



THEY STAYED AN hour among the ruins, then assembled for the cliff-top walk to Saltwick Bay. It was just after eleven o'clock. The sun, which had shone brightly as they left The Crow's Nest, was now a fuzzy pink ball. A cool breeze was coming off the sea, and the eastern horizon was hidden by mist.

Mr Hepworth gazed out to sea. 'This mist is known as a sea-fret,' he told them, 'and sea-frets are very common on this coast. You probably feel a bit chilled just now, but once we start walking you'll be all right.' He turned and pointed. 'That collection of buildings is the Coastguard

Station. The path goes right past it, and that's where this morning's walk really begins. Who can tell us what coastguards do? Yes, Keith?'

'Guard the coast, Sir.'

'Well, yes. What sort of things do they look out for, d'you think?'

'Shipwrecks, Sir. People drowning and that.'

'That's right. Vessels or persons in trouble at sea – including those silly beggars who keep getting themselves washed out on lilos and old tyres. They also watch for people stuck or injured on cliffs, and for distress rockets and signs of foul weather. Right – let's go.'

They filed across the Abbey Plain and up past the Coastguard Station. The path was part of the Cleveland Way, and countless boots

had churned it into sticky mud, permanent except in the longest dry spells. Because of this, duckboards had been laid down, so that most of the path between Whitby and Saltwick was under wooden slats.

'What a weird track,' said Maureen. 'It's like a raft that goes on for ever.'

'I hope it doesn't go on for ever,' her twin retorted. 'It kills your feet.'

It didn't go on for ever. They'd been walking twenty-five minutes, on the flat and over stiles, when the boards ended and they found themselves on a tarmac road which went through the middle of a caravan holiday camp. Just beyond the camp was a muddy pathway which led from the clifftop to the beach. Mr Hepworth lifted his hand.

‘Right. This is Saltwick Bay.’ He looked at his watch. ‘It’s twenty-five to twelve, and if it stays fine we’ll be here till about half-past four, so there’s plenty of time. We’ll eat lunch at half-past twelve. In the meantime you may paddle, play on the sand, look for fossils in the cliff-face or collect shells and pebbles on the beach. You are not, repeat not, to do any of the following: sit down in the surf and get your clothing wet. Attempt to climb the cliff. Throw stones or other hard missiles. Murder one another. Chuck your best friend into the sea. Utter shrieks, bellows or similar prehistoric noises, or find a tiny child with a sandcastle and flatten the sandcastle, the tiny child, or both. Is that clear?’

It was.

The bay was sandy in some parts and rocky in others. Fliss and Lisa sat on a rock to remove their boots and socks, then ran down to the water’s edge, where they rolled up their jeans and waited for a wavelet to wash over their feet.

‘Ooh, it’s freezing!’ Fliss scampered clear and stood with her hands in her anorak pockets, curling her toes in the wet sand. Lisa gasped and screwed up her face but refused to budge. The wavelet spent itself and rushed back.

‘Hey, that’s weird!’ She flung out her arms for balance. ‘If you look down when the wave’s going back you seem to be sliding backwards up the beach at terrific speed – like skiing in reverse. I nearly fell over.’

‘I remember that from when I was little,’ said Fliss. ‘It happened the first time I ever paddled. I howled, and it was ages before my mum could get me in the sea again.’

‘There’s something else as well,’ laughed Lisa, as a second wavelet ran back. ‘The water washes the sand away from under your heels. It’s like a big hole opening up to swallow you. I bet that’s why you were frightened. Come and have a go.’

They played along the edge of the sea till it was half-past twelve and Mrs Evans called them to come and eat lunch. They sat on rocks and munched, burying their feet in the dry sand for warmth.

'I'd no idea it was lunchtime,' said Fliss. 'We only seem to have been here about five minutes.'

'That's 'cause we're having fun,' Lisa replied. 'If it was maths, it'd seem like five hours.'

Grant Cooper and Robert Field had been looking for fossils along the foot of the cliff. They'd dug some out and brought them back in a polythene bag. Mr Hepworth tipped them on a flat rock and spread them out. Everybody gathered round, and the teacher picked out the best specimens.

'Look at this.' He held up a slender, cylindrical object which came to a point at one end. 'This is a belemnite. It lived in the sea millions of years ago and looked something like a squid.'

'It looks something like a bullet now,' observed Andrew Roberts. Mrs Evans gave him one of her looks.

'And this one's a gryphia, or devil's toenail, to give it its popular name. It looks similar to a mussel, but it too lived millions of years ago. And this,' he held up a thick disc with a curled pattern on it, 'is an ammonite. It looks snail-like, and you might think it slithered slowly along the seabed but it didn't. It swam, catching its food with its many tentacles.'

'How do they know, Sir?' asked Haley Denton.

'Know what, Haley?'

'That it swam about, Sir. There were no people then, and there are no ammonites or whatever now, so how do they know what it did?'

'Ah – good question, Haley. Well, one thing they do is look at creatures which are built in a similar way, and are alive today. There's a creature called the nautilus which is something like an ammonite. They know how it gets around, so they're pretty sure the ammonite got around in a similar way. D'you see?'

'Yes, Sir.'

When everything had been eaten and washed down with canned pop, the children went off in twos and threes to do whatever they felt like doing. It was a quarter-past one. The mist had thickened, blotting out the sun, and the breeze gusted spitefully, sharp with blown sand. The holidaymakers had withdrawn to their caravans, so that the children of Bottomtop Middle had

the beach to themselves. They went barefoot, but did not remove their anoraks.

Fliss and Lisa ranged far along the tideline, looking for shells and fancy pebbles. They found no shells, except some blue-black fragments of broken mussel which they spurned. There were plenty of pebbles though, and some were quite pretty, especially when wet. They picked up the best ones, putting them in the bags they'd saved from lunch. It was absorbing work, and when Fliss finally looked up she was amazed to see how far they'd come.

'Hey, look – we're miles from anyone else. The teachers look like dots.'

'That's just how I like them,' chuckled Lisa. 'We can't go any fur-

ther, though – we've run out of beach.'

It was true. In front of them a great, dark headland jutted into the sea. Gulls skimmed screaming along the face of its cliff but the still air felt less cold.

'There's no wind here,' said Fliss. 'Let's stay for a bit. Look – the tide's swept all the rubbish into a corner like Mrs Clarke at school. There might be something good.'

They waded through the flotsam with their heads down, turning it over with their feet, exclaiming from time to time as some new find came to light. A lobster pot smashed in a storm. A clump of orange line, hopelessly tangled. A dead gull.

Fliss worked steadily along the base of the cliff, seeking mermaids

and Spanish gold. She heard the hiss of surf on sand, and glanced up to find she'd almost reached the sea. As she stood looking out, her eyes were drawn to a dark, spray-drenched rock, and to the bird which sat on it.

It was black, and it held out its ragged wings as though waiting for the wind to dry them. Fliss shivered as she gazed at it, feeling the magic drain out of the day. It reminded her of something. A witch perhaps, or a broken umbrella. Or the iron crow on the Gate of Fate.