Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Ghost Ship

written by

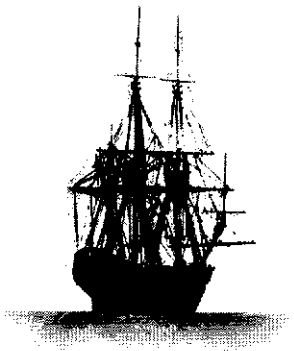
Dietlof Reiche

published by

Chicken House

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.



ONE

Sunday lunchtime was always the worst.

That was when every table in the Seashell Restaurant was occupied and customers queued impatiently outside. They were mainly parents with young children, as usual, Vicki noticed as she hurried to the serving counter with a tray.

Vicki was twelve. She liked little children, provided they didn't rampage around, spill their drinks, and smear ketchup all over the tablecloths. Unfortunately, all the youngsters having lunch today seemed to be the kind who did.

What there *did* seem to be was a secret telephone network via which all the seaside holidaymakers with little children had agreed to meet for Sunday lunch at the Seashell.

'One large, one small, and two kids on twelve,' said Vicki.

Eileen nodded and keyed in the order. A buxom blonde, Eileen ran the restaurant and, now that Vicki's mother had remarried, the household as well. Vicki's father, who was the real boss, was in charge of the kitchen.

'One large' meant a fillet of plaice with new potatoes, melted butter and peas; 'one small' was obvious; and 'kids' meant fishfingers and chips. And ketchup. Which meant that Vicki would have to change the tablecloth later.

'Everything OK?' asked Eileen, and Vicki nodded. Eileen was all right. Vicki could go to her when she'd been given a bad mark in maths and didn't want Dad to know, or when she wanted to be shown the best way to put on nail varnish. Or even when she had problems with boys.

Vicki scanned the restaurant. 'Watch out for any customers trying to catch your eye,' Eileen had told her. 'Never look away, and always give them a nod to show you've seen them.' Vicki wasn't responsible for the whole restaurant, of course. Just three tables, in fact, but they seemed to hold a magical attraction for families with little children. She only worked weekends during the holidays, and her dad couldn't pay her like his other staff, or he'd be in trouble with the local authorities. All she'd done in the past was clear away the dirty plates. This summer, for the

first time, she'd been allowed to wait at the tables properly under Eileen's supervision. Vicki was big for her age, and the heavily laden trays gave her no trouble.

'Miss!'

Vicki nodded and aimed a 'Coming right away' smile at table twelve. The two children, a girl and a boy, had started squabbling, but their glasses of orange juice were still upright. They were bored, and no wonder. The Seashell held no appeal for little kids, even though there wasn't another place like it in the world. Almost every square inch of the spacious restaurant's walls was lined with seashells. Large and small, smooth and fluted, white and coloured, dull and shiny, round and elongated. Shells from the North Atlantic and the South Pacific (most of them from the latter, Vicki had discovered). Each of the shells had been stuck to the wall with its curved side facing outwards: huge clamshells, tiny mussel shells, medium-sized cowrie shells, and tropical cockleshells of all kinds. Vicki had looked up seashells in an encyclopedia. There were more than six thousand different kinds, and most of them seemed to be represented in the Seashell. To quote the local tourist brochure, the restaurant was an 'attraction'.

And not only because of the seashells: there was also the carved wooden head on the end wall. Less of an attraction was the portrait of an eighteenth-century sea captain

hanging opposite it. Painted in oils, it didn't amount to much, from an artistic point of view.

'One large, one small, and two fishfingers,' said Vicki, unloading her tray.

'Thanks,' said the father. 'Tell me, er . . . that head on the wall over there, who's it supposed to be?'

'No one special. It's part of an eighteenth-century figurehead. All we know is, it belonged to a sailing ship named the *Storm Goddess*.'

'And the man in the three-cornered hat?'

'That's the last captain of the *Storm Goddess*. She went down in a storm somewhere off the coast near here.'

'Mum, I want a Coke!'

'Me, too!'

'Two more orange juices,' said the mother.

Two hours later the restaurant was nearly empty. The Sunday afternoon cream-tea brigade would soon be turning up, but for the moment Vicki could relax. She did so leaning against the counter. 'Never sit down,' Eileen had told her. 'If you absolutely must, doze on your feet. Only waitresses in fifth-rate burger bars sit down.' Vicki looked up at the figurehead. 'Hi, Storm Goddess,' she said, under her breath, of course – she didn't want anyone thinking her strange – but the Storm Goddess was a favourite of hers.

Vicki found the seashells interesting, and the captain too, but the carved head on the wall really fascinated her.

The Storm Goddess had been mounted on a kind of slanting base so that she leaned forward and looked down into the restaurant. But she didn't just look down, she looked straight at you.

The Storm Goddess was looking at Vicki – gazing sternly into her eyes as if guarding some secrets.

One of which Vicki knew.

As a little girl she'd thought that the Storm Goddess's gaze was meant for her alone, and that it followed her all around the room. This scared her until Dad mentioned that the figurehead seemed to be looking at him too. It was due to a peculiarity of the eyes: the Storm Goddess had a squint.

It was only a slight squint, and you wouldn't have noticed it unless you looked very carefully. More importantly, you couldn't tell *why* she was squinting, not from floor level. Vicki had found this out by chance. They'd been hanging up Christmas decorations, and a big ladder had been leaning against the wall beside the Storm Goddess. Although Vicki's father had strictly forbidden her to climb it, she'd scrambled up while no one else was around. That was when she discovered that some of the paint had flaked off the Storm Goddess's right eye, just

beside the black pupil. She also saw that the eye was made of glass.

Vicki had told no one of her discovery. It had remained a secret between her and the Storm Goddess.

She looked up at the head on the wall, and the head returned her gaze. The Storm Goddess looked down at her gravely, as if to say, 'That's not the only secret I know.'

It was true. For instance: why was her head the only thing that was left of her? Figureheads were carved from a single piece of timber, but after the storm had sunk her ship, all that the waves had washed ashore was a head without a body. What had happened on board? Why had the head become detached from the body?

The history of the town, a big fat volume preserved in the public library, contained an account of the terrible storm that had raged in the autumn of 1772. However, all it said about the head was that it had been found on the beach and identified as belonging to the *Storm Goddess*. Reported to have been washed up at the same time was a packet wrapped in sailcloth and waterproofed with pitch. What had the packet contained?

Vicki continued to gaze at the Storm Goddess. What had happened to her out at sea? What had her eyes seen?

'Excuse me!'

Table twelve was now occupied by another couple and

their son, a boy of about Vicki's age with dark hair and black-framed glasses; the Harry Potter glasses with little round lenses. Vicki usually thought they looked stupid, but they looked OK on this boy. In fact, they suited him perfectly. She went over to the table.

'Are you the waitress?' The man looked her up and down. He was wearing an open-necked shirt and a gold chain around his neck. His wife, who looked bored, was slim and sunbed-tanned. She wore more gold jewellery than her husband – considerably more.

'You can't be any older than thirteen,' said the man.

'I look young for my age.' This was Vicki's standard response to remarks like that. Why did people like this come here on holiday? They belonged at a resort on the Costa del Sol. The boy looked nice, though. He smiled at Vicki, and she smiled back.

'Besides,' Vicki went on, 'I'm only doing this until I can go to maritime college. I aim to become a ship's captain.' She always added that for especially irritating customers.

'Some hope,' said the man.

The boy grinned.

'Peter,' said his mother, 'stop smirking.'

'OK,' replied the boy named Peter. His grin persisted. Vicki grinned back.

'Harry,' said the woman, 'let's go. I'd rather have a snack

by the swimming pool.'

Peter stopped grinning. 'Oh no, not again!'

'So this is the famous Seashell Restaurant.' His father surveyed the room. These people definitely belonged in Spain, Vicki told herself.

'Look, Peter,' the man went on, 'we came here on holiday because it's what *you* wanted. That's fine, but your mother and I would like to do some sunbathing – if the sun ever shines here. If you want to stay and eat, nobody's stopping you. Right?'

Peter looked at Vicki and nodded.

His parents got up and left.

What now?

'Can I bring you something to drink?' Vicki asked, blushing despite herself.

Peter nodded. 'A Coke?'

'Right away,' she said. She only hoped he hadn't noticed her blushing.

'Eileen,' she whispered when she reached the serving counter, 'you see that boy at table twelve?'

'What? Speak up. Which boy?' Eileen asked loudly.

Vicki wished she could sink through the floor, but it refused to swallow her up.

Eileen came to her rescue. By now she had spotted Peter and noticed that Vicki's face was as red as a tomato. 'Sit

him down at number nineteen,' she said, lowering her voice.

This was a small, secluded table near the counter. It commanded a good view of the restaurant and was close to where Vicki relaxed – on her feet, of course – when she wasn't actually waiting at tables.

She gave Eileen a grateful nod.

'That sea captain story of yours was really funny.' Vicki had brought Peter his Coke, and he'd gathered that she couldn't join him at the table.

'I wasn't joking,' she said, leaning against the counter. 'It's what I really want to be.' She knew that it was unusual to have decided what she wanted to do so young. None of the other girls in her class seemed to worry about the future. She hesitated. Then she said, 'How about you? Any idea what you want to be?'

He nodded. 'A scientist. Physics or chemistry.'

Physics and chemistry certainly had nothing to do with the way her cheeks had started burning again. At least she sounded OK when she said, 'Why did you want to spend your holiday here?' Seeing the look on his face, she added quickly, 'Just curious.'

'Why *not* here?' Peter adjusted his glasses with his forefinger. He'd already done that more than once – an

appealing gesture, Vicki thought. She could imagine him fiddling with his glasses like that when he was reading. 'The thing is,' he went on, 'I didn't want to go on yet another beach holiday with my parents. Blazing sun, blue sea, white sand, blue pool, and – just for a change – a few green palm trees. It's so boring. That's why I chose somewhere different for my birthday: a proper old fishing village with tides that go in and out – maybe even some storms. A place where there are things to see.' He surveyed the restaurant. 'A room lined with seashells, for instance.'

'How did you know about us?'

'Some travel brochure. There was a photo, and the caption said that the Seashell Restaurant was worth a visit. But that wasn't what decided it for me.'

'It wasn't?' What bigger attraction did the town have to offer?

'No. There are seashells in Spain, too, plenty of them. What I found really interesting about the photo was that.' Peter pointed to the end wall.

'Waitress!'

So the Storm Goddess had lured him here!

'Waitress!'

Vicki was in demand again.

The restaurant had filled up. Vicki managed to exchange a

few more words with Peter and let him know, in passing, that she was the owner's daughter, but it was a while before she got the chance to go and stand beside his table again.

Peter hadn't been the least bit bored. He seemed to be the kind of boy who didn't always have to be the centre of attention; he could sit still and simply observe what was going on around him. At one point he produced a miniature telescope from the pocket of his jeans and surveyed the restaurant with it. Vicki, who noticed this as she bustled past, thought it was a bit odd. The telescope was now lying on the table in front of him.

'I read in the brochure that the *Storm Goddess* went down off the coast near here,' he said to Vicki, who was leaning against the counter again. 'Why is part of her figurehead here? I mean, why not in a museum?'

'I can explain that.' Vicki drew a deep breath. Explanations weren't her strong point. She looked at Peter, who was waiting expectantly. She told him that this had once been the *Storm Goddess*'s home port, and that her captain came from the town, like the first mate and some of the crew. And that the captain had been the owner, not only of the *Storm Goddess*, but also of the Seashell Restaurant.

Peter nodded. 'So that's why the head is here.' He stared at it some more and abruptly reached for his telescope again. Vicki sighed. Evidently, all boys had a craze for

something, and Peter's seemed to be his stupid telescope. He withdrew his hand. 'And now it belongs to you.'

Vicki shook her head. 'We only rent this place from the harbour master.'

'The harbour master?'

'Yes, he's a direct descendant of the ship's captain. That's why he's the owner.'

'Oh.' Peter looked at the telescope again.

'But,' Vicki said quickly, 'the first mate of the *Storm Goddess* was an ancestor of *ours*.'

He looked up. 'Really? You're descended from an eighteenth-century sailor? Awesome.' His eyes strayed once more to his stupid telescope. 'Well,' he said, 'I'm no expert, but I think that head is pretty amazing. They ought to mention something as unusual as that in the brochure.'

'Mention what? What are you talking about?'

'The fact that the Storm Goddess's eyes are made of glass.'