

6 The King's Shilling

THE ELATION THAT FOLLOWED THE DISCOVERY OF the timber on Popplestones did not last for very long, for as the months passed the shadow of the war grew ever closer to the islands and began to darken all our lives. Talk of the Front in France soon became as common as talk of pilchards or crayfish, lobster or potatoes, and as important to all of us on the islands as the weather itself.

At home, as the news came in of more-ships sunk and more retreats on the battlefields in France, Father became ever more despondent and angry. All the joy and exuberance he breathed into our lives at home vanished during that first year of the war. He rarely smiled even at me and he never set me up on his shoulder as he used to do on the way back home when

we had been out fishing together. Indeed he took me out with him less and less now. He said it was too dangerous with the German submarines lurking out there in the Atlantic – and it was true they had been sighted quite close to the islands – but that was not the reason, and I knew it. He just wanted to be on his own. At home in the evenings he would scarcely ever speak to us and when he did he often spoke harshly to Mother. I had never before heard him speak unkindly to her. He would sit in silence by the fire, rolling his pipe in his teeth, staring vacantly into the flames, and the house became a place of gloom around him. Mother tried her best to lift Father's spirits and to placate his rages, but could do neither. No more could I.

It was from Mr Wellbeloved at school that I learnt about what was happening at the battlefronts in France. Frequently now the blackboard at school became the battlefield of the Western Front. I welcomed these extended lectures on the progress of the war because at least it meant we might be missing an arithmetic lesson. Like some omnipotent Greek god, he pushed and wheeled the great armies to and fro across the blackboard, forecasting with great conviction our inevitable and total victory. He told us that even if we

were not winning yet we soon would be because God was on our side. Mr Wellbeloved talked with great pride and fervour of the bravery of our little army holding its own against the German hordes sweeping through France. We could help our soldiers, he said, by making blankets and socks for them; and so we did. I remember he wrote out messages of exhortation and stuffed them down the socks we had made before packing them away in boxes to be sent off to the Front. But socks, he said, were not enough. We had to be vigilant, and report at once anything, anything at all that looked suspicious. Invasion, he said, was always possible. We had to be prepared.

Whether it was Mr Wellbeloved's words that inspired the war games, I am not sure; but I do know that it was Big Tim who organised them up on Watch Hill. With rifles and bayonets whittled from driftwood, the two armies, one British and one German, would be drawn up opposite each other on either side of the hill. Big Tim would blow a blast on the battered bugle his uncle had brought back from the Boer War, and that was the signal that would send the two armies screaming towards each other over the heather. The battle that followed was always swift and the outcome always the same – after all

it was Big Tim that picked the sides and he made quite sure the British always won. Either the Germans would run away or they would fall, dying noisily on the spongy grass around the rabbit warren at the bottom of the hill; and Big Tim, dressed in his uncle's pith helmet and waving the union jack, could always be seen standing triumphant on the battlefield at the end of the day.

Of course they tried to make us join in, but we had no wish to be cannon fodder in Big Tim's war games and besides we were always far too busy building our boats and sailing them – that was what we told everyone and they had no reason to doubt us. In fact, of course, we slipped away as often as we dared to the Birdman's cottage on Heathy Hill.

For Daniel and me his cottage became a second home during the first year of the war. I was happy enough frolicking with Prince along the sand on Rushy Bay, or kneading the Birdman's dough for him in the wet weather when his fingers were too stiff and painful. The Birdman never asked for help. He was just the kind of person you wanted to help. I suppose that was why I offered to milk his goats for him. It looked simple enough, and I had milked a cow before after all. A goat was smaller than a cow, so it had to be an easier job I

thought. I was wrong, very wrong. Goats know. They know everything. You can see in their eyes they know everything. They knew I was clumsy and inept and they made it as difficult as possible for me. One of them, Bertha it was, always walked away whilst I was milking her; and Betsy would turn around and chew my hair, pulling at it until I had to stop milking her because it hurt me so much. Only then would she let go. I was determined to master the Birdman's goats; but they knew that too and so I never did. All summer I tried. I tried gentle persuasion, I tried bribery, but milking always became a trial of will and strength which I invariably lost.

Sometimes Daniel would come with Prince and me down to Rushy Bay and we would sail our boats together as we had always done, but more often than not now he would stay inside the cottage with the Birdman and work on his carving all day long. I would leave them sitting side by side at the long table, chiselling away at an unpromising block of driftwood only to return some hours later and find the beginnings of a gannet or a plover or an oystercatcher hatching out of the wood. To me it was always a miraculous metamorphosis. They worked together with great

concentration, even urgency, for Daniel was ever eager to practise and to learn, and the Birdman seemed equally anxious to teach him. I remember him saying once: 'I want to pass on all my father taught me whilst my fingers still obey me, and they won't for much longer.' The more Daniel improved the more he seemed to enjoy it and the more time he would spend carving with the Birdman. As they worked the Birdman would talk and talk. He was making up, he said, for all the years he had only had the birds, the animals and himself to talk to.

I myself was never comfortable talking to the Birdman in those early days for he would stare uncannily at me whilst I was speaking, trying to read the words as they came out of my mouth. So I would resort almost immediately to pencil and paper, partly to avoid those piercing eyes of his. Daniel never did that. Right from the very start he mouthed the words, contorting his lips into extravagant shapes. He made letters out of his fingers and spelled out the words. He drew shapes in the air; indeed sometimes he did all three at once and talked aloud at the same time. If at first the Birdman could not understand – and he often did not – then Daniel would persist resolutely until he did. Sometimes

this might entail acting out a complex charade, and both of them would end up helpless with laughter at his antics and the misunderstandings they created.

It took some time and it was gradual, but Daniel invented that year a whole new private language of signs, pictures and signals that the Birdman could recognise and understand immediately, so much so that I sometimes found the Birdman could understand what Daniel was saying now before I could. I remember that at one time I began to feel a little excluded, even hurt by this; but the Birdman seemed to sense my unease and took great delight in teaching me the new sign language he was learning. We became so used to using the new language that in time Daniel and I could talk to each other without uttering a word, and we would use it at home now instead of whispering whenever anyone else might be about and we wanted to talk about the Birdman or Rushy Bay. In time though the Birdman learnt how to read our lips well enough to understand most of what we said. We had to speak slowly of course and make sure he was looking at us before we began. We still used our secret language, but he needed it less and less as the months passed.

We found out early on that there were some things

you just did not talk about to the Birdman. Any mention of the war for instance, any talk of the latest outrage or offensive Mr Wellbeloved might have told us about, and he would simply turn his back and walk away. It seemed to plunge him into a deep despair and so we learned never to talk of it. Neither, we discovered, would he ever talk about himself. If we asked him about his mother or his father he would just turn his head away and pretend he could not hear us.

Then one day Daniel asked him about Samson. 'It's not really true there's ghosts on Samson, is it, Mr Woodcock?' The Birdman stared at him. 'You know,' Daniel said and he put a blanket over his head and drifted around the room arms outstretched, his muffled moanings and groaning interspersed with giggles. 'Like this, Mr Woodcock. Ghosts. Gracie believes in them, but they're not true are they, not really?' It was the only time I'd ever seen the Birdman angry. Terrified at this sudden fury, I backed away until I felt the wall behind me and could go no further. He advanced on Daniel, pulled off the blanket, took him roughly by the shoulders and shook him.

'Ghosts!' he cried. 'Ghosts! Do you know what a ghost is? Well I'll tell you. A ghost is a soul so darkened

with shame and sin that it can never rest. It is a spirit condemned to wander the earth until the end of time. Yes, there are ghosts on Samson. You cannot see them, you cannot hear them, but I know they are there. They are all there, all the guilty men of Samson, my father with them.' His voice was full of anguish as he went on. 'His spirit is still there on Samson. They all are and they always will be unless the curse of Samson can be lifted, unless I can save them. Until then that place is cursed, so keep away from it. Stay away both of you.' After that I never dared mention Samson again, and nor did Daniel.

For fear of discovery we could not spend as much time as we would have liked with the Birdman. We knew it strengthened our alibi if we were seen from time to time to be sailing our boats on the pool under Gweal Hill; and now the swans had finally left we could do that again. In Daniel's boatshed that first spring of the war I busied myself repairing and repainting our fleet of boats whilst Daniel worked tirelessly on yet another puffin carving. This was the seventh; he had rejected all the others. It would be finished, he said, only when it was perfect, quite, quite perfect. Each of them seemed to me to be more puffin-like than the one before and I

would have been proud to have made any of them, but he was never satisfied. He made endless puffin sketches and pinned them to the table in the shed just as the Birdman had taught him he should.

It was while we were working side by side in the boatshed one drizzling May morning that we heard a distant dull boom. We took very little notice of it at the time. We thought that perhaps one of the Navy ships might be firing a practice salvo out to sea – we had heard them often enough before – and we had seen several grey warships cruising in and out of the islands of late, their turrets bristling with guns. Not until Father brought back the news the next day was I to find out what it was.

He had been off to St Mary's that morning to sell our catch of lobsters and crayfish as he always did on Wednesdays providing the sea was calm enough. Mother and I were down on the rocks fishing for wrasse when we saw him bringing the boat in over the sandbars towards the quay. We watched him throw out the anchor and leap down into the shallows. We could see as he came along the beach towards us that a change had come over him. He walked briskly over the sand, jumping from stone to stone and hurdling the ropes and

anchor chains as he came. I could feel Mother's arm come around me, and I knew she was bracing herself for something, but I had no idea what it might be.

'Clemmie,' he called as soon as he was within ear-shot. 'Clemmie, I've done it and I feel ten years younger for it. Should have done it long ago.' He was smiling now as he used to and I wondered why it was that Mother was looking away from him as if she did not want to hear what he was about to tell her. 'You remember that explosion we heard yesterday morning? Well, they sank another freighter, Clemmie,' Father went on, 'not five miles from here it was. Submarine again. Just waiting out there they were, and they picked her off and sent her to the bottom. All good men, all gone. They told me all about it over on St Mary's as soon as I arrived this morning. I saw for myself a couple of lads laid out there on the beach. Washed up on the tide this morning they were. They were young lads, both of them, barely out of school, half my age, Clemmie. Well that was it, that was enough. I decided there and then I wasn't going to stand by any more and just watch. It isn't right, Clemmie, you know it isn't. They need sailors and I'm a good one, better than most. We Scillonians are the best navigators in the world; we have to be, don't

we? So anyway, I went and signed the papers, Clemmie. There's a dozen or more joining up from all over the islands, but I'll be the first from Bryher. It's all done. I joined the Navy. I've taken the King's Shilling.*

Mother's arm tightened around my shoulder and I looked up at her. She was smiling at him. 'I'm not going to argue with you,' she said. 'You wouldn't listen to me anyway, would you? I knew you'd be going sooner or later, I knew it had to come.'

'You won't go short, Clemmie,' said Father. 'I've worked it all out. I'll be sending money home all the time. Pay's not bad you know, one and a penny a day. You and Gracie won't even need to work the flowers and potatoes if you don't want to. There'll be enough for the both of you, don't you worry.'

'I'm not worried about that. I'm not worried about the money,' said Mother. 'Gracie and me can manage till you get back, can't we, Gracie? We'll see to the flowers and potatoes; might even catch a few lobsters, you never know. It's not just men that can catch lobsters you know. No, it's you I'm worried about.'

* To 'take the King's Shilling' is to join up. In fact, volunteers received a day's pay when they joined up, which was about a shilling.

'Me?' said Father. 'Stuff and nonsense.' And he picked me up and set me high on his shoulders. 'Getting heavier by the day, Gracie,' he said as I put my arms around his neck. 'You used to hang on to my beard when you were smaller, remember? It's a wonder I've got any left.' And we walked back up to the house, happy together for the first time in months. 'Don't you worry about anything, Clemmie,' he said. 'I'll be back before you know it. Won't take long this war, not now I'm in it.'

'No dear,' said Mother. 'Not now you're in it.' And she put her arm around him and laid her head on his shoulder.

'When will you be going to the war, Father?' I asked from high above them.

'Soon,' he said.

And it was soon, all too soon. Only a week later Mother and I were standing on the quayside at St Mary's and Father was hugging me to him. He looked so fine and grand in his blue uniform. Maybe it was my pride in him that stopped me crying like everyone else seemed to be. I tugged his beard when I kissed him goodbye and he laughed and then whispered, 'Take care of your mother for me, Gracie.' I remember thinking

that was all the wrong way round, for Mother had always been the one to take care of me. And then he laid a hand on Mother's arm, brushed her cheek gently and said, 'Bye, Clemmie. Chin up.' And he was gone, up the gangplank and into the ship.

We waited until the ship was so far out that we could no longer distinguish him from the others waving beside him on the deck. 'At least he's his old self again,' said Mother, taking my hand and leading me away. 'At least he's happy now.'

'They won't sink his ship, will they?' I asked Mother on the way back across the water to Bryher.

'Course not, Gracie, don't even speak of it. He'll be back, you'll see.'

I told the Birdman the next day that my father had gone to be a sailor in the war and he smiled sadly and put his hand on my head. 'Daniel and me will look after you,' he said. 'We'll look after you and your mother, won't we, Daniel? I'll be your father till he gets back home again; how would that be?'

'That'll be fine,' I said. 'Just till he gets back though.'