

## The Fire Witch

by Philip Atkinson



Megan Broomley lived all alone in a picture-book cottage at a place called Hodd's End. The cottage had originally belonged to the farm and was used to house tied workers who laboured their entire lives for rent and food plus a shamefully inadequate wage. But now the cottage belongs to Megan.

Megan had red hair, although these days it's the colour of a January sky, and she's considered by many a witch, but not the kind that gets burned at the stake or is covered in warts. She was a beautiful looking woman—and still is. The witch thing came about because she was a folklorist in the true sense of the word. Folklore is lore that gets handed down by its very use. It is changed to suit the user, and the moment it is recorded it ceases to be folklore and becomes a recipe. But Megan had learned her animal husbandry from her father and her domestic magic from her mother. She could bring cows home simply by banging two buckets together and she could lure pigs to their own slaughter by singing the melancholy swine-soothing song learned in her infancy. She knew what made animals sick and what to do to cure them, if cured they could be.

Megan could have waltzed into any restaurant and become famous for her cookery—what she offered for sale at market was snapped up within a couple of hours of opening. Her cheeses were a major source of income until the government brought in regulations that banned the use of non-pasteurized milk. She recouped the income loss by introducing herbed butters that quickly got on the shopping lists of both professional and amateur cooks from far and wide. These asides were carried on in addition to the work required by the farmer to maintain the occupancy of the cottage—she also knew ways with the soil that could bring in harvests yielding consistently better than any of his neighbours.

Megan could never be described as an arrogant woman, but she did have another gift of which she was particularly proud—she could create fire. She didn't need a match or accelerant. Somehow she could cause things to burst into flame just by staring. It was a gift she had always had; something that came as a shock to her parents. They discovered it when Megan set alight the kindling in the cottage grate one morning while her mother searched for a match. The implications of such a talent being made public were dismaying, and her father promptly forbade its use. The child complied until, in her late teens, both parents died within a month of one another. After that, she rekindled her gift

and practised it to perfection. Every day for forty-five years now her fire has been lit by her secret.

The first farmer Megan had known was Neville Nixon who had owned the farm even before she was born. He died when she was about six and he left the place to his eldest son John, who had been born on exactly the same day as her own father. In turn, John left the farm to his son Edward. Edward and Megan were about the same age and had at one time—albeit briefly—been lovers in the old fashioned sense. Long after it was over she married a man named Brian, and Edward married a woman from town named Olivia. Neither couple had children, so when their spouses died some three decades later Megan and Edward were left alone except for each other and were glad for it. One morning in summer, a year and a day after burying his wife, Edward called on Megan and she invited him into the cottage and made tea.

“I shall leave you the farm,” he announced bluntly. “There's no one else. Your family has been here just as long as us. It's only right. I shall leave you the farm.”

“You planning to pop your clogs then, Teddy?”

“You never know, do you?”

“We're only sixty-six years old, you fool.”

“My Olivia was only sixty and your Brian only made seventy-two.”

“I have no intention of dying for a long time yet, and I have no desire to own a farm. If you leave it to me I'll keep the cottage and get rid of the rest.”

“But who'll get it then? My only relation is some cousin I've never met. He's a city boy born and bred with no idea about farming. How can I give it to him?”

“Give it to someone else then.”

“Anyway,” Edward continued softly. “I want you to have the cottage. I'll make sure that's in my will. I promise you that. We were so close once, Megan, weren't we?”

“Oh, that's your game, you old bugger. Listen, I'm past it. I don't want to wash your clothes and dishes and I certainly don't want no one else in my bed either.”

Edward was dejected, partly because of the rebuttal but almost as much for her having guessed his intention so easily. Edward was not good at being on his own and had even begun to weep in the evenings after the help had long gone home. He had no strength left either to plan a future nor to deal with day to day life on his own. The last of his courage had been expended in approaching Megan with his clumsy attempt at courting.

As it happens, her answer would not have made much difference to his life even if it had been in the affirmative because Edward himself was dead within the month. The funeral was at the sloping churchyard of St. Jude—patron saint of lost causes, which, thought Megan, just about summed things up. As the minister completed the ritual of burial the rain fell in thick drops on the few gathered there. A small child hid behind his mother's skirts each time Megan glanced over, convinced that he'd become the victim of a spell if he stayed in full view. The locals were represented by the verger and his wife, and the minister of course. Megan was the only real friend, and there were two younger men she'd not seen before. They turned out to be trouble.

Megan was invited to Edward's lawyer's office the following Monday for the reading of the will. Both of the men were there, one was the lawyer and the other turned out to be

Edward's unmet cousin, Vaughn. Vaughn's wife was there—the woman behind whose legs the little boy at the funeral had taken refuge. Megan learned later that the boy had come as a package with the wife and had never known his real father. The lawyer was looking in a mirror as they entered his office. He adjusted his hair with the palm of his hand, then turned and gestured for them to sit down.

"There's a problem," he began. "I'm afraid there's an anomaly with the will." He shuffled papers around and cleared his throat. "The will itself is quite straightforward, but there's an amendment been found at the house."

"And what does that mean?" asked Vaughn. The lawyer took off his glasses and crossed one leg over the other, and touched his hair again.

"The will stipulates that all the worldly possessions of Edward Paul Nixon—you understand, I hope, that the law requires all debtors to be paid first, of course, so that what remains is what constitutes 'all worldly possessions'—anyway, it stipulates all shall be left to Megan Broomley."

There was a split second of silence and then at exactly the same time Vaughn said, "Shit." and Megan said, "I don't want it."

They looked at one another. The lawyer then went on.

"However ... a note of a later date has been found among Mr. Nixon's effects which states ... " He unfolded the paper in front of him ... "I have spoken today with Megan Broomley who has said she does not wish to have the farm as all she wants is Hodd's End cottage, so therefore I leave the farm in its entirety to my cousin twice removed, Vaughn Harper."

"So what's the problem?" asked Megan. "I get the cottage and Mr. Harper gets the farm." Vaughn was beaming.

"Perfect," he said.

"Not quite perfect," said the lawyer. "You see, well, the amendment is signed although not witnessed, but that should not prevent it standing up in court, but ... it doesn't actually leave anything to you Mrs. Broomley."

"What do you mean, it says I only wanted the cottage so Vaughn gets the rest. I don't want more than that. I'm happy with that."

"Yes, but it doesn't actually *specify* that. The effective tract says 'I leave the farm in its entirety to my cousin twice removed, Vaughn Harper.' So you see, he hasn't said that you get the cottage. The cottage is in fact part of the farm."

It took a moment for the penny to drop. Vaughn could hardly contain himself. He'd gone from being left absolutely nothing to getting absolutely everything in the space of a minute. Megan looked at him.

"Well, I s'pose it's down to you Mr. Harper," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Well, Mrs. Harper and I already discussed what we'd do if I was left the farm. We intend to move in and try our hands at being farmers." He looked at his wife and they embraced and laughed. "So don't worry Mrs. Broomley—we'll probably be able to keep you on, and even if we can't there's no rush to move out."

A palpable silence filled the room until everyone in it, Vaughn included, was red-faced with embarrassment. The lawyer, looking almost as if he were enjoying the denouement of having thrown a spanner into the works, looked back and forth between Megan and Vaughn. Mrs. Harper looked at Vaughn and the floor while his gaze flitted among them all. But Megan only looked at Vaughn.

“I fear you’ve misunderstood, Mr. Harper,” she ventured. “The intent of the note is obvious even if Edward’s words are inaccurate. The cottage is mine, the farm is yours.”

Vaughn looked even more befuddled than he already had been, but his wife squeezed his hand and he suddenly pulled himself together and went on the offensive.

“I don’t think so, Mrs. Broomley. The cottage is part of the farm, the note clearly states you don’t want the farm, so, there you have it. But as I said, you’re welcome to stay in the cottage as a tenant or do whatever else you want.”

“And what do you say?” Megan said to the lawyer.

“Well ... Mr. Harper is technically correct. You could contest the will, but in a case such as this where clarity is uncertain, it would likely be set aside, in which case everything reverts to the next of kin—which is Mr. Harper.”

As the words sank in and Megan realized she had no ally in the lawyer, she also noted that Vaughn wore a face of one wounded by insult. He had offered the tenancy to Megan which, in his opinion, was simply confirming the status quo; neither he nor Megan lost out. The awkward standoff ended abruptly when a light bulb in the desk lamp chose that moment to pop and the lampshade gave off a veil of grey smoke before it burst into flame. By the time the lawyer had it under control Megan had left his office and was on her way home.

Two weeks later, the Harper family moved into the farmhouse. All the farm hands had been kept on as Vaughn had been advised to keep them by his lawyer who had become, opportunistically, also his financial advisor. Vaughan had stepped into farming at just about the busiest time possible—half the fields were rippling with hay and the other half filled with pregnant cows. Not many farmers timed calving for the back end of the year, but the Nixon family always did. Their market niche was veal and the winter arrival of the calves meant they were perfect by the time the springtime export window opened.

“The French love it,” the lawyer had said. “Prices are at a premium so early in the year and the Nixons have dozens of customers already in place drooling. It’s a bit of a risk, the cows need to be producing lots of milk for the calves before there’s green grass, but that’s where the hay comes in. It’s supposed to be the best hay in the world.”

“How so?” asked Vaughn, loving all the words and nuances of his new farmer profession.

“Well, it’s probably just the land it grows on, but the local gossip is that the extra lush growth has got something to do with Megan Broomley’s magic. Did you know she was supposed to be a witch?” He laughed.

“Get away! Really? I hope she’s not gonna put a spell on me about the cottage, I think she’s still humpty-backed about that.”

“I don’t know why,” said the lawyer. “She’s living in it for nothing. You’re not even asking her to do the things she did for Mr. Nixon, are you? And it’s not like she has any family to pass it along to. I’ve been thinking about that. There’s good money to be made from renting out that cottage as a holiday let or a B&B. We should talk in the New Year.”

Meanwhile, Megan had taken a keen interest in the Harper’s son. After his mother had told him they owned the cottage, he felt Megan wouldn’t dare turn him into a toad. He inched closer to her door over the first week they were in residence until, finally, she opened it and told him to come in for a glass of milk. The child almost turned inside out in panic, but she ushered him over the stook before he’d had time to think.

“I see you creeping around out there. Creeping’s no good, if you want something just bang on the door and ask. How old are you?”

“I’m nine.”

“Gawd, you’re a bit shrimpy for nine, I thought you was about six.” The boy looked down at the floor. “Don’t you worry, I can give you some stuff that will make you grow faster than dandelions.” He seemed pleased and worried at the same time.

“What’s your name then?”

“Tarquin.” he said.

“Stone me ... why’d they give you such a naff name?” she asked bluntly. He looked at the floor again. “Don’t mind my way of saying things, it’s an interesting name.”

“They tease me at school,” he said. “I hate it.”

“Me too,” she replied. “Let’s give you a better one.”

“Can I be called Harry? Like Harry Potter?”

“Of course you can. Harry it is.”

“And will you teach me to be a wizard?”

“Why would I be able to do that?”

“Well, everyone says, you know.”

“I don’t know, I’m sure. I know what they call me in the village, but everything I know I worked hard at. None of it’s magic, except maybe one thing.”

“What’s that?” he asked eagerly.

“Never you mind. Here, Harry, you come and give me a hand.” And the two of them became instant and fast friends as they went about the cottage kitchen making cheese, baking bread and talking, talking, talking.

The first cow aborted late on December 14<sup>th</sup> but the panic didn’t set in until a second one miscarried during the night. By 4:00 pm another had aborted and died.

“What do we do?” Vaughn asked the lawyer. “We’ll just have to sell them for meat I suppose.”

“Vaughn, I checked into that. You can’t sell fallen stock for anything but dog food.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean if a cow drops dead it’s automatically declared unfit for human consumption. All you’ll get is the insurance money.”

“We are insured, then?”

“Yes, of course, but that won’t help at all if you lose more. You’ve got bills to pay and if you miss the end of year deadline you’ll be in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Vaughn was feeling very vulnerable all of a sudden.

“Big trouble. The farm is collateral for all the orders outstanding. If the orders aren’t filled the customers have a right to compensation. You had to do that to get the deal in the first place.”

“But how bad can it be?” Vaughn’s voice was getting louder.

“Do you have other money?”

“No, I spent it all on doing up this farmhouse. I didn’t even own any kind of house before cousin Edward left this one to me.”

“Oh dear,” said the lawyer. “That means you’ll have to put it on the market to cover the costs.”

“I’ll lose it you mean? Let me get this straight ... how many cows have to die before all this happens?”

“It’s not the cows dying, Vaughn, although that would be an even worse disaster. It’s the abortions. You need the calves to be born so they’ll be big enough to sell by April.”

“How ironic,” said Vaughn. “They need to live so I can have them killed. What’s doing this anyway?”

“I’ve no idea. You’re the farmer.” Vaughn almost laughed. Then his expression changed to angry.

“You don’t think that old witch has poisoned them, do you? Come on.” And the two men went striding across the field to the cottage.

“What do you want?” Megan asked as they stood in the wane light before the door.

“Do you know why the cows are losing their babies?” demanded Vaughn.

“They’re called calves,” she said. “And as a matter of fact yes, I do know.”

“I knew it. I knew it would have something to do with you,” he began, pointing a shaking finger right at her face, but the lawyer interrupted. He pushed his hand through his hair and smiled condescendingly.

“Mrs. Broomley, if you know any way of stopping it can you please tell us. It’s in your best interest—the cows are aborting and if we can’t stop it Vaughn and his family will lose the farm. They’ll have to move in here so you’ll have to go too.”

“I think you’ll find the cottage is part of the farm so if he loses one he’ll lose the other,” she said coldly. Vaughn’s face turned suddenly ashen, and the lawyer looked more than perturbed. Everyone knew what had to come next, but it took a concerted effort for Vaughn to say it.

“OK. You get the cottage.”

“I’ll get pen and paper,” said Megan. “Would you like some tea?” Vaughn looked at the lawyer when Megan went to the kitchen.

“This is down to you. You should never have pointed out that glitch in the will. She wouldn’t be bending me over now.”

“But if we can prove she’s poisoned the cows we’ll take her to court and recover the cottage with ease. We might even get her a jail sentence.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, let’s not make this worse than it already is,” Vaughn said flatly. Megan returned with the pen and paper and the lawyer set down in words that the cottage was given freehold to Megan Broomley etc. etc. Vaughn stood over the writing so there were no shenanigans with the semantics and they called in a farm hand to act as second witness. Megan owned the cottage.

“So it’s now mine ... even if you lose the farm?” Vaughn’s eyes nearly popped out. “Don’t worry, I’m just kidding. Come here.” And she motioned the two men over to stand beside her at the cottage window.

“See those two oak trees in the corner of the cow field?” The men crowded the small panes to look.

“Yes,” said Vaughn.

“Yes,” said the lawyer.

“Your missus spent a few hours cutting the mistletoe out of them a few days back.”

“Yes,” said Vaughn. “She has a contract to supply it to a shop in town.”

“Well, she may have cleaned up on sales but what she left behind is what’s causing the cows to drop early. All the crappy bits she didn’t think would sell she left in the field and the cows have eaten it. Mistletoe will cause abortion in cattle and sheep. The ones that fell ill were the ones in that field, the others will be fine, but you’d better gather up what’s left because that field gets sheep next month.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’ve told you now.”

Vaughn looked at Megan for a moment and she wondered if he would lose his temper, but in the end he smiled and said, “My son told me you’re the most clever person he’s met. I think he might be right.” And he turned around and set off to find a farm hand.

The lawyer was not so understanding. He tarried a few moments and once he thought Vaughan was out of earshot he turned on Megan.

“Well, congratulations, you’ve made me look a fool.”

“I can assure you, there’s no malice in me. You just do your job properly and look after Mr. Harper and his family. And you have yourself a nice Christmas.”

“I heard they call you a witch, but you don’t scare me. I don’t like to be made to look a fool. I intend to reverse this if I can.”

Then he too turned and left. But as he cocked his leg over the stile at the end of the cottage garden, a wisp of thin grey smoke curled from his hair.

*from [Fireside Tales of Christmas](#) available from Amazon books.*

