

the problehem

Praise from children and adults:

“I read from *the problehem* to a family group with ages ranging from seven to seventy. In between the laughter you could have heard a pin drop.” John

“Wonderful. I liked the bit with Captain Hacker and the pig. It was really funny.” Lucy

“Inventive and often very funny.” Fern

“Boggleration! I think the way Sydney speaks is cool.”
Billy

“Sydney the smuggler is only as tall as your hand, but has a heart as big as a mountain...not bad for someone who can only speak in rhyme.” Michael

“I like the book because it has an interesting and exciting plot. It is adventurous, comical, magical and surprising and has a bit of history in it. It also has beautiful illustrations by the author.” Amy

“I am a huge fan I want hear more of Sydney as soon as he is able to settle near a well filled inkwell.” Sarah

“Excellent. It is unusual and original. You should read it.” Henry

the
probblehem

a puzzling smuggling
adventure

Ged Duncan

Bardic Media

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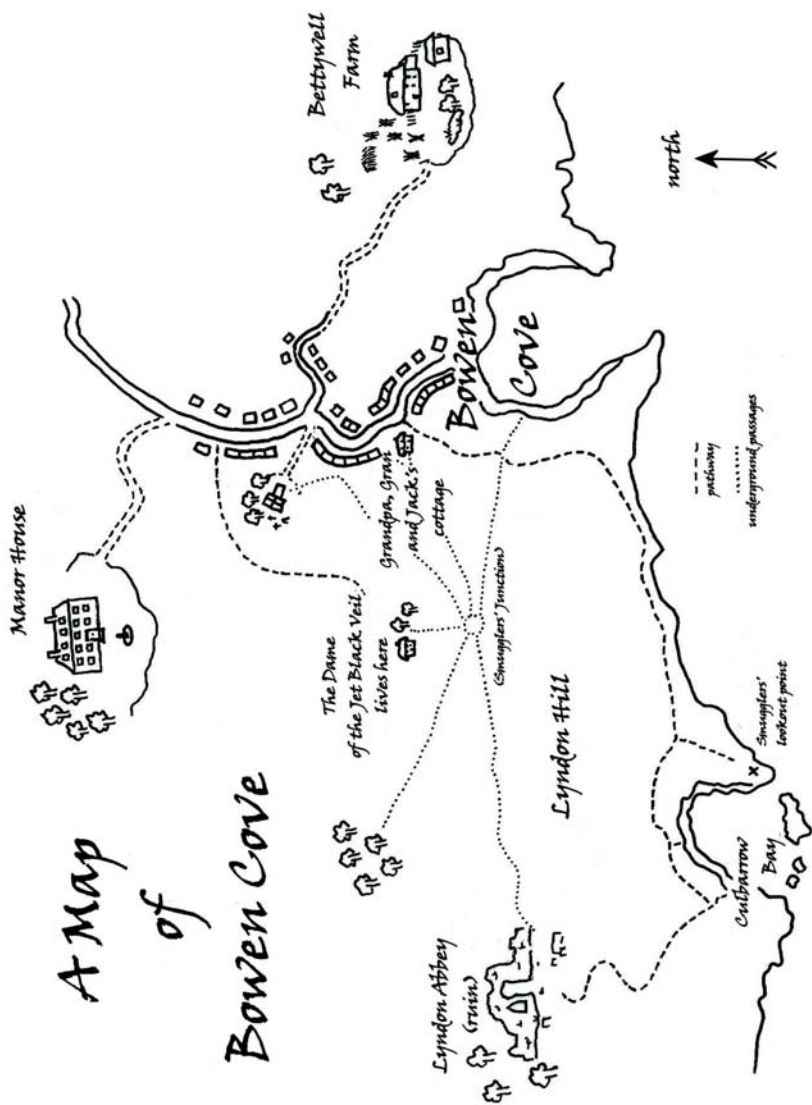
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online as ebooks and in print at:
www.stories-of-ged.co.uk

email admin@stories-of-ged.co.uk for
regular news and updates

To
Billy Bowen
and the
Bowditch Boys



prologue

Plug wanted to go home already. But he hadn't even arrived yet. He wouldn't admit it now, but the last time he had been to Bowen Cove it was the most exciting thing he had ever done. His Grandpa had told him thrilling stories about the smugglers who used to live there, and his Gran had convinced him that a ghost lived in their cottage. But he was five then and now he was ten. He wanted adventures not stories. The thought of spending a week in the country with two elderly people could only mean one thing. Boredom.

Plug's mum swerved as she drove down the country road,
“Look Plug, a deer!”

Plug had reached Level 6 of Dungeon Master 2 on his PlayBod. He didn't need an interruption now. This was going to be his entertainment until the end of the week. He should reach Level 15 by then. A sound of explosions, bleeping and the loud wailing of zombies came from the gadget in his hand.

“I'm busy,” he said, thumbs twitching furiously. He only had one life left.

“We're nearly there, you'll have to turn that thing off soon.”

He looked up briefly and saw fields and trees through the window. They had left the town long ago and he had hardly noticed. The glance up was long enough for a particularly big zombie to hit him with a club and he lost his last life. Plug muttered a word that he tried not to use in front of his mum or his teachers and the PlayBod played a triumphant tune and then went quiet.

“Plug! I don't want you using language like that in front of Gran and Grandpa..or me for that matter,” said his Mum, and then she thought a bit and added, “or at all, actually.”

It was half term, but Plug's Mum had to work, which was why he was going to stay with his Grandparents in their village by the sea. He didn't have a Dad, or not one he knew anyway.

When he asked his Mum about him she just said, "Humph!" and changed the subject.

"Can you remember anything about Bowen Cove?" his Mum asked, trying to get him to show some interest. "You were quite young when you came here before."

"Not much," said Plug. "I remember Grandpa's smuggling stories and that Gran thought there was a ghost in the cottage." His Mum laughed, "Oh yes, the ghost she feeds every night!" They recalled the kindly old pair putting out a dish of food on the table before they went to bed. The strange thing was that the dish was always empty in the morning. Plug's Mum thought it was Grandpa playing a trick. But at the time Plug believed it. The ghost didn't seem to do any major haunting like rattling chains or pulling him out of bed. So he quite liked the idea of a hungry ghoul in the kitchen.

But he didn't believe it now. It was just a story to keep a young child out of mischief.

"Do you remember anything else?"

"There was a big old table with drawers in it."

"That's a strange thing to remember. What about paddling in the Cove? Or the cliffs? Or the boats bobbing about in the water?"

"Nope."

"Why do you remember the table?"

"I played with all of Gran's old things in the drawers and kept pulling them in and out...and that there was one I couldn't open. Gran said they had never been able to open it."

"You see. Smugglers and ghosts, mysterious drawers. I'm sure you'll have fun."

Deep down Plug was annoyed and nervous that his Mum was leaving him on his own. Maybe she was right. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad. He had no idea quite how exciting his visit would turn out to be.

“Oh yes,” said his Mum as she started to drive down the steep hill into the village. “There's one other thing you ought to remember. It's where you got the name 'Plug'.”

one

Gran and Grandpa's cottage seemed to have a roof made of old straw. How does it keep the rain out? thought Plug as he listened to Gran and his Mum talking. They were all sitting round the table. Grandpa, like Plug, looked a bit bored. Plug looked at the table. It really was old, with scratches and marks all over its surface and drawers running along under the top. He tried the drawer on the end. It still didn't open.

Gran decided it was time to tell the story about how he got his name. Plug decided it was time to have another go at Level 6. He'd heard the story before. The story was embarrassing. It involved him in the bath while his Gran was there for a start. There must be a way of getting past that zombie. He turned off the sound on his PlayBod and soon his thumbs were twitching away. Hopefully the adults wouldn't notice.

The trouble was that he had been called 'Terence Horace Hole.' He was now called 'Plug', which was fine. But 'Plug Hole'? He reckoned he got as much grief at school with that name as he would have done being called 'Terence Horace Hole'. "Come on lad," whispered Grandpa. "I'll take you down to the Cove. We might even have time to go out in *Wendy Lady*." *Wendy Lady*, it turned out, was Grandpa's little boat.

Gran was just getting to the punchline. "And I was so discomknockerated by then. He'd pulled out the bath plug so many times. I said, 'Plug, for goodness sake, stop playing with the Terence'." Gran and Mum laughed. Grandpa and Plug looked at each other. The zombie got Plug again.

Grandpa and Plug got out of the house on the promise of being home in time for dinner. At home Plug had to help make the dinner. That Gran did all the cooking here was a good sign. He said goodbye to his Mum who would be gone when they got

back. Just as they were stepping out through the small cottage door his Gran asked,

“Plug, can I have a go on your thingy?”

“Er, my thingy?”

“You know, your bleepy thingy with the zombies.”

Gran wanted to play on the PlayBod.

“Er, sure,” said Plug, handing her the gadget. He quickly showed her how it worked.

“And that’s the volume control,” he added. “Mum makes me have it on low, but it goes really loud if you want.”

“Quiet will be fine,” said Gran.

It only took a few minutes for Grandpa and Plug to walk to the Cove. They passed more small houses with straw roofs. Some had names like ‘The Olde Bakery,’ and ‘Old Forge.’ But there weren’t any smells of baking bread or sounds of hammer on metal. The names showed what they had been long ago. Now they were just houses where people lived.

Wendy Lady was moored out in the Cove with lots of other boats gently bobbing about in the sea. Cliffs surrounded the water like two great arms protecting the boats from the rougher sea outside. Grandpa dragged a small wooden boat from the shingle into the sea. Plug was a bit disappointed. It was tiny. “Don’t worry, lad,” said Grandpa, noticing Plug’s expression. “This isn’t *Wendy Lady*. This is called a ‘tender’. It’s for rowing out to a bigger boat.”

Five minutes later *Wendy Lady* was chugging out of the gap in the cliff arms with Grandpa and Plug on board. It wasn’t a big boat, but it had a chugging engine that sputtered bubbles into the white swirl of wake behind them. Outside the Cove the waves were bigger, but the little boat rode up and down them easily as it moved along, sending a fine spray of seawater over the passengers.

"This is so cool!" shouted Plug to his Grandpa over the sound of the engine. Grandpa smiled back at him.

"See those cliffs up there lad?" he said. "That's Lyndon Hill, where the smugglers used to signal to their boats that the coast was clear. They flashed a light out to sea."

Plug looked at the place high on the cliff top where Grandpa was pointing. The boat chugged on.

"They used to land at night so the Customs men wouldn't catch them," said Grandpa steering the boat closer to the shore.

There was a small opening in the cliffs where they were lower and Grandpa sailed *Wendy Lady* straight through it. "And this is Culbarrow Bay, where they made lots of their landings."

The boat trip was over far too quickly. They had promised to be back in time for dinner and, once he had sailed round the Bay, Grandpa steered the boat back to Bowen Cove. As they walked back up to the cottage Plug fired questions at his Grandpa about the smugglers. He hardly remembered the stories from last time. He had forgotten how exciting they were.

"Why did people smuggle? Why were the customs men after them? What did they bring ashore in the cove?"

"It happened for about 200 years, starting in about 1650. The king and government were always fighting wars and they put a tax on lots of goods to pay for them. It meant that ordinary people couldn't afford things like tea and brandy. With some things more than half what you paid was tax. So they shipped them in themselves so they didn't have to pay tax and the Customs men were paid to catch them at it."

"And what happened if they were caught?"

"They got sent to prison and their boats were often destroyed. Some of the ringleaders were even hanged to death." That's a pretty harsh punishment, thought Plug. His Grandpa noticed the look on his face.

"But they were pretty good at outwitting the customs men," he added with a smile.

Plug was lost in thoughts of secret nighttime boat trips, and barrels of brandy and chests of tea being landed in the dark and smuggled up the cliffs. But they had reached the door of the cottage and Grandpa pushed it open and went in. There was a smell of cooking dinner, but it wasn't ready. A loud bleeping came from one of the armchairs that had its back to the door. They could see a small grey-haired head sticking over the top of the chair.



“I’m up to Level 3!” an excited Gran called out.

two

Plug helped Grandpa serve out the dinner. Every so often Gran would shout,

“Got you, zombie!”

Later they prised the PlayBod out of her hands and sat around the old oak table in the kitchen to eat. When they had finished Gran spooned some of the stew out into a small dish.

“Still feeding the ghost then?” said Plug.

“I am. Is that a problem?” Gran sensed that Plug was teasing her a bit.

“Do ghosts actually have stomachs, Gran?”

“Well, I expect that they do,” she replied cautiously. “You know, ghostly stomachs like the rest of them.”

“But ghosts pass through things, and things pass through them. They haven’t got bodies, that’s the whole point about a ghost isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right, that’s what ghosts are like.”

Plug felt that Gran had not really thought the ghost thing through.

“Then the food your ghost eats would fall through its stomach onto the floor. How come you aren’t cleaning stew off the floor every morning?”

“Then how come the food is always gone in the morning then?” said Gran, not convinced by Plug’s argument.

Plug thought about Gran’s question.

“Maybe something else is eating it,” he said, and then he suddenly thought of an alternative explanation. “Like a mouse!” Gran let out a little yelp.

“A mouse! What a horrible thought. No I’m sure it’s a ghost. I hear creaking and rattling sometimes.”

Later Plug lay in his bed up in the eaves of the cottage. He was quietly giggling at the idea that for years Gran and Grandpa may have been feeding generations of mice in the kitchen

thinking they were a friendly ghost. He decided he would stay awake to prove his idea and to stop Gran wasting good food on rodents.

Eventually he heard the creak of the floorboards by his grandparents' bedroom as they came up to go to sleep, and he waited until he could hear Grandpa's gentle snoring below him. Slowly he slid out of bed, put on his slippers and took out the torch he had hidden under his pillow earlier.

Even with the torch it was very dark in the cottage without the lights on. Plug crept slowly down the steep stairs that ran from his room to the landing outside his grandparents' bedroom. Each stair seemed to creak, and he stepped right at the edge of each one trying not to make a noise.

Grandpa's snoring was much louder now. Well, very loud actually. The noise was making the handle of the bedroom door rattle. Plug smiled. So much for Gran's ghostly rattling, he thought. He paused outside the door. But although he knew the rattling was made by Grandpa's snoring he could feel his heart beating fast against his chest and he was breathing very quickly.

Suddenly he heard a noise, an irregular tapping. This didn't sound Grandpa related. Nor did it sound like a mouse. Perhaps there was a ghost in the house after all! He stood very still. Plug saw a shadow moving on the wall. Now he realised he wasn't breathing at all, and the hairs on his arms were tingling with excitement and fear.

Plug slowly turned his head towards the sound of tapping. He felt a sudden surge of relief, and then a little foolish. There was a tree growing right outside the window and the gentle wind was blowing a small branch against the window. In the moonlight, the movement of the branch was throwing a shadow against the wall.

Plug continued his journey down to the kitchen. At the bottom of the stairs was a wooden door with a metal latch. It opened with a click that he was sure would wake his grandparents upstairs. But after he had waited for a few seconds he heard his Grandpa snoring again. He shone his torch straight at the table and it lit a small plate of stew and vegetables that Gran had left out for the ghost. There was no sign of either a mouse or a ghost!

Plug turned on the kitchen light. Everything looked normal in the room, with its pots and pans and crockery. Grandpa's fishing rod was leaning up against the wall in the corner. Plug felt slightly disappointed and rather silly standing in the cool kitchen, wearing his pyjamas, in the middle of the night.

He climbed up on to a stool by the table and sat there swinging his legs and looking at the little plate of food. Plug started to feel hungry just by looking at it. Why should the mice have this lovely stew? I'm sure Gran would rather feed me than them, Plug thought.

He took a spoon out of one of the drawers in the side of the table, but as he did, he found himself looking around the room. He couldn't see any mice. Or ghosts. He pulled the plate towards him, realising that once again his heart was pounding against his chest.

Plug took a spoonful of stew and looking around once more he lifted it to his lips and popped it in his mouth. It was delicious.

But as he chewed on the first mouthful he heard a rattling sound. It was coming from the table. One of the drawers was beginning to open. Plug was astonished, especially when he realised that the drawer that was opening was the one that had been shut tight for years and years!