

4 The Birdman

DANIEL WAS WAITING OUTSIDE MY FRONT GATE early the next morning. He too had scarcely slept for worrying about the Birdman and Prince. 'I just hope he reached Samson and stayed the night there, that's all,' he said. 'He wouldn't have had time to get there and back. I know he wouldn't. P'raps it's all right though. After all he must know that stretch of water better than anyone. Come on, Gracie, let's hurry.' And we ran all the way up over Samson Hill and only stopped for breath when we could see Rushy Bay below us.

By now the force of the storm was spent and the wind had died, but the sea was still seething and angry. The waves rolled into the bay from Samson, gathering and rearing as they neared the shore before they curled

over to hurl themselves into the hissing sand. The beach was empty. There was no Prince waiting for us and we could find no message in the sand. We could see the storm had thrown up a line of debris high under the dunes and must certainly have washed away any message the Birdman might have left behind for us. Nonetheless we had to be sure, so we searched the thin strip of dry clear sand under the dunes, just in case. That was how we came across the oar, half-hidden under a tangle of seaweed.

Daniel helped me to pull it clear and we carried it up onto the clean sand. 'Could be anyone's, couldn't it?' I said, but Daniel said nothing. We scoured the beach together, picking over the flotsam, hoping against hope we would not come across what we were now both expecting to find, the shattered and torn timbers of the Birdman's boat. We found wood enough and plenty but it was white, wave-washed and smooth. There was no trace either of his boat nor of the other oar. I was relieved and heartened enough by this time to imagine that all must be well, that we had indeed found an oar from someone else's boat, but Daniel insisted that we should go over to Great Par, the beach on the other side of Heathy Hill where we knew the Birdman always kept his boat.

'If they are back safely like you say they are,' said Daniel, 'then the boat will be there, won't it, and we won't have to worry any more, will we?'

We left the oar lying on top of the dunes and made our way through the reeds towards Great Par. We walked on together in silence, and all the while I dreaded we might find nothing there, that my worst fears would be realised. As we came to the top of each dune more and more of the beach came into view, and still there was no boat to be seen. We were passing just below the Birdman's cottage when Daniel stopped suddenly and caught my arm. 'There's no smoke, Gracie,' he said, his voice hushed to a whisper. 'Look, can't you see, there's no smoke coming out of the chimneys. There's always been smoke before, I know there has. And there's no gulls either, there's no gulls on the roof.' I looked up at the cottage which was almost camouflaged against the background of heather on Heathy Hill and I could see Daniel was right, that the place was indeed deserted. The front door banged in the wind and no one came to shut it. A corner of the thatch had been ripped away by the storm and lay strewn around the potato field below the house. There was no sign of life on the hill except for the Birdman's two goats

that clambered amongst the rocks at the top of Droppy Nose Point. Then a solitary gull flew over and hung on the wind above the cottage. It circled once above us and then flew on out over the sea towards Samson.

I knew at that moment what was going through Daniel's mind and knew I had to forestall him. 'There's no one in there, Daniel,' I said quickly. 'You can tell there's no one there. Let's go on and see if the boat's in Great Par. No need to go any closer is there? Well I'm not going up there, that's for sure.' And suddenly all those terrible fears of the Birdman welled up inside me once again.

'You can stay here if you like,' Daniel said ignoring my protests, 'but I'm going to find out if he's in there. What's the matter with you, Gracie? What's he ever done to hurt you? I mean we know he's not mad now, don't we? Come on, Gracie, it'll be all right.'

I found myself following him reluctantly up the hill, through head-high bracken and heather into the biggest and best-kept vegetable garden I had ever seen and past a pair of white beehives that stood like sentries on either side of the track. Several brown hens ran squawking towards us out of the heather and then followed us up the path at a discreet distance. We slowed, almost

tiptoeing as we reached the front door that blew shut in our faces just as we reached it. Daniel knocked once. No one came. He knocked again.

'See?' I said, pulling him back. 'He's not there. I told you, didn't I? I told you he wouldn't be.' But Daniel paid me no attention. He lifted the latch on the door, took my hand firmly in his and we stepped together into the darkness of the cottage.

It was one long room with an unmade bed at one end by the fireplace, and an ornate black stove at the other. And above the stove on the mantelpiece stood *Woodcock*, the bright blue boat we had made for him. At the back of the fireplace was a pile of dead grey ash that the wind from the open door was whipping about the room. Daniel shut the door behind us to keep the hens out. Almost the entire room was taken up by a long trestle table that was covered from end to end in carvings, bird carvings, finished and unfinished, and around each one of them was a group of pencil sketches pinned to the table. Some of these had been torn away by the wind and a few of the carvings had been blown over onto the floor. The floor itself was a mat of wood shavings and sawdust, and the stone walls around were lined from the ceiling to the floor with shelves that

bellied under the weight of hundreds of carvings. We were being watched by a silent audience of gulls and kittiwakes, petrels and gannets, merlins and puffins and plovers. Some were diving, some were preening themselves, but most stood glaring angrily at us from the shelves as if we had interrupted a secret meeting of bird conspirators.

To one side of the stove were the only shelves in the room not filled with birds. Instead on each of the four shelves there was a loaf of bread. I noticed that not much was left of the loaf on the bottom shelf. I was glad to have Daniel's hand to hold, nothing could have persuaded me to let go. He led me over to the stove and felt it. 'Cold,' said Daniel. 'They haven't been back all night. We won't find his boat in Great Par, Gracie; we won't find it anywhere.'

'They could still be on Samson,' I whispered. 'Couldn't they? I mean that's what I'd do; I'd wait there till the sea was calm and it was safe to come back. That's what you'd do, isn't it?'

Daniel shook his head. 'The oar, Gracie. Where did the oar come from if they're still on Samson?'

'But it needn't be theirs, need it?' I said. 'Could be someone else's, couldn't it?' Daniel did not answer me.

A sudden gust of wind shook the cottage, rattled the windows and whistled down the chimneys disturbing the ash in the fire grate. I moved closer to Daniel who had picked up the end of the loaf on the bottom shelf to smell it.

'Wonder why he keeps four loaves?' he said. Then, as if they were all answering together, the birds lining the shelves began to shriek and scream at us. That was more than I could take. Dragging Daniel behind me I ran for the door which opened in front of us just as we reached it. Prince was suddenly around our legs, jumping up at us and shaking himself all over us; and blotting out the light from the doorway was the black, hooded silhouette of the Birdman with a kittiwake perched on his shoulder. Above him I could see the sky was white with screeching gulls. Daniel and I backed away towards the stove knocking over a chair as we went. Prince followed us sniffing at the bread in Daniel's hand.

'Hungry, were you?' came the voice from inside the sou'wester. 'Plenty of bread, always make plenty of bread. Bake one a day. Always have plenty in reserve in case I get ill. I keep the freshest till last, on the top shelf – you can have some of that if you like.' The

kittiwake lifted off his shoulder and landed clumsily amongst the carvings on the table, knocking one of them over. He hopped on one leg; the other seemed curled up and stunted and he would not use it. The Birdman shut the door behind him, pulled off his sou'wester and shook it dry.

'Bit of a bluster out there I can tell you,' he said. The words he spoke were unformed and unfinished. They seemed yawned out rather than spoken and then thrown out from the top of his mouth. He heaved his black cape off his shoulders wincing as he did so, folded it and laid it carefully on the floor. All his movements were painfully slow and stiff. He whistled sharply and Prince left us at once and sat down on the cape, looking from the Birdman to us and back again as if waiting for someone to say something, but no one said a word.

We must have spent a full minute looking at each other. The old man I saw in front of me was not at all as I had expected him to be. All my life I had thought he would have the predatory look of an ancient crow under the shadow of his sou'wester. I could hardly have been more wrong. Only the tired stoop of his body and the loose, mottled skin of his forearm betrayed his age. His face was the colour of a well-worn polished brown

boot. The skin was creased but still young and supple – not that you could see much of his face for it was almost entirely hidden by a head and beard of wild white hair. But it was his eyes that marked him out from any other man I had ever seen for they drew you into them somehow so that you could not look away even if you wanted to.

'So, at last we meet,' he said, breaking the long silence. 'I'm glad you came. I was afraid you never would you know. 'Course I could have gone down to the beach I suppose, but then you'd have run away soon as you saw me coming, wouldn't you? Not allowed to get too close to me are you? "Keep your distance" – is that what they told you? I don't blame them. Everyone runs away from me. I'm quite used to it by now; but I didn't want to risk that, not with you. That's why I sent Prince here down to see you and I hoped he would bring you home with him one day, but you never came. I thought of inviting you, of leaving a message in the sand asking you to come and visit; but then I thought that might frighten you away and you'd never come back.'

Still neither Daniel or I spoke. The kittiwake on the table glared evilly at us first with one eye, then the other. The Birdman shook his head. 'Bit of a mess in

here, isn't it?' he said. 'Course if I'd have known you were coming today I'd have tidied the place up a bit. Mother always said there was no one as untidy as I was; but I haven't had anyone up here in this house since she died, and that's nearly thirty years ago now. Nothing much to tidy up for if you never have visitors, is there? I mean they don't mind, do they?' And he laughed, looking around the room at the birds on the shelves. 'The wind blew the door open again by the look of it; ash everywhere. Still, not too much harm done though. One day I'll have to get round to mending the latch on that door. Been meaning to, but there always seems to be something else to be done. Never enough hours in the day.'

He stood looking at us and a smile opened his mouth. He did not have many teeth. 'What a gale that was last night, wasn't it? I can tell you I was lucky. Half-way across to Samson I was when it hit us. Came in faster than I thought it would. Only just made it. The dog came with me of course – always does, don't you boy? He always likes to go over to Samson. Likes the rabbits he does, and there's rabbits everywhere over there, great big black ones. Oh, he loves his rabbits. Course I don't often go out in the boat nowadays, only

across to Samson when I have to. I can't pull against the wind like I used to – getting old you know. I spent the night over there like I usually do. Only one cottage left with a roof on it now, not like it used to be I can tell you. Made a fire, kept ourselves warm, didn't we, Prince?

At the mention of his name, the dog looked up from cleaning a paw, his wet tail slapping against the wall behind us. 'Then this morning, first light, with the wind around behind us and the worst of the storm blown out I thought we'd try to row back. Thinking about it now, I suppose I should have waited an hour or two but I had the goats to milk, and the hens to feed. Had to get back for them, poor old things. And if I leave Friend alone for too long he goes off all over the island looking for me. All the way up to Shipman's Head he goes – dangerous up there, even for a donkey. So I had to get back. I tell you though, I never had to pull so hard in all my life, did I, Prince? Then this old wrist had to go and give up on me.' He held up his left hand and flexed his gnarled fingers slowly. 'It just seized up, nothing I could do about it. Couldn't hold onto the oar any more, couldn't grip it. Worst of getting old – your body won't do what you tell it any more. It was just off the Point out there. We nearly ended up on the rocks after that, didn't we

Prince? I had to paddle my heart out with one oar. Don't know how we managed it, but we did, and the waves brought us nicely into Poplestones. I looked up and there was old Friend himself waiting for me, as if he knew I was going to beach there all the time. So I had a ride home and here I am. And I'll tell you something else for nothing, I wasn't the only thing washed up on Poplestones. I've never seen anything like it. The whole beach is covered with timber, great thick pine planks they are, finest looking timber I've ever seen; and no sign of a wreck that I could see, just the timber.'

'Gracie found the oar,' Daniel said, but the Birdman did not hear him. He raised his voice a little. 'She found the oar, Mr Woodcock, the one you lost. It's still down there in the dunes; we left it there. We thought you were done for, didn't we, Gracie?'

A sudden troubled look had come over the Birdman. The smile that had lit his face until now trembled and vanished, and he turned away from us while Daniel was still speaking. He lowered himself carefully onto his knees by the fire and began to break up the pile of lightings. Daniel and I exchanged glances. 'That's why we came up here, Mr Woodcock,' Daniel went on, 'to see if you and Prince were all right, because we knew

you went off to Samson yesterday. We saw you rowing out there. Then when the storm came last night we thought . . . ' The Birdman still had his back to us and seemed intent on lighting his fire. The paper flared and he bent down to blow on it until the flames were shooting up through the lightings into the chimney. He sat back on his haunches and watched it. I nudged Daniel, willing him to go on talking, but he shook his head. I mouthed to him silently, 'The war, tell him about the war.'

Daniel nodded and tried again. By this time the Birdman was sitting on the corner of his bed holding his hands out and rubbing them together in front of the flames. 'Mr Woodcock,' Daniel began, even louder now to be sure he was heard, 'you know we told you what Welly Belly said? You remember he thought there was going to be a war soon? Well they started it, Mr Woodcock, just like he said they would. They started it yesterday. It's all right though. Everyone seems to think we'll win it fairly quickly, but we've got to be on the look-out now for ships and submarines and things just in case we get invaded – that's what my father told me. And we're not allowed to show any lights at night. We have to draw the curtains.'

The Birdman looked up, his face filled with resignation. He put his hands on his knees and pushed himself up until he stood looking down at us again. 'You can talk all you want, Daniel, but I won't hear a word of it, not a word. These old ears of mine don't work like they should, haven't done since I was a boy. Mother always said it was the fever that did it, the fever I caught the day we left Samson. All I remember was the ringing in my ears and the roar of an endless wind blowing through my head. I could hear after the fever went, but the world was always muffled to me after that. As the years passed I heard less and less, and now these last couple of years I can't even hear my gulls. All I can hear is an empty silence. I'm as deaf as my wooden birds over there, Daniel. I can read though – Mother saw to that – but you know that already, don't you? So if you've got something to tell me, you'll have to write it down or draw it. Got plenty of paper – keep it for drawing the birds.' And he reached into the drawer of the little table by his bed and took out a pencil and a sheet of paper and put them down on the table beside us.

'You spell better,' said Daniel, handing me the pencil. 'You tell him.' So I wrote in my best writing: 'They began the war yesterday.' And Daniel turned the piece

of paper round so that the Birdman could read it. When he looked up again there was anger in his eyes.

'It's wrong,' he said. 'It's all wrong. All killing is wrong, I tell you; I should know better than anyone. I should know. I should know.' And then as if he had suddenly had enough of us, 'Time you were going. I've got my goats to milk and my hens to feed, and you'd better get back home and quickly. Must have been in the sea some time already that timber, maybe most of the night. Doesn't do it any good to stay in the sea any longer than it's got to you know. So you get back home now and tell them all to get out to Popplestones as quick as they can. There's cartloads of it there, I tell you, 'nough to build ten houses. You'll have to hurry else it'll be too late. Soon as the Preventative hear about it – and they always do – they'll be crawling all over the island. Off with you now.'

We were almost out of the door before he called us back. 'Children,' he said, more gently now. 'That cormorant I gave you must be getting lonely all by himself. I think perhaps you ought to have another one to keep him company – token of your first visit.' And he picked up one of the carvings off the table, brought it up close to his eyes to examine it. It was a crying gull with

its wings half-opened and a flatfish on the rock under its feet. 'I don't think I can do much more with this one. Like to take it with you?'

Daniel took it from him with great care and he looked up at the Birdman, pointed at his own lips and mouthed slowly and silently, separating each word, 'It is beautiful, thank you.'

'Thank you,' I said, following Daniel's example. And the Birdman understood and laughed aloud.

'You'll come back and see me tomorrow if you can?' he said. 'Now get along with you and get that timber hidden away before the Preventative find it.'