

The Eve of All Saints Day

by Helen Macari

'Halloween,' thought Beth. 'I should be back home helping the children get dressed to go out, not standing up here at the Tower watching.' She was grateful to her mother for offering to dress the two boys, seven year old Jack as a pirate and Robbie at five as a footballer with a broken leg, then take them to the party at the Town Hall. This had left her free to continue the ritual that had begun nine years ago when she and Tom married. He was skipper of the fishing boat 'The Dee-ana-mara', his brother George skippered 'The Silver Spray' and since taking charge five or six years ago, the two vessels always sailed together. They left harbour together, used adjacent fishing grounds and returned together, watched from Tower Hill by Beth and sometimes some of the other wives and families.

Tonight however, she stood alone as the daylight began to fade. She shivered a little as a breeze blew up and sent a slight chill through her body. Ten minutes later she was bracing her back against the Tower for support as the wind grew increasingly stronger and the rain stabbing at her face felt icy, making her skin sore. She tried to sidle round the Tower for shelter but it made no difference. The wind, getting stronger by the minute, could now be heard howling through the trees off to her right and involuntarily a tremor of fear ran through her spine. There was an alarmingly loud crack of thunder that made her jump, and then as several flashes of lightning lit the scene Beth could see huge waves churning up the sea. In the far distance she thought she saw lights through the lashing rain but they only lasted for a second. Perhaps it was just wishful thinking.

The next fifteen to thirty minutes saw Beth joined by a crowd of townspeople arriving singly or in little groups, each and every one horrified and frightened at the speed the light breeze had turned into a gale force wind. Her cousin Mae had brought Beth a woollen hat, gloves and an oilskin coat for protection but she still stood shivering against the Tower.

"Have you sighted anything at all Lass?" It was her Uncle Jamie, "We've alerted the Coast Guard that the boats were heading home." He slid his arm around her shoulders. She appreciated the comforting gesture that could not have come easy to him. Worry showed in his face and in that of the others as she looked round. This was the crises they dreaded most and their feelings could not be hidden.

"A couple of times I thought I saw lights, but I'm not sure as it was during a flash of lightning. I could have imagined it."

Now there were dozens of eyes all peering into the gloom. Some of the crowd had binoculars but most had their hands cupped up around the top of their eyes trying to shield them from the elements as they searched in vain for any sign of lights.

Beth and Jamie slowly became aware of a silence descending on the crowd and turned to see why. Old Jess, the recluse, was shuffling up the hill, her body bent forward and leaning heavily on her walking stick. She called to one of the men for aid and with his help reached the Tower. Nobody really knew anything about her, other than she had lived alone since her mother died nine on sixty years ago when Jess was twenty-nine. There were rumours of course, especially of her being a witch. The townsfolk, more than a little in awe and fear of Jess, passed this over as the vivid imaginings of some teenagers coupled

with Jess' appearance and lifestyle, although they had themselves attributed many a strange happening to her over the years.

"Halloween, bloody Halloween!" Jess mumbled just loud enough for Beth and Jamie to hear, and again, "Halloween. Oh Mum!"

Beth put her arm round the frail old lady and pulled her into the side of the Tower to help her withstand the wind.

"How many boats?" Jess asked.

"Four."

"Just as in the past, twenty good souls," muttered Jess. "Well it can't be the same this time, oh no, not again. Jamie, get their wives together and somebody to take me to the 'Granny Stone'. I'll meet you all there."

Then, "Jamie, Jamie," she called in the darkness as she turned away, "bring baskets Jamie, baskets with sand in them. Do you hear me Jamie?"

"Aye."

"Oh Uncle Jamie, things are bad enough without pandering to the whims of that old witch," cried Beth through the tears she had up until now refused to let flow.

"Now now lass. Calm yourself. Have a little faith in Jess. It was always said she had the gift. She's not the mad old bat everybody thinks, I know a wee bit about her. I've been visiting her every week since I was a boy."

The 'Granny Kempock Stone', so called because of its resemblance to a woman wrapped in a hooded cape, stood on a lower hill than the Tower and would have at one time been clearly visible to sailors. The Bronze Age standing stone was, for many centuries, regarded with superstitious dread and witchcraft, but those days had surely long gone.

It took Jamie about ten minutes to round up the wives of the fishermen who were in the four boats, and a good five minutes more to persuade them to meet up with Jess who was already kneeling in front of the 'Granny Stone'. Her head bowed, her eyes closed and her two hands flat against the cold wet grey stone.

"Jamie, give them each a basket of sand."

This done, the next instruction was for the wives to circle the 'Granny Stone' seven times as old Jess chanted a weird song over and over again. The words were incoherent except for one – BAAL. Jess lifted her head several times during the chant, and raising her right arm to the sky shouted BAAL, BAAL, BAAL – then, silence. Jess slumped to the ground with a loud moan. Nobody knew what to do. Parents quickly hushed any sniggers from the young as they all stood in awe. Then a whisper grew louder and stronger as it circulated round the gathering.

"The wind, the wind is easing. The sea is beginning to calm and the rain's not so heavy. You don't think – you don't think....." but the rest of the sentence was lost as Jess roused herself.

"Begone, begone wi' ye. Get to the Tower and watch for the boats. See them safely into harbour," she waved her arm motioning for them to leave.

She turned, "It's done Jamie. It's done. I need to go home now."

"Take my arm Jess," he said, and they followed the crown heading for Tower Hill then turned off for Kempock Street and the wee cottage Jess had lived in all her life.

"Your man would be proud of you this day Jess. She always said you had the gift."

"I wonder Jamie. I wonder. She never forgave me for not using it sixty-two years ago this Halloween night and save my faither. Four boats and twenty good souls were lost that night and she never forgave me for not trusting in myself."