



Prologue

Storm Cover

A storm had broken over the tiny fishing village that nestled in amongst the troughs and peaks of the rugged Yorkshire coastline. Black waves crashed upon what was left of the foreshore as the tide reached its high point, the tumultuous North Sea angrily battering the walls of the little coastguard station that stood in defiance against it. Sheets of driving rain slid sideways across the landscape, seeking an inlet through the cracks and crevices in the jumble of stone houses that lay scattered across the hillside; the howling wind rattling the shutters and tearing at the red pantiles of a hundred rooftops.

Inside the homesteads of this quaint hamlet all was quiet and warm, however. Centuries of experience had taught the villagers well and, at the first sign of a squall, just like the gulls that sought shelter in the rocky outcrops surrounding the bay, the residents of Baytown had battened down their hatches and bolted their doors, so they might slumber in their beds until a tired dawn poked its weary head over the horizon.

Not every soul had slept through the tempest. At the top of the old village, set aside from the tangle of cottages down below, a neat little white rendered house stood quiet and still, just like its counterparts. But one of its inhabitants did not sleep. A young girl had been woken by the squall. Or was it something else that had jolted her awake?

The fisherman's daughter was used to the petulance of the North Sea and paid no mind to the capriciousness of Mother Nature. Like all good seafaring folk, she could sleep soundly through the worst of the weather. But the noise that had awakened her was different from the sound of thundering waves or wind whipping round the gables – it was as if the storm had somehow found its way inside the house and was now banging and crashing its way through the downstairs rooms.

Still half asleep, the girl quietly slipped out of her cot, so as not to rouse her younger sister who lay peaceful beside her. Without turning on a light, she tiptoed to the top of the cottage's narrow, steeply pitched back stairs, passing her parents' bedroom along the way. Briefly poking her head around the door, she saw her mother in the family bed and her baby brother sleeping soundly next to her, both undisturbed by the noise that went on below. If it was not her mother who was it, then, making the noise below?

A rush of excitement overtook her for the briefest moment. Perhaps it was her father returned from sea! But no, it couldn't be. He wasn't due back for another week. Feeling a both curious and a little scared, she proceeded down the steps in the dark, letting her bare feet feel the way. On reaching the bottom tread she halted and, without opening the rough timber leg-and-brace door that stood against it, stood watching and listening through the gaps in the wood.

There was a little light in the room, from which the girl could see that there was definitely someone in the house – someone she didn't recognise. Could it be a friend of her father's? But then, why would they be here so late at night, and whilst her father was away? The girl was also confused as to the source of the light in the room, albeit dim, given the shutters were firmly closed against the storm and the angry clouds would have covered the moon. She guessed the intruder must have brought a torch with them. It gave off a strange light, though – sooty and flickering, like a dying flame.

Being for the moment more interested in who the housebreaker might be, the girl peered a little more closely through a crack in the door, trying to get a glimpse of them. She knew it was a male, for he was talking to someone, and he wasn't being very quiet about it either. She strained her eye at the gap in the wood. Finally, with a little effort, she spied the person speaking.

The man sat in the corner by the cooling embers of the hearth. He was perched on the little three-legged milking stool that was usually a favourite of the girl's, as it was small and out of the way and yet still close to the warmth of the fire. But, unlike the little stool, so large was the man who sat there that the small round seat was completely engulfed beneath his breeches, and it looked as if the spindly chair legs jutted out directly from his behind.

The girl stared on wide-eyed at the spectacle. Where the gent's pants ended, huge calves extended in grimy woollen stockings, the ankles so fat that his flesh spilled over the sides of his buckled leather shoes. The rest of the man was no picture either. His ugly, wart-smattered face, pasty and open-pored, glistened with sweat, making his greasy hair stick to his face. And his impossibly chubby ring-covered fingers looked like bunches of sausages protruding from his grimy frilled sleeves. The girl gave an involuntary shudder.

Quickly surveying the room, the fisherman's daughter saw with little relief that the man had not been talking to himself. To the contrary: the modest parlour was quite bursting with life. A gang of dirty unkempt children ran about the place like so many rats seeking sustenance – something which the youngsters themselves were quite obviously sorely lacking. Furthermore, there was a number of other creatures in the room, perching on picture frames, hanging to the cupboard handles and fighting for space at the windowsills. The girl strained at the door, her eyes seeking confirmation of what she saw in the half light. They were birds – but not the common gulls she was used to seeing in this seaside setting. These were sooty, grey-black birds with strange piercing blue eyes that cut through the gloom as they stood sentinel at their various lookouts. The girl was all at once very aware of her own unwanted presence at the scene and felt most afraid of being caught by this strange and substantial assortment of intruders.

As she looked on, all the while the gargantuan man supervised and barked his orders. "Take whatever you can find." He snarled at the ragged youngsters as they busied

themselves shovelling the girl's family possessions into large hessian bags. "And don't be sparing."

A couple of the birds cawed an assent and, leaving their posts, with their own rasping croaks swept over the boys' heads, snapping at them meanly. The children cowered, bony fingers working ever faster to fill their sacks with booty, whilst the man took the opportunity to clear his throat, wiping spittle from the sides of his mouth with a filthy rag. "If it isn't bolted down, put it in the bag," he continued. "We'll sort through it afterwards, and what we don't find of value, we'll make a gift of to the sea." He gave a horribly wet laugh, almost a gurgle, which he ended for good measure with a fit of thick, throaty coughing. He spat into the rag and then replaced it in the pocket of his tattered frock coat.

The girl watched in horror and disgust. It was obvious that her home was being burgled – very noisily. Clearly the thieves didn't care a jot about being caught. But why had her mother not woken; or her sister, or her baby brother, for that matter? How could anyone possibly sleep through all this noise? Wondering if she should go and check on them again, she turned quietly to go back upstairs. But before she could do so, the girl stopped short at another sound – the creak of footsteps in the main stairwell. Somebody was coming down the stairs. Oh, thank goodness, her mother must have woken after all!

But this person's gait was too heavy by far to be anyone from her family. The girl's fear heightened. If only Father were not away at sea right now – away from his brood and braving this terrible storm. The fisherman's daughter held her breath as the form emerged from the hallway and into the room. It was indeed a woman: but not one she knew, nor wished to. This person had to be the robber's feminine accomplice. The female was every part as gross and hideous as her male counterpart. Dressed in a faded satin bonnet and an unnecessarily frilly old-fashioned dress, the front of which was stained with food and drink from more than one untidy dinner-sitting, she reminded the girl of some sort of grotesque Bo-Peep character out of a perverse and frightening interpretation of the nursery rhyme.

"All good, Mistress?" The man spoke to his partner in crime.

"Yes, my love." The dame replied in a simpering voice, her smile showing rows of pointed little yellow teeth.

The watching girl fought to choke down a wail of terror.

"The charm has worked." The man's consort continued. "They are all sleeping soundly as the grave. But wait," she jabbed a fat forefinger towards something on the kitchen table. "We are a light short."

The girl's eyes followed the direction of the woman's gesturing. But the sight of the item upon which they came to rest made her positively reel with shock. The girl put her hand to her mouth, suppressing a scream. For there, at the table's centre, in place of the simple pottery vase into which the girl's mother usually put flowers cut from the garden or collected from their daily ramblings on the headland, stood a far grislier item. It was something that the fisherman's daughter never could have imagined, even in her worst nightmare.

It was, or rather it seemed to be - for without close inspection the girl could not tell whether the thing was real, a severed human hand.

Blackened and withered, the hand stood proudly on the scrubbed-top counter,

unnaturally upright from the wrist, its fingers upturned. From each digit there burned a single black flame, so that the hand appeared like some kind of ghoulish candelabra, burning five dark lights – or what should have been five, for the light in one of the fingers was snuffed out, leaving nothing but oily black smoke in its stead.

“Grimly warned us that if one of the fingers does not burn, someone in the house must be awake,” recited the female robber. “Should I ask the jackdaws to sweep the house, my love?” At the mention of them, the darkly feathered birds all turned towards her, their pale blue eyes watching as she spoke, their muscles taught and twitching, poised for her command.

“No,” replied the man. “We must away. Grimly’s orders. No-one is to be hurt during our little outings - more’s the pity,” he smirked. “Quick to it, lads,” he gestured to the scurrying youths that ran hither and thither about the room.

Without further ado the poor, undernourished children obeyed. One by one, heads bowed, with full sacks on their shoulders they scuttled past their master and towards the fireplace, first stepping into the ashes and then with some speed scrambling somehow straight up into the chimney, from whence they disappeared without a trace. The girl blinked furiously, trying to adjust her eyes. What she had seen was not physically possible. The chimney in their modest cottage was far too small to take a child. But then where had the children gone?

As she fought to take it all in, the birds followed on from the children - swooping lightly over the grate and then up and away into the night, until at last only the two grotesque ringleaders of the macabre thieving circus remained in the room. With their charges gone the man, with some effort, stood up. Lumbering heavily over to the table, he picked up the flaming hand. Then, turning to his accomplice he gave a lavish bow. “After you, my dear.”

The woman giggled coyly. “Let us go together, husband,” she replied. Putting an oversized arm around his enormous waist she gave it a playful pinch with a plump finger and thumb as they turned towards the fire.

“Quite right, my love,” he leered at her, showing stained, broken brown teeth. “Shall we?”

Together, they walked over to the hearth. There, standing on the grate, by some miracle of magic or science, like a couple of overripe maggots they squeezed their hideous bodies up into the waiting chimney and out into the storm-torn night that lay beyond.