

5 The Preventative

WE HAD THE BIRDMAN'S GULL UNDER A PILE OF rags on the workbench in Daniel's boatshed – it was the only place we could think of – before running back to the house to break the news about the timber washed up on Popplestones. Within a few minutes the word had spread and every cart and wagon on the island was hitched up and hurrying towards Popplestones. It was only then when I was sitting up beside Mother and Father on the cart that I wondered whether Daniel and I should have gone out to Popplestones first to be sure the Birdman had not been exaggerating, but my first glimpse of the bay was enough to reassure me. I could see the Birdman's little boat hauled up on the dry sand, and from one end of the beach to the other the sand was

littered with timber. Some of it had been smashed against the rocks and lay splintered in the water, but most of it was scattered across the beach in untidy piles and was still quite undamaged. In the farthest corner of the bay by the rocks the sea itself was smothered under a heaving, groaning blanket of boards.

Any thoughts of the war were forgotten now in this new heady excitement. No one could remember a harvest such as this, and for us on the island that is exactly what it was. Life there was never easy. We lived only on what we grew, on what we fished out of the sea, on what we made and sometimes by what we found on the beaches. Whatever was washed up by the sea on Bryher was as much ours as the fish we caught or the crops we grew. It was the way we lived, the only way we could live. Just as the seaweed and driftwood belonged to whichever of us were fortunate enough to find it and to whichever of us were fortunate enough to find it and carry it above the high-water mark, so it was part of the same ancient tradition that anything, any wrecks, any cargo, any trove washed up on our shore belonged to us by right. But every child knew well that the Customs Officers over on St Mary's – the 'Preventative' as we called them – had different ideas and they would do all they could to stop us from keeping such a windfall; and

there was nothing that united the islanders so much as the prospect of a visit from the Preventative. Everyone knew that morning on Popplestones that the Preventative would be coming sooner rather than later – they always did.

So all that day we loaded timber onto the carts and wagons, and they went back and forth along the track under Gweal Hill to every farm and every house on the island. Many of the men, Father amongst them, were neck high in the seething sea throwing hooks and anchors over the jammed timbers to pull them apart. Then we would grab them and haul them up out of the sea and onto the dry sand. No one even stopped to eat at mid-day. No one stopped for anything, except for a few of the smaller children who soon tired of the work and set up a see-saw with one of the planks over a rock. No one minded that for they were too little to be of much help and anyway it kept them out of the way. By late afternoon the planks were all gone and only a few of us stayed behind on the beach to tidy up, to remove all traces of the day's work. Using seaweed for brushes we swept the beach from end to end, walking in a line backwards so that we covered our own tracks as we went. We smoothed over all the tell-tale footprints, hoofprints

and wheelprints that had criss-crossed the sand. We had not quite finished when the Preventatives' boat was sighted by the look-out on Watch Hill, but by the time their boat reached the quay we were ready for them.

There must have been at least half a dozen Preventatives, all of them dressed in their dark blue uniforms done up to the chin with bright brass buttons. The peaks of their caps rested on their noses so that you could not see their eyes. Most of them I noticed seemed to have long black moustaches, almost as if it was part of the uniform. They spoke to no one, but began by combing the island from Shipman's Head to Rushy Bay; and then, as we knew they would, they visited every house on the island.

We did not have long to wait before our turn came and we saw one of them opening our squeaky front gate and coming up the path. Father met the Preventative officer at the door and I was relieved to see that Father was the taller and broader of the two men. I felt very proud as I always did of Father and very safe under his protection. I could tell from the way Mother's hand was shaking that she did not feel quite so secure. I stayed with her at the sink peeling potatoes as we had planned, and I listened.

'Mr Jenkins, isn't it?' said the Preventative officer.

'That's me,' said my father. 'You looking for something?'

'This is a serious matter, Mr Jenkins, not a matter for levity. It so happens we had a few timbers – nice ones they were too – washed up on the west coast of St Mary's this afternoon, Colombian pine planks. Good sound timber, about fifteen foot long, a foot wide and three inches thick. Seems like they came in from the west during the storm last night. Well they must have done, mustn't they?' I could tell from his voice that he knew we knew, and that he knew we knew he knew. It was a kind of game but a serious one.

'If you say so,' said Father.

'I do, Mr Jenkins, I do. And we think it's likely that more of this timber was washed up on the west coast of Bryher. Stands to reason, doesn't it?'

'Ah well,' said Father, 'I wouldn't know about that. You see I hardly ever go over that side of the island – no one does – dangerous over there you know. Anyway I suppose you've had a good look over there yourselves, haven't you?'

'We have indeed, Mr Jenkins.'

'Find anything did you?'

'No, Mr Jenkins.'

Father shook his head and tutted. 'That's a pity,' he said. 'That's a terrible pity. Still perhaps all there was came up on St Mary's. Perhaps that's all there is.'

'I don't think so, Mr Jenkins, and it's my duty to remind you that any such timber would be the property of the Crown and it would be a felony to remove it or conceal it from the proper authorities. A criminal offence, Mr Jenkins, a criminal offence. And we are the proper authorities.'

'But there isn't any timber, is there? I mean you couldn't very well miss great planks of wood that size, could you?'

'No, Mr Jenkins, you couldn't.' And the Preventative officer straightened his shoulders and stretched himself to his full height before he went on. 'I have to ask you formally, Mr Jenkins, whether you have come across any such timber?'

'I wish I had, and if I had you'd have been the first person I'd tell, you know that. I'm a law-abiding man – we all are on Bryher.'

'Of course, Mr Jenkins, I've never been on an island more law-abiding than this – that's if you can believe what I've been told on every doorstep I've visited. No

one I've spoken to has seen anything. But I wonder if your little girl here can help us? Children have such keen eyes, don't they, Mr Jenkins? Perhaps she's seen something you might have overlooked. Come over here little girl, don't be frightened.'

Mother took my shoulders and turned me round to face him. The Preventative was quite portly and almost purple in the face, whether with fury or exertion I was not sure. I was nervous certainly but not frightened, for Father was there behind him smiling over his head at me and I was confident I could play my part in the conspiracy. All I had to do was to keep a straight face and play ignorant. But it was then that I saw the white mess on the top of his cap and the dribble of it running down his left shoulder. One gull at least disliked Preventatives as much as we did. I did try not to laugh, but I did not succeed. A stifled squeak came out rather than a laugh, but it was recognisable as a laugh and quite enough to upset him.

'There something funny, little girl?'

'No, sir,' I said. It was not only the bird-spattered cap that made me quite unable to control myself, it was the thought of those hundreds of pine boards lying hidden under the pathways in the flower pieces and potato

fields all over the island. It had been Father's brilliant idea and it must have worked, for otherwise the Preventative would not still be searching. Every sixth row in the daffodil piece was left as a path. It was here, and in between the rows of potatoes that the boards had been laid end to end and covered over. The flower pieces were untended and weed-covered at this time of year so they had even replanted the weeds to make it look right – the first and last time, Mother had said, that she would ever do that.

The Preventative officer's face had gone a deeper shade of purple. 'This is a serious matter,' he said. 'There is nothing funny about this at all.' And with some effort he crouched down in front of me so that our faces were on the same level. He forced his face into a kind of smile; but it looked to me more like a snarl than a smile. 'You can tell me where they've hidden them, can't you, little girl?'

Again my lips would not obey me and I could not hold my laughter back. His face darkened with anger. It was Mother who saved the situation.

'It's your cap,' she said sweetly. The Preventative officer took it off and it was clear he was not at all amused by what he found, but it seemed it was enough

to explain away my laughter. Mother tried to make amends by taking it from him and wiping it with a wet cloth. However, the man's dignity had been ruffled and he was not finished with us yet.

'Well if you've nothing to hide, Mr Jenkins, then you won't mind will you if I search the house?' And he took his cap back from Mother and set it firmly over his eyes again.

'What? Search my house for fifteen foot wooden planks?' Father said. 'Where on earth are we going to hide things that size in a little place like this?'

'Oh you'd be surprised, Mr Jenkins,' he said. 'You'd be surprised at the places I've found things, I can tell you. I'll start like I always do, start with the roof and work downwards. Plenty of room under the thatch, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Well you won't find a thing up there,' Father said, 'except perhaps a few dead birds and mice. You'll find mice all right. But you're welcome to look anyway, I've nothing to hide. The trap-door is in my daughter's bedroom, just above her bed. It's the only way into the roof. Nothing to hide, have we, Gracie?' And Father smiled reassuringly at me as he led the man upstairs.

But my laughter had died suddenly inside me. Until

they mentioned the roof it had simply never occurred to me the Preventative officer might want to search there. The roof was the only secret place in the house, the only place no one ever looked into, the only place I could hide anything I wanted and be sure it would never be discovered. That was why I had hidden the Birdman's cormorant up there. It had been the perfect place for it, hidden yet available. Every evening before I went to sleep I would climb up onto my bed, lift the trap-door and take it out to look at it and touch it; and whenever Daniel came to the house we would take it down and admire it together in the secrecy of my room.

I could hear them walking now across the bedroom floor above my head. The boards creaked and I knew exactly where they were. 'It's all right, Gracie,' Mother said putting her arm around me. 'He'll soon be gone.' Then I heard the trap door grate as it was lifted off and waited for the cormorant to be discovered. I did not have long to wait.

'Well, and what have we here, Mr Jenkins?' came the Preventative's voice. 'Didn't you say there was nothing up here?'

There was a long, long pause and then Father began to speak in a voice so low that I could not hear a word.

They talked together for some time up there before I heard the trap-door drop back into place and their heavy tread coming down the stairs. Father came first holding the cormorant in both hands and he was laughing as he came into the room. 'Well, I did say there were only dead birds up there, didn't I? Look what we found, Clemmie,' he said. 'Quite a surprise after all these years, isn't it? It's been lost for so long, we'd almost forgotten we had it. God knows how many years it must have been up there in the roof, and if you hadn't come here today looking for those planks we'd never have found it again. I'm very grateful to you, sir. You haven't seen this before, have you, Gracie? My father, your old grandfather, made this over fifty years ago now. Never thought I'd see it again, never thought I'd see it again. You remember it Clemmie, don't you?' Mother seemed stunned for a moment. All she could manage was a weak smile and a nod, and then I looked away from her for fear of catching her eye.

After that the Preventative made only a half-hearted search under the settle and under the table and then, feeling perhaps that his honour had been sufficiently restored, he left us. Father shut the door after him and turned round to face me. I looked from Mother to

Father and back again. Of the two I think Father looked the more angry, but I always feared Mother's silent disapproval more than his roaring anger.

'Well?' he said, holding the cormorant out under my nose. 'And where did you get this from, Grace Jenkins? I want the truth now mind, none of your stories.'

'Daniel and me, we made it,' I said.

'You made this?' Father said, his voice rising to a shout. 'You don't expect me to believe that do you?'

'Honest,' I insisted. 'We did, we did. You can ask Daniel if you like. He'll tell you.'

Mother took the cormorant out of Father's hands and looked at it closely. She handled it gently. 'Gracie,' she said quietly, 'how can you say such a wicked thing? You know Daniel couldn't make this. I know he's clever with his hands but he's not that clever. This is the work of a craftsman, a real craftsman. Daniel couldn't do this.'

'And anyway,' Father went on, 'what was it doing hidden up in the roof? Answer me that if you can, Grace Jenkins.' Father's brow was furrowed and I could see his anger taking hold.

I was crying anyway by now, so the tantrum I threw came easily to me, as did the lie. 'All right then; if you don't believe me, I'll tell you. It was going to be a

Christmas present and I hid it up there so you wouldn't find it and so it would be a surprise and I wish I'd never done it now and I never will again and I'll never give you anything else ever again.' I ran crying up the stairs, leaving my mother and father silent in the room behind me.

They left me where I was, sobbing noisily on my bed. Then almost at once I heard the front door open and shut and Father's footsteps going away down the path. From my bed I could see him striding along the escallonia hedge down towards Daniel's boashed. I buried my head in my pillow again, knowing that this was the end of it all, knowing that I would have to tell them everything now about the Birdman and about Rushy Bay. Once they discovered I was lying I would have no other choice. I could just see the shed door from where I was. I lay there on the bed and waited for Father to come out. When he did, Daniel was with him and Father was carrying the seagull the Birdman had given us in both hands.

'Clemmie isn't going to believe this,' I heard Father say. 'She's not going to believe this when she sees it. Clemmie! Clemmie!' he called and Mother came out of the house and met him half-way down the path. Father

held out the seagull and she took it carefully and turned it over and over in her hands. 'He made this too, Clemmie,' Father said. 'Daniel made this one too.'

'You make this yourself, Daniel?' she asked.

Daniel nodded. 'I can't do puffins though,' he said sweetly. 'I keep trying to do a puffin. I started six of them now but I can't ever get them right. Look.' And he held out his half-finished lumpy-looking puffin. He had contrived a look of bemused bewilderment as if he could not understand what all the fuss was about.

'And you made the other one too, Daniel, the cormorant?' Mother asked. I could hear she was still not convinced.

'Well not on my own; Gracie helped me of course,' said Daniel. 'You know, like she helps me with the boats.'

'I should have thought puffins would be easier to carve than cormorants or gulls,' Mother said. 'And who taught you to carve like that anyway?'

'Taught myself,' Daniel said.

'That's just how they are when they've caught a fish and they're trying to keep it for themselves,' said Father stroking the raised wing of the seagull. 'You ever seen anything like this before, Clemmie?' But Mother never answered.

'Can Gracie come out now?' Daniel asked. 'Everyone's going down to the quay to see the Preventatives off.'

'I'll call her,' said Father. 'Gracie,' he shouted up to me. 'Daniel's here.'

I came slowly down the stairs rubbing my eyes, still sniffing as convincingly as I could. Father was waiting for me by the door. He put his arm round me as he led me outside. 'Been a bit of a misunderstanding, Gracie,' he said. 'Perhaps you'd better go and put that cormorant of yours back in the roof. We'll pretend we never saw it, shall we? And we'll have it for Christmas just like you planned. I never would have believed you two could make something like that. Forgive and forget, eh?' And he hugged me tight, and kissed me with his tickling beard that always smelt of smoked fish and pipe tobacco.

All the way down to the quay I never spoke a word to Daniel. I hardly dared look at him, for I knew Mother must still be suspicious and that she would detect any flicker of collusion between us, but I could not resist just one quick glance. Daniel looked back at me po-faced but I recognised the glee in his eyes. He blinked at me once. Daniel always blinked when he meant to wink – he never could shut one eye at a time.

When we reached the quayside the Preventative boat was just weighing anchor and half the island was there to watch them leave empty-handed. We stood in the silent crowd until the boat was well out into the channel, and then a spontaneous cheer of relief and triumph went up and did not stop until we knew they could hear it no longer. I think I must have cheered louder and harder than anyone else there, but then I did have more to cheer about.