

DON'T LOOK NOW

Late October always seemed to bring the storms which threw themselves against the coast riding on the back of a roaring sou'wester. The wind would moan down the chimneys almost trying to blow out the fires in the hearths. The beech wood on the slopes behind the strand was whipped into a frenzy of thrashing branches as the gales raced and howled through the trees many of which had boughs still quite full with last summers foliage. The dying leaves were sent flying like a tornado of leaf confetti and small twigs which, once the storm abated, would be left littering the floor of the wood like the dead left on the battlefield after the tempest has passed. Sometimes whole trees would succumb to the storm and be found fallen with roots exposed only fit for firewood.

The sea would turn white with foam and sea fret, giant waves pounding into the bay, lashing against the rocky headlands on either side of the cove. White water fountains would fly up as the waves hit the rocks and the air would boom like thunder which could be felt through the soles of your feet.

It could be exhilarating and frightening in equal measure but however they felt about the storms the villagers all had the utmost respect for the sea, especially when it was angry.

This was by its nature the wrecking season. Whilst the villagers scraped by working hard on the farmland owned by the local gentry or fished or worked in the tin and copper mines it was a very hard existence, often brutal and short. They could hardly be blamed then when the autumn storms occasionally blew a ship returning home to Plymouth or Falmouth off course and onto the savage rocky coast only to founder on the hidden teeth below the surface of many a cove.

If a ship hit during a storm for several miles up or down the coast from the village the word would spread like wildfire and no matter the time of day or night hoards of poor villagers, men women and even the smallest children would swarm to the site of the unfortunate wreck to try and salvage whatever they could to eat or sell as might be the case. They had to be quick before the soldiers and authorities arrived to stop the looting of the wreck and often fights broke out amongst the desperate salvagers over the spoils, They were not concerned with the poor wretches who might still be alive and trapped on the sinking ship nor those washed up dead or near to it on the beach or the rocks. The stakes were high as if they were caught they would be up before the local magistrate and then the assizes who would be local landowners or well to do merchants with absolutely no sympathy for the peasants dire conditions. Cold-eyed men they would likely dole out sentences of hanging or being transported for life to the colonies which was still a death sentence, merely a slower one.

Wrecks were a rare event though and the villagers desperately needed to supplement their income all the time. No less risky than wrecking was the trade the village silently colluded in all year round when there was little or no moon.....smuggling.

There were ten or twelve men in the village who were active in the trade. They worked for a smuggling master who owned a large number of pack ponies and who co-ordinated the arrangements with the ships masters and the buyers of the contraband.

Wenna had been born in the village and had never been more than ten miles walk from it her whole life and knew nothing else. She was only twelve but her parents had seven children and she was the eldest so had as long as she could recall never been anything but a second mother to her younger brothers and sisters. As such she was a quiet thoughtful girl with a nature much older than her years. The family occupied a tiny two-room stone cottage in the village. Her father, she knew, was one of the 'gentlemen' although nothing was ever said about it at home.

It was All Hallows Eve 31 October 1789 and the wind had been building all day until by dusk it was a proper storm. Wenna's father had been looking more and more anxious as he watched the sky and the sea during the daylight hours, Wenna knew that there was a ship due to offload contraband in the cove later in the night once it was full dark and folk were in bed.

There would be no moon tonight which would be good for smuggling. The ship bringing the contraband from France would already be on its way and now the storm had struck it would be much more difficult and dangerous for both the ship and those offloading the precious cargo in the cove,

Once her mother had fed the children Wenna was tasked with putting them to bed and telling them a story to settle them for the night. She was very good at making up tales to entertain them and before she started she mentally checked that everyone was present in the one enormous bed in the upstairs room of the cottage. This was reached by a ladder and was where the whole family apart from her mother and father slept. First after Wenna was Kerenza (10), then Breock (9), the twins Maby and Merryn (7), Isolde (5) and little Peran (3). Six expectant faces turned to her as she began her tale of mermaids and handsome sailors, dolphins and whales. The background to her voice was the moaning of the wind in the chimney and the flickering flame of a candle.

Long before the story was ended the children all slept. Wenna blew out the candle and lay down next to them listening to the storm buffeting the roof of the cottage around her in the dim flickering light from the fire in the hearth below where her parents voices were kept low and murmuring. She must have slept awhile as she woke with a start as the door of the cottage opened and closed again quickly and a cold draft of air blew into the lower room. She checked the other children and all were sleeping soundly. Gingerly climbing out of the bed and pulling on her warmest clothes she climbed down the ladder to the room below. As she suspected her mother was there alone.

"Wenna what are you doing up at this hour?" her mother asked.

“Has father gone to the cove?”. Her mother nodded fear in her eyes. “Yes. I’m so worried that the storm will overturn the boats and the customs men are rumoured to be about the district these last four weeks. I know we need the money but I’m so fearful for your father. ‘Tis All Hallows Eve and I wish they weren’t working tonight, it’s a dark moon and a bad omen and I feel in my bones no good will come of it.”

Meanwhile in the cove huge waves were pounding the sand making it treacherous trying to manage the landing of the boats ferrying the barrels and bales from the French cutter which in turn was desperately trying to hold her position offshore without running aground on the rocks. Several times the boats were near to broaching in the surf. The men were however strong and determined shouting directions to each other above the storm. After nearly two hours of exertion when they were all near to exhaustion they had landed the last barrel and all was loaded on the ponies who formed a long line roped nose to pannier all the way along. The ponies would carry the cargo up from the beach to the stash which was in dry caves just along the coast from the village. These secret caves had been used for this purpose for generations.

The ponies plodded quietly up the beach and through the village their hooves muffled in rags. Nevertheless Wenna listening out for her father’s return heard the soft sounds of the caravan passing the front of the cottage. She turned and smiled at her mother, “don’t look now mother but I hear the gentlemen passing by”. Her mother smiled back the lines of tension in her face relaxing a little as she knew the worst was now over and once again the brandy, silks and tobacco in such ready demand were almost home and dry. There would be money for corn, sugar and flour, maybe enough for a few chickens for eggs or a pig to fatten, The approaching winter seemed a little less daunting than it had before but Wenna and her mother still feared the consequences every time the gauntlet was run in the dark of the moon.