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Opening extract from

Arthur High King of Britian

Written by

Michael Morpurgo

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1 THE BELL

THE BOY LEFT HOME AT FIRST LIGHT, ENOUGH food and drink in his rucksack to last him the whole day. It was something he had always promised himself he would do – if ever he had the chance, if ever the circumstances were right. He told no one of his plans, because he knew his mother would worry, his little sister would tell on him, and his father would try to stop him. As far as they were concerned he was going shrimping off Samson. He would be getting up early to catch the spring tide just as it fell, so that he could walk the sea-bed from Bryher to Tresco and from Tresco over to Samson. That was what he'd told them. Everyone did that, but what no one had ever done, so

far as he knew anyway, was to walk over to the Eastern Isles and back again. Everyone said that it could not be done in the time. His father was quite adamant about it. That was partly why the boy was determined to do it.

He had worked it all out. He knew the waters around the Scilly Isles like the back of his hand. He had lived there all his twelve years. From the deck of his father's fishing boat, he had learnt every rock, every sandbank. He knew the tides, the currents and the clouds. He could do it. The spring tide would be the lowest for years. The weather was settled and perfect – red sky the night before – and the wind was right. So long as he left the Eastern Isles by half past twelve he would have enough time to make it back to Bryher and home before the tide rose and cut him off. He knew precisely how fast the tides came in. He knew there would be places where he would have to wade shoulder high through the sea. And if the worst came to the worst he could always swim for it. He was a strong swimmer, the best in his school. He could make it. He would make it.

He stood on Green Bay looking out across Tresco Channel, the cold mud oozing between his toes. He checked his watch. Just before six. A pair of oystercatchers busied themselves in the shallows, and

were interrupted by a gang of raucous gulls fighting over a crab. They took off, piping their indignation. The sea was fast draining away in the Tresco Channel. It was a windless, cloudless dawn. The boy hitched up his rucksack, and began to trot out towards Tresco. As he had expected, the sea was still running fast through the channel. He splashed out into it, the force of the current soon reducing him to a walk. He took off his rucksack, held it above his head and waded in deeper. The cold of the water took his breath away. He thought that maybe he had set out too early, that he might have to turn back and wait for the tide to ebb a little further; but a few steps more, and he was through the deepest water and then out of it altogether. He clambered up over the dunes and broke into a run, passing Tresco church by quarter to seven. He was on time.

As he came down to the harbour at Old Grimsby, the whole sea-bed was open to the sky. It was as if Moses had been there before him. The sea still ran through in places, but he could see his route plainly – Tean, then over to St Martin's and along the shore towards Higher Town Bay. And there were the Eastern Isles still surrounded by sea, the Ganilly sand-bar already a golden island in the early morning sun. The sand-bar would be his only way in and his only

way out. In less than two hours, by his reckoning, the sand-bar would be a brief causeway to the Eastern Isles. He would have to hurry. He ate his breakfast on the move, a couple of sausage rolls and a jam sandwich. He gulped it down too fast and had to stop to wash it down with water. Biting into the first of his apples, he headed out towards Tean. With the tide still going out he knew this was the easiest part. It would be on the way back that he would have to race the tide home to Bryher. The return must be timed perfectly, to the minute; so the sooner he reached the Eastern Isles the better. Once there, he would have just a quarter of an hour to eat his lunch and rest. With this in mind, and only this in mind, he reached St Martin's and ran along the beach, trying to keep to the wet sand. It was easier on his aching legs than the softer sand near the dunes.

The sun was high now and hot on his head. The rucksack was chafing at his shoulders, so he hooked his thumbs into the straps to relieve the soreness. When the beach became rocks he turned inland and followed the track through the bracken towards Higher Town. He was passing the school gates when he saw Morris Jenkins coming down the track towards him. He was about the last person the boy wanted to meet. Morris would want to talk. He always wanted to talk.

'What're you doing over here?' Morris shouted.

'See you, Morris,' said the boy as he ran by, breathless.

'Flaming marathon, is it?'

'Something like that.' And then he was out of sight and heaving a sigh of relief. He slowed to walk. His legs felt heavy. He was tiring. He longed to sit down, to rest; but he dared not, not yet. He thought of Morris Jenkins. He had resisted the temptation to tell him where he was going, what he was doing. He'd only have scoffed. When the time was right, when he'd done it, then he would tell anyone, then he'd tell everyone. There'd be those who wouldn't believe him, of course, Morris amongst them, but he didn't mind that. He would know and that was all that really mattered. He bit into another apple and pressed on towards the Eastern Isles.

By noon the boy was sitting in triumph on the highest rock on Great Ganilly, the largest of the Eastern Isles. There were a few other walkers out and about now, shrimping the sea-bed around St Martin's; but he was quite alone on the Eastern Isles, except for a solitary seal bobbing in the open sea and a few shrieking terns that were diving at him, trying to drive him off his rock. He sat where he was, ate his lunch and ignored them. In time they gave up and left him



in peace. He finished his last jam sandwich and checked his watch. He had ten minutes to spare. He'd rest for a minute or two and then be on his way. Plenty of time. He lay back on the rock, head on his rucksack, his eyes squinting in the glare of the sun. He closed them, and wondered how the Scilly Isles had been when they were one entire island, before it tipped fifteen hundred years ago and let the ocean flood in. Had there been an earthquake, or a tidal wave perhaps? No one knew. A mystery. He liked mysteries, he liked the unknown. Lulled by warm stillness and more exhausted than he knew, he slipped into sleep.

When he woke, the sun was gone, the sky was gone, the sea was gone. He was cocooned in thick fog. The foghorn from the Bishop Rock Lighthouse sounded distantly, echoing the fear that was taking

root in the boy's heart. He scrambled down through the bracken. It would be clearer down on the shore. It must be. It had to be. If he could see the sand-bar, then he could find his way back to St Martin's. It was all right, it was all right! There was the sand-bar stretching away into fog. All he had to do was follow it and he'd be safe. Only then did he think to look at his watch. Twenty-five to one. Just five minutes behind time. He'd have to hurry. He ran out on to the sand-bar, his eyes straining for some shadow in the white-out that might be St Martin's. It had to be that way. It had to be. He was running through sandy pools, and then the pools were suddenly not pools any more, but the sea itself. He could go no further. The ocean was closing in around him. He could hear the sea running now, rippling in over the sand-bar to encircle him. He stood frozen in his fear and listened. A sudden wind came in off the sea and chilled him to the bone, yet it gave him the only hope left to him. He was stranded. Great Ganilly had vanished, St Martin's was invisible. Only the wind could save him now. If the wind would only blow away the blinding fog, then at least he could find his way off the sand-bank, and swim back to Great Ganilly and safety. So he stood in the wind and watched all about him, waiting and praying for the fog to thin.

Bewildered, disorientated and frightened now for his life, he found the highest place he could on the sandbank. He felt a strange calm over him, a detachment from himself. He wondered if this was the beginning of dying. When he cried out it was only to hear the sound of his own voice to be sure he was still alive; but once he'd begun he did not stop. He shouted, he screamed until his head ached with it, until his throat was raw. His words were at once muffled and lost. There was no hope. He sank to his knees in the sand and gave up. The sea would take him, drown him and grind his bones to sand.

A bell sounded from far out across the water, a ship's bell. Whilst the boy was still doubting his own hearing, it ran out again. Muted in the fog, there was no resonance to it, but it was real. He was not imagining it. The boy was on his feet and running across the sand calling out. 'Over here! Over here! Help! Help me!' He stopped to listen for the reply. There was none, only the bell ringing from somewhere out at sea, distant, faint, but definitely there. He splashed out through the shallows and was soon waist-high in the sea. He stopped now only to listen for the bell, to fix his bearings, to reassure himself each time that it was no illusion. The bell was closer now, sharper. He was out of the sea and

running on stones, his feet slipping, sliding. More than once he stumbled to his knees, but always the bell called him to his feet and gave him new hope, new strength. It was beckoning now, helping him, guiding him – he was sure of it. 'Where are you?' he cried. 'Where are you?' The bell answered him again and he staggered on towards it. When he found himself wading out into the sea again, he did not stop. He had no choice, he had to follow the bell. When the water came up over his chin and he could walk no more, he began to swim, pausing every few strokes to listen for the bell, but each time he stopped the bell seemed further from him. He was being swept away. He kicked hard against the current, fighting it; but he knew he was fighting a losing battle. He cried for help, and the salt water came into his mouth and choked him. His strength was fast ebbing from him. The cold of the sea gripped his legs and cramped them. His arms could no longer keep him up. He cried out one last time and the sea covered him. His last living thoughts were of his mother. She was clutching his wet rucksack, hugging it and crying, the rucksack he must have left behind on Great Ganilly. At least she would know he had got that far. Seaweed tugged at his arms and held him down. He hoped there was a heaven.

Heaven was warm and the boy was glad of it. He shivered out the last of the cold and looked about him. He was lying in a vast bed and covered with skins. The fur tickled his ear. A great roaring fire burnt beside him and a man in a long grey cloak was poking at it with a stick, sending showers of sparks up the chimney. The boy had often tried to picture heaven when he was alive. This was not at all how he had thought of it. He was in what appeared to be a huge hall, lit all around with flaming torches; and in the middle of the hall was the biggest table the boy had ever seen, round, entirely round, with maybe a hundred chairs set about it. At one end of the hall was a staircase hewn out of the rock, winding its way upwards into smoky darkness. The boy coughed.

'So,' said the man, straightening up and turning



towards him. ‘So you are awake at last.’

The boy found his voice. ‘Are you God?’ he asked.

The man put his head back and laughed. His hair and beard were white and long, but the face and eyes were those of a man still young – too young to be God, the boy thought, even as he asked it.

‘No,’ said the man, and he sat down on the bed beside him. ‘I am not God. My name is Arthur Pendragon. I live here, if you can call it living.’ He leant forward and whispered. ‘Year in, year out, they keep me shut up down here in this cave. Even a hibernating bear comes out after the winter, doesn’t he? Be patient, they say. Be patient and your time will come.’

‘They?’

‘There are six of them, six ladies. They brought me here. Only when the fog is down and I cannot be



seen, only then will they let me out. I am supposed to rest, but for some years now I have not been able to sleep as I should. I have had dreams and my dreams tell me my time is coming, that I will soon be needed again. I wait only for a messenger.' He spoke now in greater earnest. 'You are not the one? You are not the messenger? You were not sent, were you?'

The boy shrank back in fear.

'No, of course not. You couldn't be. You didn't ring the bell, did you? When he comes, he will ring the bell, they have told me so.' The man smiled with his eyes, and the boy knew he had nothing to fear. More than that, he realized suddenly that he might still be in the land of the living. But he needed to be quite sure.

'I'm not dead then?' he ventured.

'Not you, nor I,' said Arthur Pendragon. 'But you nearly were.' A carpet by the fire stirred and became a dog, a deerhound. The dog yawned, stretched and came padding over to the bed.

'Meet Bercelet,' said Arthur Pendragon, and he scratched the dog's head. 'My only companion in my long confinement. The ladies who brought me here don't talk much. They're good enough to me. I want for nothing, but it's like living with shadows. Still, now we've got you, for a while at least. It was Bercelet