

When Death Came To Flannan Isle

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We sat round the wooden table as we did for lunch every day. It was the only time the three of us got to eat together since one of us was always on duty at breakfast and supper.

'So will this be your first Christmas on a rock then Jim?' Murdo spoke in between mouthfuls of food. He always ate fast, shovelling in heaped spoonfuls one after another. He'd barely have time to chew one before the next was on its way. It was disgusting to watch; but hypnotic too. It seemed impossible for anyone to eat that fast without choking yet somehow he managed it.

'Aye, that it will.' While Jim was almost twenty-one he still had the slender frame of a lanky teenager. He'd only been working the lights for a few months and was still very much learning the lighthouse keepers' trade. He was just an occasional; someone sent to fill in whenever one of the permanent staff was needed elsewhere. Flannan Isle was his first deployment on a far distant light: one that was little more than a cluster of white-washed building on a pinnacle of granite jutting out from a restless sea. It was only on the far distant lights that you really felt the isolation. It could be weeks, sometimes months, before you got to speak to anyone other than your fellow keepers. All six of the tiny islands that surrounded the one with the light on it were uninhabited and, as far as I knew, they always had been. The nearest place with other people was Lewis some twenty miles to the west. Given that we had no boat it might as well have been on the far side of moon and anyway it was hardly a great metropolis. For real civilisation you'd have to go more than a hundred miles to Inverness and that could take days.

'Well, we mightn't have much and there's no drink but we do alright, you'll see.'

I smiled across at Jim, 'Don't look so forlorn. A dry Christmas never killed anyone and you'll be home by Hogmanay. I'm sure you'll more than make up for it then. 1900, the start of a new century; it's bound to be a night to remember. And I'm sure that not all the pretty girls in Aberdeen are taken.'

Murdo huffed, 'You ever been to Aberdeen? Ugliest women I've ever had the misfortune to meet.'

'Bet you didn't let that stop you though.' Jim shot his reply back without thinking. Once he realised what he'd said, he turned as white as a sheet. There's a very strict pecking order in lighthouses and it wasn't an occasional's place to make fun of a head keeper with twenty years experience under his belt.

For the first time since I'm known him, Murdo's spoon stopped half way to his mouth. At first he had a look that seemed to be a mixture of surprise and anger but after a few seconds a broad grin spread across his weathered face. 'You're right there laddie!' He emptied his spoon and carried on eating as fast as before, laughing to himself and shaking his head from side to side. 'You're right there.'

Not wanting to put his foot in his mouth again, Jim rose from the table and walked over to the window to check on the weather while Murdo and I finished our lunch.

Jim had only been there for a few second when he cried out, 'Hey, there's a boat out there; not really a boat, more like a dingy.'

Murdo leapt to his feet, sending his chair crashing to the floor behind him. 'There's only one reason you'd get a dingy out here. Someone's in trouble. John, you come with me, Jim lad, you stay here.'

Murdo had worked on lights long enough to know it probably meant a ship had gone down and that the sailors were making for the nearest land as it was their only hope of survival. Once we knew they were there, it was our duty to do all we could to help. At first Jim seemed like he was about to protest but he must have thought better of it because he said nothing. Even though he was just an occasional he knew the rules as well as the rest of us: no matter what happened someone always had to stay in the light.

Murdo and I grabbed our oilskins and headed down to the east dock. As we did, we watched the small wooden boat grow slowly closer. The man at the oars looked spent but somehow was still managing to power the boat towards the shore. Once on the dock, we could see he wasn't dressed for the sea. He was wearing what look like an expensive tweed suit as well as a collar and neck tie.

Murdo waved his arms over his head, 'Hey, you. Over here!'

The man didn't look round but the direction of the boat shifted until it was heading straight towards where we stood. When the boat finally touched the shore, he collapsed across the oars.

'John, you stay here, I'll get him.'

Murdo moved with a speed that belied his size and within a flash he'd shimmied down the ladder leading to the water and leapt into

the wooden dingy. The first thing he did was tie it to the dock. Next Murdo shook the man but he didn't respond. Unperturbed, Murdo scooped him up and threw him over his shoulder before climbing back up to the dock. The man seemed lifeless, his head lolling back and forth with every step Murdo took.

Once they were on the quay, I could see the man properly for the first time. He was probably in his early thirties and had one of those thick moustaches that seemed so fashionable these days amongst the middle classes. I glanced at his hands: while they were blistered and bleeding from rowing I could tell they weren't the hands of a worker. His skin had the blue-grey tinge of someone who'd been out in the cold too long. I glanced at Murdo, 'We'd better get him inside as quick as we can. See if we can get him warmed up.'

'Warmed? What're you blethering on about man? He's burning up.'

I touched the back of my hand to his forehead and withdrew it immediately; he was so hot it was like touching a kettle that had just boiled on the stove.

'They're following me .. They're going to kill me ... Captain ... God ... Someone ... help me ...'

We looked on helplessly as the stranger thrashed around in Jim's bunk. His skin was still tinged with grey but he was sweating so profusely that the sheets beneath him were sodden. While he'd not regained consciousness he was murmuring deliriously. Although I couldn't make out all the words I could tell he was petrified about something.

Jim scratched his head thoughtfully. 'He doesn't seem like a fisherman or a sailor or anything, does he? How d'you think he got all the way out here?'

Murdo shot him a look that could curdle milk straight from the cow. 'Jim, that's none of our business.'

'But ...'

'Our duty is to care for him as best we can not meddle in his private affairs. Whatever he's been through is between him and god,' Murdo paused for a moment, 'Or maybe him and the police.'

Suddenly the man sat bolt upright and his eyes sprang open. For a second he just stare off into the distance then he started to scream. Before any of us could do anything he collapsed onto the bed, the sound of his cry still echoing around the small room.

Jim stared at him wide-eyed, 'I think he's dead.'

'Don't be daft, laddie, people don't just drop dead like that. John, check him.'

I leaned forward and placed my cheek over his mouth but felt no breath; I put my hand on his chest and felt no rise and fall; I held my ear against him but there was no heart beat. I straightened up again and glanced round. 'Jim's right. He's dead.'

'You don't think whatever killed him's infectious do you?'

'If it is, me and Murdo are more at risk than you are. You never went near him and we both touched him.'

'But he's in my bed. And on my sheets!'

Murdo put one of his massive hands on the boy's shoulder. 'Jim lad, we've got other things to worry about.'

'Like what?'

'Like what to do with his body. I mean, if we don't do something with it soon, it'll start rotting.'

If Jim had looked worried before, he looked worse now. 'Rotting?'

'Aye. When someone dies with a temperature like that, they'll start going off much sooner than usual.'

I scratched my beard as I tried to come up with a suggestion. We had nowhere to store a body and the soil on the island wasn't deep enough to bury someone so that option was out; it seemed there was only one answer left. 'It'll have to be a burial at sea.'

'Shouldn't we keep the body for the police to look at or something?' Murdo and I turned to Jim.

'You've been reading that Sherlock Holmes rubbish again, haven't you lad?' Murdo turned away, 'Bloody Conan Doyle, filling young boys' heads with his modern rubbish. There's no way we can tell anyone about this until the relief boat arrives on Boxing day. He'll have rotted away to nothing then. No, John's right; it'll have to be the sea for him.'

'Right, Jim lad, you grab his legs and I'll grab his shoulders.'

We were standing round Jim's bed trying to avoid staring at the man's dead body. Murdo had laid some old sail cloth we'd scrounged

up from the stores along side him. As was traditional for a burial at sea, we were going to sew him into in it along with a few sizable rock we'd gathered from the land that surrounded the lighthouse. They'd act as ballast, making sure he didn't float to the surface again as he started to decay and bloat.

Jim grabbed the man's ankles and then let go almost immediately. 'Jings, he's still roasting hot!'

Murdo lent forward and slid his arms under the dead man's shoulders. 'It's just him starting to rot; now grab his legs.'

That was when the man moved. It was just a shiver but it was definitely a movement. Jim and Murdo were too busy to notice it but I did. Then his eyes flicked open. They were no longer blue; instead they were milky grey with dull black pupils – there was no doubt these were the eyes of a dead man. He twitched again. This time Jim noticed too. He screamed and leapt away from bed.

Murdo stayed where he was. 'What's gotten into you laddie?'

Jim was now standing tight against the back wall staring at the man. 'He ... he ... he ... he moved.'

'Don't be daft Jim lad, dead men don't move. It'll just be gas escaping or something like th ...'

Murdo never got to finish what he was saying. The man's hands swung up, grabbing his hair and pulling him downwards. Murdo was caught unaware and despite his size he toppled forward. He screamed as the dead man sank his teeth deep into his neck until blood spurted across the linen sheets and the white-washed wall behind him. Murdo struggled but the dead man had locked onto him and refused to let go. He bit Murdo again and again. On his throat, his face, his shoulders; any part he could reach. As more and more blood sprayed from his body Murdo started to weaken. Finally he stopped moving and his body went limp. Still the dead man kept attacking, his teeth slicing into his flesh, his hands tearing at Murdo's now lifeless body.

'Jesus, John, is Murdo's dead? I think I'm going to ...' Jim made for the door but got only half way before he threw up.

The sudden movement caught the dead man's attention and he seemed to noticed Jim and me for the first time. He pushed Murdo's body to the floor where it landed in a crumpled heap. We watched, horrified, as he pulled himself to his feet and started to stumble towards us. His movements were stilted and sluggish as he lurched forward, Murdo's blood dripping from his mouth and face.

I swallowed hard, 'Jim, we've got to get out of here.'

Jim remained where he was.

I took a step forward and grabbed his arm. 'Jim, we need to get out of here now!'

That was all Jim needed to release him from the fear that was rooting him to the spot and together we turned and ran into the main room. Behind us, we heard slow, shuffling steps as the dead man started to follow.

'What're we going to do? That's a dead man back there and he's coming after us.'

'I don't know Jim, just let me think for a minute.'

'But he's coming ...'

Just then the dead man staggered into the room, letting out a low, visceral moan as he did so. I looked round for something I could use as a weapon. My eyes settled on the gaff hook we used to help land the fish we caught to liven up our otherwise dull diet. I grabbed it and swung it hard at the man's head. The sharp point pierced his skull just behind his left ear and sank so deep into his brain that the tip emerged from the centre of his forehead. Almost instantly the man crumpled to the ground, pulling the makeshift weapon from my hand. I'd have said he died if he hadn't been dead already but something, some life force, certainly left him. Still neither Jim or I was keen to approach. We'd seen what happened to Murdo when he'd been caught by surprise and we didn't want the same to happen to us. Minutes passed without any movement and I finally decided it was safe. I knelt down next to the stranger's body and examined it. His shirt had come loose and I could see what looked like a bite mark on his side. It was deep enough to have drawn blood and while it looked a couple of days old, there was no sign it had started to heal. Instead, it remained a festering wound that oozed a thick, black liquid.

To my right, Jim let out a startled yelp, followed by a scream so filled with pain it could only have been made by a dying man. I leapt to my feet and spun round to find Murdo standing behind Jim, his massive arms wrapped round him, his teeth buried deep into the side of his head. Jim feebly tried to fight but the damage was too much. After a second he went limp and Murdo let go of his body. As it fell to the ground Murdo turned towards me: his eyes were clouded and lifeless; his skin as grey as the granite beneath our feet. Blood oozed from the bites that covered his head and neck as he lurched forward, arms reaching out towards me, hands grasping the air. I tried to free the gaff hook but it was too firmly embedded in the dead man's skull. Realising that Murdo would be on me in seconds, I left it there and ran for the stairs that led up to the top of the lighthouse.

I've been hiding in the light for five minutes now. I can hear Murdo slowly but inevitably getting closer and closer. There's one hundred and eighty five steps between the bottom and the top of the tower and I've listened to Murdo clamber up every single one of them. He's moving unsteadily, bumping off the walls, stumbling here and there but then again he's dead so I have to give him credit for still being able to get up the stairs at all. It's given me time to make a plan though and I'm ready for him when he finally steps into the light. It's only three o'clock in the afternoon but the darkness is starting to grow outside and I should be getting the light ready to send its signal out into the night. Instead I'm preparing to kill Murdo ... Or whatever it is I need to do to stay alive. After what he did to Jim, I'm under no illusions as to what he'll do to me if I let him get his hands on me. I've known Murdo for eleven years but I'm not going to let him do that to me; not over my dead body – or his.

As Murdo lumbers closer I back off towards the door to the balcony that surrounds the outside of the light. In my hand I'm grasping the leg of a chair that I'd broken into pieces so I'd have some sort of weapon to defend myself. I step out into the sea air and wait for Murdo to follow. Like a bloodhound he tracks my every movement. Even though his dead eyes don't see any more he knows where I am. Maybe he hears me or smells me or something but however he's doing it, he definitely knows where I am. I wait for him to step through the door. The change in temperature seems to disorient him for a second or maybe it's the wind that's starting to whip around the light as the sun goes down. I take my chance and smash the chair leg into his skull sending him spinning towards the guard rail. I hit him again and again but he won't go down. Finally I pull back and swing as hard as I can. I catch him across the side of the head and send him over the edge. Unfortunately I swing with such force that the chair leg slips from my grasp and spins off into the gloaming but it doesn't matter; Murdo is already falling the 75 feet to the ground. Even dead, there's no way he's surviving that sort of fall.

I'm peering over the rail looking at Murdo's shattered body just to make sure he's properly dead when I feel the bite on the back of my neck. I spin round to find Jim standing behind me, my blood dripping from his open mouth. Without thinking I grab his shirt and throw him over the guard rail. He's so slight that it's not difficult for someone like me. I don't like doing it but I can tell from his eyes that he's dead already; he just doesn't seem to know it yet. I'm guessing he will when he hits the ground. I slump onto the deck of the balcony knowing that all of this is finally over and wondering how I'm going to explain it to the lighthouse board but after a couple of minutes I notice something. There's a heat radiating out from where Jim just bit me; I can feel it spreading throughout my body. That's when I finally put two and two

together. The dead man had been bitten by someone, he bit Murdo, Murdo bit Jim and Jim bit me: whatever it was that killed him while making him walk again, it was infectious and now I have it.

I leap to my feet not knowing how long I have but I have to do something to break the cycle of infection. None of these bodies could be here when the relief ship arrived and nor could I.

It had taken all my strength to load the three bodies into the dingy and row it out to where I knew the water was more than sixty fathoms deep. It seemed only fitting that whatever the disease was it was leaving Flannan Isle the same way it arrived. One by one I heave the bodies over the side, knowing that they'll never surface again not all the way out here. I say a prayer for each of them in turn. I've cleaned everything up at the lighthouse so no one will ever be able to work out what happened; it's better that our families don't know. After all the exertion I'm exhausted and I sink down into the bottom of the dingy. It's now dark and I can make out the stars above me in amongst the clouds. I can feel the movement of the small boat as it's lifted up and down by the swell passing underneath me. I no longer have the strength to do what I intended; to throw myself over the side with my pockets filled with rocks. I can feel the infection, whatever it is, burning through my veins. It's only a matter of time before it kills me and then I don't know what will happen. I stare up at the sky. I can see the constellation of Orion just above the left hand side of the boat. I try to get up but I no longer have the strength. All I can do is lie here, hoping that it won't hurt as badly as it seemed to hurt the dying man we'd rescued from the dingy less than half a day before. The new century is only a few days away but I know I'll never see it dawn.

Author's Note: The lighthouse on Flannan Isle is a real place off the west coast of Scotland (visit follow this link to see its location in Google Earth: http://www.forthoseinperil.net/files/Flannan_Isles_Lighthouse.kmz – this requires that you have either Google Earth or a Google Earth Mobile app installed on your ebook device) and this story was inspired by a real event that took place there in 1900. It has entered Scottish mythology and in many ways it is our *Marie Celeste* or our *Bermuda Triangle*. I touched on it towards the start of my book [For Those In Peril On The Sea](#) where one of the characters is reminded of the memorable line 'Three men alive on Flannan Isle who think on three

men dead' from the poem by Wilfrid Wilson Gibson about Flannan Isle. The basic summary of the story is this: On Boxing Day (as the day after Christmas is known in Britain) of that year, a relief ship arrived to find the lighthouse deserted. Some say that there was untouched food left on the table but no signs of struggle, although this part may well be fiction. No trace was ever found of the three lighthouse keepers that should have been manning the light and to this day no one really knows what happened to them; to all intents and purposes they just disappeared into thin air. For more information about this mystery, visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flannan_Isles.

I'm in no way implying that this is what happened and, out of respect, I have specifically chosen not to use the real lighthouse keepers' names for the characters in this story. In addition, I've set it in the preceding year (1899) rather than 1900. Without any modern technology, this would have been a time when the men keeping a far distant light such a Flannan Isle would have been cut off from the rest of the world for much of the time, and this adds to the tension within the story since the lighthouse keepers know there's no way they can call for help from the outside world. It's just them against whatever is happening to them.