paces into the room and frozen, wracked with pain. Kate rushed in to find her father struggling to hold her steady.

Amelia, though as thin as a bird now, had suddenly seemed to take on a deadweight that even his strength found difficult to bear. Every slight movement was accompanied by an uncontrollable scream from her mother.

Kate took Amelia's other shoulder, and the pair of them manoeuvred her back to the bed and laid her as gently as possible on it.

Kate couldn't help herself bursting into tears in sheer frustration at her helplessness as she whispered endearments into her mother's ear, stroking her hair. She looked across to her father and saw tears running down his cheeks as he fiddled with her morphine drip.

"Could you help me with this, Kate," he said, "I can't see properly."

Kate rushed round the bed, wiping away her own tears and hastily increased the rate of the pump's infusion.

Only a few days before they had cut these back because Amelia appeared to be undergoing a phase of remission from her cancer, experiencing much less pain and being able to go downstairs and walk around their house for the first time in months.

Soon the muscle-spasm that arched Amelia's back relaxed, and she subsided into a morphine-induced sleep.

"I'm afraid this looks like the end, Katie darling." Her father whispered. "The oncologist said it would reach her spine soon and that that would signal the final phase. We just have to accept it and make her as comfortable as possible."

“It can’t be, can it?” cried Kate. “She was so well yesterday, walking about. She looked so happy as she looked at everything in the living room. She was on the mend.”

“It often happens. Apparent remission. They said you can seem to get better for a while, then it hits you again, harder than ever,” replied her father.

The Macmillan nurses called an hour later, changed her and made her more comfortable.

Amelia slipped slowly away. In the first hours she would open her eyes and look longingly at Katie or John, whoever was keeping watch, swabbing her brow and cleaning her mouth of the saliva gathering there and spilling over as she turned her head in a hopeless attempt to communicate. The only words they understood through the wheezing rattle of her attempts at speech were: “Thank you, thank you.”

Later, she just laid passively, eyes closed, whimpering when any attempt was made to move her.

When Kate removed her oversized nappy to change her, she peed like a baby in the sudden rush of cold air.

She ceased eating. Kate and her father made numerous attempts to force teaspoons of water between her lips.

Towards the end her frail chest heaved in spasms as she took tiny gasps of air, three or four at a time, and then relaxed and didn’t breathe for what seemed an eternity to Kate. Then she would repeat the process.

Her eyes were sunken in their sockets and her cheekbones and nose seemed to grow as the soft tissue dissolved beneath her almost translucent skin.

Seeing her mother visibly waste before her was too much for Kate, and it was almost with relief that she obeyed her father’s instruction to “nip down to the shops to get us some dinner, or we’ll starve.”

When she returned, she saw her father standing quietly at the top of the stairs, looking vacant and lost.

“What is it?” She cried, running straight up the stairs to him, “What’s happened?”

“She’s dead. She died a few minutes ago. She just opened her eyes wide, took a deep breath and then collapsed back, giving a long sigh.”

Kate ran in to her mother and was about to fly to the bed to hug her, when she saw the strange expression of surprise in her mother’s wide eyes and open mouth. She seemed beyond reach, now, untouchable. An involuntary shudder shook her to the core.

As Kate approached and looked down at the corpse of her mother, this cage in which her spirit had dwelt, it looked so empty. She gently pushed Amelia’s lower jaw shut and closed her eyelids. Her mother’s expression looked more peaceful now. More like her living self as she was in sleep.

But Kate would never forget that awful vision of life departed from this hollow shell, that had, in a different guise, borne Amelia through life and brought her, Katie, into being, now lying prostrate before her.

She leaned forward and kissed her mother on the brow, cupping her face in her hands, as Amelia had so often done when she thought Katie was asleep when she was a little girl.

Kate’s recollections were interrupted by her father. “Nice lad, that Rob. Down to earth. Straightforward. I like that. Give us a hand with these tea things will you, Kate.”

As he approached, she turned her head away from him.

“Are you alright?” John Pegler touched her on the shoulder. “It’s mother, isn’t it?”

Kate turned and they embraced. Kate’s father hugged her tightly, as if by doing so he could somehow bring them all together again, bring his own dear Amelia back to life.

One day Kate was idly rummaging around in the attic.



There were several trunks, of varying ages and styles, stacked against the eaves. Opening the first, she shone her torch inside. It was full of papers, letters and old photos. She decided to investigate this later.

In the next she found a treasure trove of old dresses, cloaks, boots and the like. She guessed they must have belonged to Amelia. She dragged out a bundle of likely looking dresses and hauled them down the loft-ladder to her bedroom.

Finding a beautiful dress in a crepe fabric cut on the bias in deep purple, with a triangular base hem, she ripped off her tee shirt and jeans, and put it on. It clung to her body like a skin. She went to her mother's full-length mirror, now in her room, and studied herself. It was fabulous. It made her look like a film star. She turned around. The dress swirled about her legs and settled gently to reveal her hips and thighs to be more shapely than she had ever imagined. She put on a pair of the soft leather, above the knee, boots.

She turned, and turned again, watching the skirt swirling gracefully, as if in slow motion. How lovely her mother must have appeared, wearing such an outfit.

She ran downstairs to show her father. At first he looked shocked, recognising his wife's outfits, then laughed: "I see you've been in the attic. That trunk's full of her oldest dresses," he explained, "ancient Biba dresses from the seventies she wore when we first met. She used to go to Oxfam shops in Kensington when she was a student."

"When did you meet, then?"

"Oh, back in eighty-six. That was two years before you were born. That dress suits you just as much as it did her. You know she could still fit into them until recently."

Going back upstairs she tried on several other dresses and tops of this type, soft cotton tee-shirts with balloon sleeves, unable to make up her mind which was the most sexy.

She resolved to wear them for school, regardless of their

possible incongruity. She was sure their sheer elegance would be a hit with the boys, a total contrast to her modern or “Goth” companions. Worth a try, anyway, she thought.

Kate’s friendship with Robert Ruddock grew as the term progressed. He showed her the short cut between their houses and she often took it to return from his cottage.

They had arranged that on the first Saturday of the Summer half-term he would introduce her to the estate workers at Fugglesham Court and give her a guided tour of the stable courtyard and the outer buildings of the grand Elizabethan mansion.

As they walked around the grounds, Robert pointed out the various facets of the house: “Fugglesham Court is the seat of the Tercel family. They’ve been here since the 13th century, apparently.

It was originally a Great Hall house, but one Sir Gabriel de Tiercel, in the reign of Elizabeth, greatly expanded it into three wings. He built a West wing, matching the original, now the East wing and, joining the two wings, this great South façade with that gabled entrance in the middle.

He was a ruthless man, Gabriel. He removed the nearby hamlet on the South side of the house that housed his estate workers to make way for a grand vista and deer park. He was a fanatical hunter.

It’s said he massacred the villagers when they objected, and there’s other nasty tales about him as well, apparently, though I don’t know myself. After a disastrous fire, in which he died, Gabriel’s descendents further expanded the house on the north side into a series of courts, hence the present name.”

“So who lives there now?” asked Kate, as they completed their tour around the outside of the buildings.

“Just the old General Tercel himself, and a few servants. We don’t often see him. He’s been a virtual recluse since his

wife died, apparently.”

“So he’s all alone in that huge house? How sad.” Kate felt a pang of compassion for a man with all that wealth but deprived of love and family.

“Oh, no. He’s got a son, Gabriel. But he’s always away. I’ve never seen him since I’ve been here.”

They rounded the last court and returned through the great arch into the stable courtyard. “Want a cuppa before you go? I’ve got to help my Dad this afternoon in the woods, putting out the feed for the pheasants.”

“Ok. Yes, thank you.” Kate followed him into a sort of parlour.

“This is where Dad and the others eat when they’re not out on the estate. It’s empty at the moment, it not being lunchtime yet. I’m meeting him here soon.”

He made her a cup of tea and passed her a huge biscuit-barrel. The windows in this room were so dusty that the courtyard outside was only hazily visible. As they drank their tea, Kate could see blurred figures passing to and fro outside.

“I’d better go,” she said, “I know you’re busy.”

“Never too busy for you,” answered Robert with a broad grin. “Next time you come round I’ll take you out on the quad bike. It’s brilliant. We use it to transport the feed for the pheasants around the woods where the paths are too small for a tractor. I’ll have to get my Dad to agree, first. You’ll have to cling on tight, you know, if you’re not going to fall off, and I’ve got a spare helmet.”

“Thanks. I’ll really look forward to that,” Kate said, as she walked towards the door. “Bye.”

As she opened it she met the first of the estate workers trickling in for their lunch break. She walked to Robert’s cottage and then down the lane towards the village and her home.