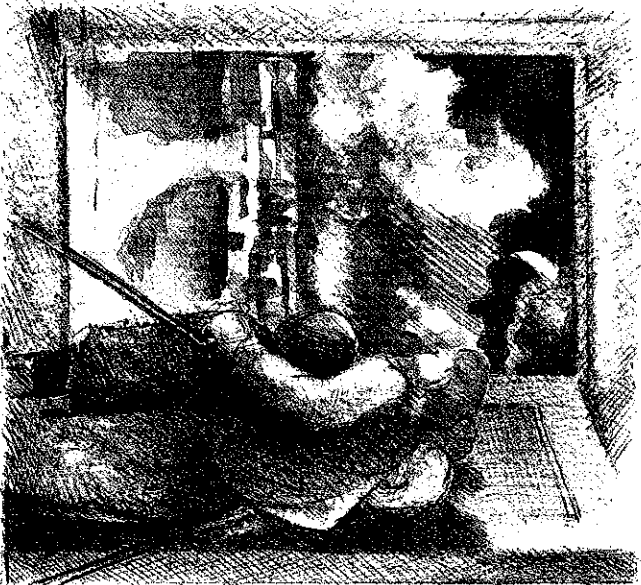


Chapter Five

WHEN MRS CARTER opened the cottage door, the wind snatched it out of her hands and slammed the door against the wall.



'Blast!' said Mr Carter. 'That's a rough old night!'
The four of them stood just inside the door, huddled



together, staring out, getting used to the storm and the darkness.

There was a slice of moon well up in the sky. It seemed to be speeding behind grey lumpy clouds, running away from something that was chasing it. The Carters' little garden looked ashen and the marsh looked ashen and Mr Elkin's fields looked ashen.

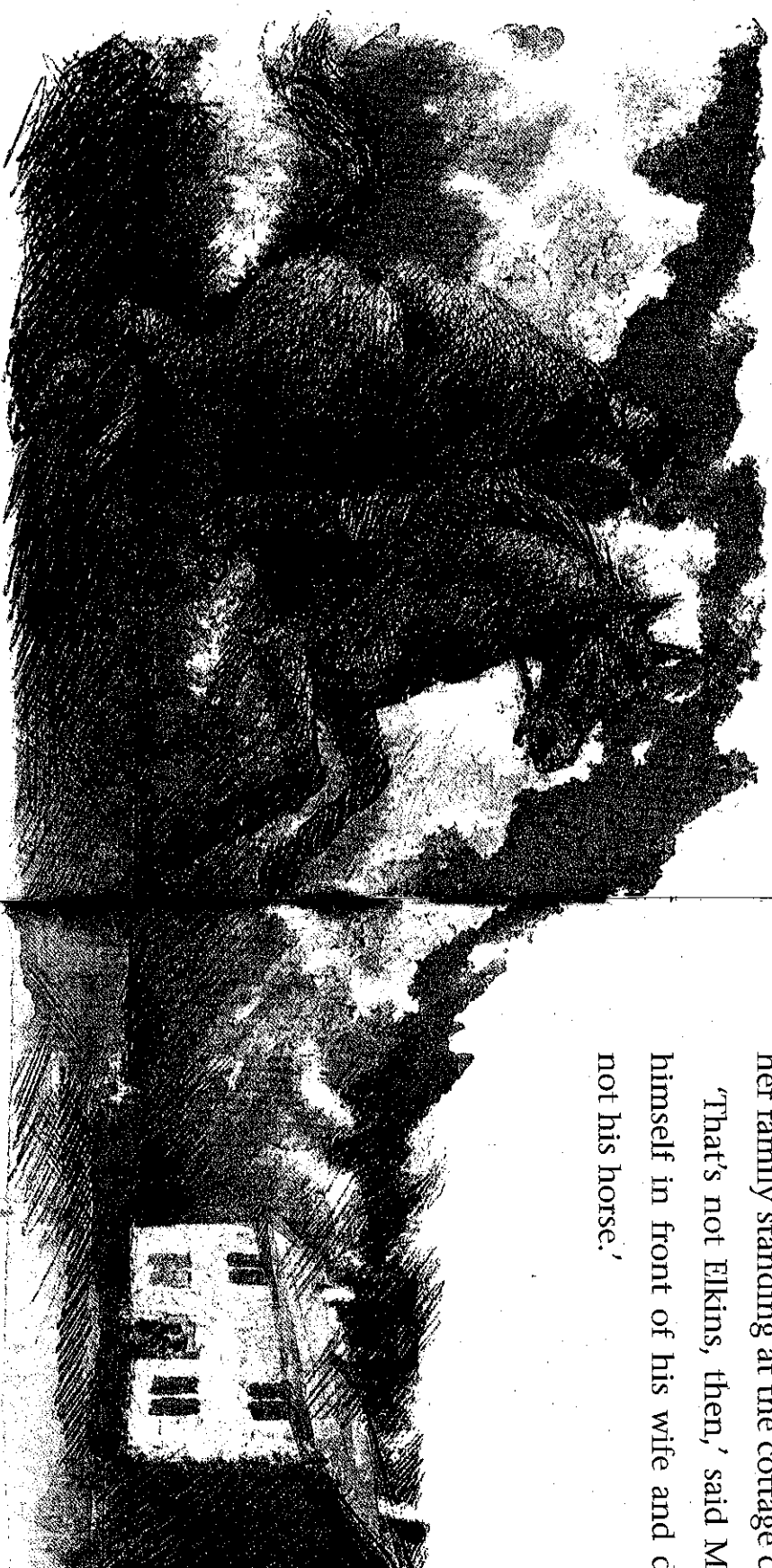
They all heard it then: the sound of hooves, galloping.

'Blast!' said Mr Carter. 'Who can that be, then?'

'In this storm!' cried Annie's mother.

'At midnight,' said Mr Carter.

Annie slipped one hand inside her coat. The hooves drummed louder and louder at the top of them, and round the corner galloped a horseman on a fine chestnut horse. 'Whoa!' shouted the rider when he saw her family standing at the cottage door. 'That's not Elkins, then,' said Mr Elkins. 'That's not his horse.'



The horseman stopped just outside the pool of light streaming through the open door, and none of them recognised him. He was tall and unsmiling.

'That's a rough old night,' Mr Carter called out. The horseman nodded and said not a word.

'Are you going into Waterslain?'

'Waterslain?' said the horseman. 'Not in particular.'

'Blast!' said Mr Carter in a thoughtful kind of way.

'I could go,' said the horseman in a dark voice, 'if there was a need.'

Then Annie's mother loosed her daughter's hand and stepped out into the storm and soon explained the need, and Mr Carter went out and asked the horseman his name. The wind gave a shriek and Annie was unable to catch his reply. 'So you see,' said Annie's mother, 'there's no time to be lost.'

'Come on up, Annie,' said the horseman.

'It's all right,' said Annie, shaking her head.





'I'll take you,' said the horseman.

'You'll be fine,' said Mrs Carter.

'I can walk,' insisted Annie.

But the horseman quickly bent down and put a hand under one of Annie's shoulders and swung her up on to the saddle in front of him as if she were as light as thistledown.

Annie's heart was beating fearfully. She bit hard on

her lower lip. Then the horseman raised one hand and spurred his horse. Mr and Mrs Carter stood and watched as Annie turned away the full white moon of her face and then she and the horseman were swallowed in the stormy darkness.





Chapter Six

AT FIRST ANNIE said nothing and the horseman said nothing. But as the horse slowed to a trot and then began to wade across the ford, the horseman asked quietly, 'Are you afraid, Annie?'

'I am,' said Annie. 'I'm afraid for my sister and her baby,' she said. 'And I am afraid of meeting the ghost.' She paused and then added in a sort of sob, 'I think I'd die if I met him tonight.'

At first the horseman didn't reply, and Annie thought it best not to say anything about being rather afraid of him as well, not knowing who he was. But then the rider suddenly reigned in.

'Annie,' he said, 'your sister and her baby will be all right.'

'How do you know?' asked Annie.

'And you will be all right,' said the horseman.



'There are ghosts and ghosts, Ar and unkind ghosts. You won't me fear between here and Waterslain.'

And so, step by step, Annie and slowly crossed the ford.

Now the chestnut mare quickened her stride again.
It comforted Annie to feel the mare's warm neck and
flanks, and after a while she leant forward and buried
her face in its mane.



With her eyes closed, Annie had the sense that she was not so much riding as flying - flying through the storm on a journey that might last forever.



He's a ghost himself, thought Annie. He's bewitched us all and he's taking me away into the always-darkness. No! No! That's wrong. No, he's my helper and we're going to the rescue of a maiden in distress.

When she sat up again, Annie found herself shook her head and frowned. 'That's herself. 'You've been reading too much of herself. And yet, wondered Annie, who is he? does he come from? And how did he get right past our door just when we need your name?' called Annie over her shoulder. 'What's that?' said the horse.

'Storm!' cried Annie. That's even

