

2 Island of Ghosts

TEA WHEN I WAS A CHILD WAS ALWAYS FISH, FISH and potatoes; and that evening it was mullet, a great pink fish that stared up at me with glazed eyes from the platter. I had no appetite for it. All I could think of were those two letters in the sand on Rushy Bay. I had to know one way or the other – I had to be sure it was the Birdman.

I forced myself to eat the fish for I knew mother and father would suspect something if I did not, for mullet was known to be my favourite fish. We ate in silence, busying ourselves over the fish, so I had the whole meal to work out how best to ask them about the initials in the sand, without incriminating myself.

'Saw the Birdman today,' I said at last, as casually as I could.

'Hope you kept your distance,' said Father, pushing his plate away. 'With young Daniel Pender again were you? Always with him aren't you?' And it was true I suppose. Daniel Pender and Gracie Jenkins were a pair, inseparable. We always had been. He lived just across the way from our front gate at Veronica Farm. Whatever we did, we did together. Father went on. 'Proper young scallywag his father says he is and I can believe it. You be sure he doesn't lead you into any trouble, my girl. Always looks like a big puppy that one with his arms and legs too long for the rest of him. Hair's always stood up on his head like he's just got out of bed. Proper scallywag he looks.'

'Looks aren't everything,' said mother quietly; and then she smiled and added, 'they can't be, can they, else how would I ever have come to pick you?'

'My beard, perhaps, Clemmie,' father laughed, and he stroked his beard and smoothed his moustache. He always called her 'Clemmie' when he was happy. It was 'Clem' when he was angry.

'You leave Daniel be,' said Mother. 'He's a clever boy, clever with his hands. You seen those boats he makes?' 'I help him,' I insisted. 'I paint them and I make the sails.'

'Been sailing them all day, I suppose,' said father. 'Out by the pool were you? That where you saw the Birdman?'

'Yes, Father,' I said; and then, 'About the Birdman, Father; everyone just calls him "The Birdman", but he must have a real name like other people, mustn't he?'

'Woodcock,' said father, sitting back in his chair and undoing a notch in his belt as he always did after a meal. 'Woodcock, that's what his mother was called anyway. You can see for yourself if you like – she's buried down in the churchyard somewhere. Last one to leave Samson they say she was, her and the boy. Starving they were by all accounts. Anyway, they came over to Bryher and built that cottage up there on Heathy Hill away from everyone else. The old woman died a few years after I was born. Must have been dead, oh thirty years or more now. The Birdman's lived on his own up there ever since. But you hear all sorts of things about his old mother. There's some will tell you she was a witch, and some say she was just plain mad. P'raps she was both, I don't know. Same with the Birdman; I don't know whether he's just mad or evil with it. Either way it's best to keep away from him. There's things I could tell you . . .'

'Don't go frightening her now with your stories,' said

Mother. 'Anyway it's only rumours and tittle-tattle. I don't believe half of it. If anything goes wrong on this island they blame it on the Birdman. Lobsters aren't there to be caught – it's his fault. Blight in the potatoes – it's his fault. Anyone catches the fever – it's his fault. Dog goes missing – they say he's eaten it. Lot of old nonsense. He's just a bit simple, bit mad perhaps, that's all.'

'Simple my aunt,' Father said, getting up and going over to his chair by the stove. 'And what's more, it's not all tittle-tattle, Clemmie, not all of it. You know it's not.'

'There's no need to tell her any more,' said Mother. 'Long as she doesn't go anywhere near him, long as she keeps off Samson, that's all that matters. Don't you go filling her head with all those stories.'

'But they're not all stories, are they, Clemmie? Remember what happened to Charlie Webber?'

'Charlie Webber? Who's he?' I asked.

'Never you mind about Charlie Webber,' said Mother, and she spoke firmly to Father.

'That's enough – you'll only frighten her.'

But Father ignored her. He leaned forward towards me in his chair, stuffing his pipe with tobacco. 'Charlie Webber was my best friend when I was a boy, Gracie.

Got into all sorts of scrapes and capers together, Charlie and me. Nothing we wouldn't tell each other; and Charlie wouldn't ever have lied to me, not in a million years. He wasn't like that, was he, Clemmie?' But Mother wouldn't answer him. She walked away and busied herself at the sink. His voice dropped to a whisper now, almost as if he was afraid of being overheard. 'There's always been strange stories about Samson, Gracie. Course, people only half-believed them, but they've always steered clear of Samson all the same, just in case. But it was all on account of the Birdman and his mother that Samson became a place no one dared go near. They were the ones who put it about that there was a curse on the place. They were always warning everyone to keep off, so we did. They told everyone it was an island of ghosts, that whoever set foot on the place would bring the terrible curse of Samson down on his family. No one quite believed all that about ghosts and curses; but just the same everyone kept well clear of the place, everyone except Charlie.'

Father lit up his pipe and sat back in his chair which creaked underneath him as it always did whenever he moved. 'I never went over there, but Charlie did. It was a day I'll never forget, never, never — low tide, no water

to speak of between Bryher and Samson. You could walk across. It was my idea, and not one I'm proud of, Gracie, I can tell you. It was me that dared Charlie Webber. I dared him to walk over to Samson. We were always daring each other to do silly things, that's just how we were; and Charlie Webber never could resist a dare. I stood on top of Samson Hill, and watched him running over the sands towards Samson, leaping the pools. It took him about ten minutes I suppose and there he was jumping up and down on the beach waving and shouting to me, when suddenly this man in a black sou'wester appeared out of the dunes behind him, came from nowhere. He began screaming at Charlie like some mad fiend and Charlie ran and ran and ran. He ran like a hare all the way back across the sand, stumbling and splashing through the shallows. By the time he reached me he was white with fear, Gracie, white with it I tell you. But that's not all of it. That very same night Charlie Webber's house was burnt to the ground. It's true, Gracie. Everyone managed to get out alive, but they never did find out what caused the fire; but Charlie knew all right, and I knew. Next day Charlie went down with the scarlet fever. I caught it after him and then near enough every child on the island got it. Aunt Mildred

– you know Daniel's Aunty Mildred – she was just a baby at the time and she nearly died of it.'

'Did Charlie Webber die of it?' I asked.

'Now that's enough,' said Mother sharply. 'You've said enough.'

'Clem,' said Father, 'she's ten years old and she's not a baby any more. She's old enough to hear the rest of it.' He lit his pipe again, drawing on it deeply several times before he shook out the match. 'No, Gracie, Charlie didn't die, but he had to leave the island. His family was ruined, couldn't afford to rebuild the house. But before Charlie left for good he told me something I'll never forget. The day after the fire, Charlie was sitting on the quay when he felt someone behind him. He looked around and there was the Birdman. There was nowhere for Charlie to run to. He'd come, he said, to say sorry to Charlie, to explain to him that it wasn't his fault. There was nothing he could do once Charlie had set foot on Samson. He told Charlie that there was a curse on the island, that the ghosts of the dead haunted the place and could not rest, not until the guilt of Samson had been redeemed, whatever that meant. And when Charlie asked him why there was a curse on Samson, why the ghosts could not rest – this is what he told him. He was

a little boy when it happened, younger than Charlie, he said. The people of Samson woke up one morning to find a ship run aground on a sandbank off Samson. Like a ghost ship it was on a flat calm sea. No fog, no wind, no reason for it to be there. They rowed out and hailed it, but no one answered; so they clambered on board. There was no one there. The ship was deserted. Well you don't look a gift horse in the mouth, do you? Every man on Samson, sixteen of them there were in all he said – every one of them was on that ship when it refloated at high tide. They sailed it off to Penzance to claim the salvage money, but they never got there. The ship foundered on the Wolf Rock, off Land's End, went down in broad daylight, mind you; gentle breeze, no fog. Every man on board was lost. The Birdman's own father went down on that ship, Gracie.'

'It's a horrible story,' said Mother, 'horrible. Every time I hear it it makes me shiver.'

'True nonetheless, Clemmie,' father said. 'And that wasn't the last of it. It seems things went from bad to worse on Samson after that. With no men left to go fishing or to work up the fields, the women and children soon began to go hungry. All they had to eat was limpets. The Birdman told Charlie that they even had to

eat the dogs. It's true, Gracie, that's what Charlie told me. Then with the hunger came the fever, and the old folk and the babies began to die. So they left. One by one the families left the island until the Birdman and his mother were alone on Samson.'

Father drew on his pipe again and found it had gone out – his pipe was always going out. 'And I believe every word Charlie told me, Gracie. I don't pretend to understand the whys and wherefores; and I tell you straight, I don't know if it's him that's cursed or Samson. All I do know is that it's better to keep away from the both of them – that's for sure. So you keep well clear of him, you hear me now?'

I sat silent for some time lost in father's story, my head full of questions. 'So he can put spells and curses on people like they say he can?' I asked.

'Maybe,' said father, tapping his pipe out on the side of the stove. And I shivered as I thought of how close we had been to his cottage that day, and how he must have been watching us on Rushy Bay. Then there were those letters in the sand. Perhaps they were initials, but perhaps they were part of some spell. I wanted to be sure.

'What about his first name, Father?' I asked. 'Do you know his first name?' But immediately I regretted it for

I felt Mother looking at me. I was being over inquisitive, too interested; and she was suspicious.

'Why all these sudden questions about the Birdman, Gracie?' she asked. 'You've never shown any interest in him before.'

'Just saw him today, like I said. Just wondered, that's all. Daniel and me, we just wondered about him.'

Mother came over and stood in front of me. She took my chin in her hand and pulled it up so that I had to look her in the eyes. She always did this when she thought I'd been up to some mischief and she wanted to get the truth out of me. 'You haven't been speaking to him, have you Gracie? You haven't been over on Heathy Hill, have you? You know you're not supposed to go there, don't you?'

'No, Mother, course I haven't, honest I haven't.' It was just as well I did not have to lie, for Mother would have known. Father I could deceive any time I wanted, but Mother knew me far too well. She looked down at me out of tired kind eyes, a knowing smile on her lips, so knowing that I had to look away.

'You leave him to his birds, Gracie,' father said. 'You keep well away like I said. Promise me now. You be a good girl and stay away.'

'I promise,' I said. 'I'll stay away.'

And so I did, for a day or so at least. It took only that long for Daniel to persuade me to go with him back to Rushy Bay, that we had been silly to run away in the first place just because we'd heard a donkey braying. I told him everything Father had told me about the Birdman and Samson and Charlie Webber. He listened, but I could see he didn't really believe any of it. He said he had heard something about the fire before, and that it didn't matter anyway because we weren't going to Samson like Charlie Webber did. We were only going to Rushy Bay. And the Birdman might be a bit loony, but what did that matter? He just wanted to make friends, that was all. Why else would he give us back our boat? Why else would he be leaving messages for us in the sand? We didn't have to go anywhere near him, did we? Perhaps I agreed to go with Daniel because I was half convinced by his arguments, or perhaps I was inquisitive.

When I crawled up over Samson Hill with Daniel that next day I kept flat on my stomach in the heather until I was sure the Birdman was not down there on Rushy Bay waiting for us.

The Birdman was not waiting for us, but something

else was. Lying on its side in the sand in almost the same spot we had found our boats the day before was a bird, a cormorant. At first we thought it had been washed up dead, for it lay amongst the flotsam at the high water mark. As we approached I could see it was small even for a young bird, and that the feathers were not oily black as they should have been. I thought it must have been blown off the rocks before it could fly.

Suddenly Daniel caught my arm and pointed further along the beach. A trail of footprints led right to where the cormorant lay and away again. At that moment I would have panicked and run as I had done before, but this time Daniel's hand was firm on my arm and he led me forward. In the sand above the cormorant, written out in orange shells were the letters I now expected to find: 'Z.W.' It was not until we were down on our knees in the sand beside it that I realized the cormorant's feathers were not stirred by the breeze as they ought to have been, that it was in fact made of wood. Then we noticed the shells. Only a few feet away the shells along the tide-mark had been rearranged to read: 'Stay and play. Your beach as much as mine.'

We scanned the dunes above us for any sign of the black sou'wester amongst the reeds, but all we could see

of the Birdman were his gulls still lined up on the thatch of his cottage watching us. Thin wisps of smoke rose from the chimney pots at each end of the cottage only to be whipped away at once and dissipated by the wind. Daniel reached out and picked up the cormorant. The base of it was carved out as a rock, covered with limpets and barnacles, and the cormorant stood on his great webbed feet, head slightly lifted, almost indignant. He was leaning forward as if balancing himself against the wind. All his feathers were so finely crafted that I expected them to be soft to the touch. Daniel set the bird down in the wet sand facing out over the water to Samson and sat back on his ankles.

'You ever seen anything like it?' he said stroking the crown of the bird's head. 'Looks as if he could lift off and fly, doesn't he?'

'D'you think the Birdman's watching us?' I whispered. 'Spect so. Don't mind if he is. Look at this, Gracie. The man who made this isn't a madman; he just can't be. And he gave us back our boat, didn't he? It's like I told you, Gracie, he's trying to make friends with us. He likes us being here. I'm going to stay and sail our boats, Gracie just like he said we could, and what's more I'm going to say thank you to him.'

'Well I'm not going anywhere near that cottage,' I said, suddenly cold with fear at the very thought of it. 'Not in a million years.'

'We don't need to, Gracie,' he said. 'Look.' And he wrote in shells beside the Birdman's message: 'Thanks. Daniel and Grace.'

'No,' I shouted as soon as I saw my name in the sand. 'You can't, you can't! He'll know who we are if you do that, he'll come after us and put his curses on us.' And I lifted my foot and kicked the sand all over Daniel's writing until I had obliterated every last letter. I was crying in spite of myself. 'Father says he puts spells on people. We musn't talk to him. We're not supposed to.'

Daniel looked up at me and I could see from the look in his eyes that he was disappointed in me. 'But we're not going to talk to him, are we?' he said. 'Look, Gracie, it stands to reason. If the Birdman had wanted to put a spell on us he could have done it already, couldn't he? Well he could, couldn't he?' I would not answer him because I hated to be wrong, and I knew well enough in my heart that I was. In my shame and fury I kicked the cormorant over on its side and ran off up the beach towards Samson Hill. Daniel called after me to come

back and all my rage at my own humiliating fear burst from me.

'If you're so brave, Daniel Pender,' I screamed at him, 'then you can sign your silly name; but I'm not coming here again, never, d'you hear me? Never. You can keep your silly boats and your silly cormorant for all I care. I don't want it and I don't want ever . . .', and I would have gone on to say every hurtful thing I could think of, had I not caught sight of the Birdman's dog plodding purposefully along the beach behind Daniel, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. I tried to call out to Daniel to warn him but my voice would not speak as it should, so I just pointed and ran back down over the sand to warn him.

The dog paid us no attention but went straight to where the cormorant lay and sniffed it. Then, arranging his jaws with care around it, he picked it up and came and sat tidily at our feet looking very pleased with himself, his tail swishing the sand behind him.

The dog seemed to have no eyes, for they were covered by a curtain of matted black ringlets. 'He's giving it to you,' I said. 'He wants you to take it.'

'For us is it?' Daniel asked the dog and he took the cormorant out of its mouth. 'Did he send you then, did

the Birdman send you?' And the dog licked his lips and shook the sand out of his mouth. Daniel patted him and parted the hair over his face to reveal two shining black eyes. 'How can you see through all this lot?' he said.

And then the dog pricked up his ears, stood up and looked around towards the cottage. He stopped panting for a moment and listened. Before we knew it he was bounding away over the sand and had vanished into the dunes. Neither of us had heard a whistle, but neither of us had any doubt at all that he had been called back.

'Must have been watching us,' I said. 'He must have seen me kick it over, mustn't he?'

Daniel brushed the sand off the cormorant's head. 'See, I told you, Gracie, didn't I? He just wants to be friendly, that's all.' And he dropped to his knees in the sand. 'Come on. We've got to thank him, haven't we?'

We never spoke a word after that but knelt in the sand together and collected all the shells we were going to need. Then I wrote out in orange shells: 'Thanks for the cormorant.' And both of us signed our names in shells underneath.

We stayed all day sailing our boats on Rushy Bay and even when Daniel suggested the sea was getting too rough I insisted we stayed on, just to prove to myself, to

him and to the Birdman that I was no longer frightened. True, I did keep my eye on Heathy Hill, but now I was almost hoping the Birdman would come down to the beach with his dog. He did not come however, and my new-found courage was not put to the test, not yet anyway. As we left the beach Daniel cupped his hands to his mouth and called out, 'Goodbye', in the direction of the cottage, and I waved with him because I felt sure that the Birdman would be watching us.

Back in Daniel's boatshed that evening we stood by his workbench and examined the cormorant closely. 'One day, Gracie,' he said, 'one day, I'm going to be able to make something like that.'

'What happens if someone finds it?' I asked. 'What are we going to say?'

'Just tell them I made it,' he said laughing. 'But they may not believe us, so better if they don't find it. I haven't got a room of my own to hide it and I haven't got anywhere to put anything, not anywhere private anyway. You got a room of your own, Gracie, you keep it. It'll be safer with you. If Father finds it, he'll only want to know where it comes from and Big Tim will torture me till I tell him.' And he handed the cormorant carefully to me. I already knew where I would hide it –

I was only worried about how I was going to get it there without being discovered.

'I've been thinking, Gracie,' Daniel said. 'He gave us this cormorant to show us he was friendly, didn't he? So we've got to do the same, haven't we? We've got to give him something back so's he knows we want to be friends as well. I've been thinking. D'you think he'd like it if we made him one of our boats?'

'Could call her *Woodcock*, couldn't we?' I said. 'We've got to name it after a bird, like all the others are. *Woodcock's* a kind of bird, isn't it?'

'Never seen one,' said Daniel, 'but I think it is.'

And so I went home that evening with the Birdman's cormorant stuffed inside my blouse. Mother paid me no attention as I came in; she was busy over the stove and I reached the safety of my room without her even seeing me.

We built *Woodcock* together that spring, but it was nearly summer before she was ready for launching. We had never taken so much trouble over a boat as we did with *Woodcock*. Nothing was ever right until it was perfect. We took her to Rushy Bay for her trials and pushed her out towards Samson Island. She danced out over the waves, her sail catching the wind and leaning

her over so that she sped out to sea. I think she might have gone all the way to Samson had we not waded waist high into the sea after her and brought her back. She was quite magnificent with her shiny blue hull, her white stripe and her brick-red sail. Daniel was satisfied. So we left her, beached well above the high-water mark; and we left too a long shell message for the Birdman in the sand. It read: 'We name this boat *Woodcock*. May God bless her and all who sail her'; and we signed it, 'Daniel and Grace'.

We waited until sundown in the purple hummin heather on Samson Hill to see if the Birdman would come for it, but he never came. We could not stay as long for mother always liked me to be home before dark. But first thing the next morning we went back to Rushy Bay and found the boat gone. In its place there was this message: 'Thanks. Beautiful.' And underneath, 'Zachariah Woodcock.'

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