

# 'GONE TO SEA'

Michael Morpurgo

WILLIAM TREGERTHEN HAD THE LOOK of a child who carried all the pain of the world on his hunched shoulders. But he had not always been like this. He is remembered by his mother as the happy, chortling child of his infancy, content to bask in his mother's warmth and secure in the knowledge that the world was made just for him. But with the ability to walk came the slow understanding that he walked differently from others and that this was to set him apart from everyone he loved. He found he could not run with his brothers through the high hay fields, chasing after rabbits; that he could not clamber with them down the rocks to the sea but had to wait at the top of the cliffs and watch them hop-scotching over the boulders and leaping in and out of the rock pools below.

20 He was the youngest of four brothers born onto a farm that hung precariously along the rugged cliffs below the Eagle's Nest. The few small square fields that made up the farm were spread, like a green patchwork between the granite farmhouse and the grey-grim sea, merging into gorse and bracken as they neared the cliff top. For a whole child it was a paradise of adventure and mystery, for the land was riddled with deserted tin miners' cottages and empty, ivy-clad chapels that had once been filled with boisterous hymns and sonorous prayer. There were deserted wheel houses that loomed out of the mist, and dark, dank caves that must surely have been used by wreckers and smugglers. Perhaps they still were.

But William was not a whole child; his left foot was turned inwards and twisted. He shuffled along behind his older brothers in a desperate attempt to stay with them and to be part of their world. His brothers were not hard-souled children, but were merely wrapped in their own fantasies. They were pirates and smugglers and revenue men, and the shadowing presence of William was beginning already to encroach on their freedom of movement. As he grew older he was left further and further behind and they began to ignore him, and then to treat him as if he were not there. Finally, when William was just about school age, they rejected him outright for the first time. 'Go home to Mother,' they said. 'She'll look after you.'

40 William did not cry, for by now it came as no shock to him. He had already been accustomed to the aside remarks, the accusing fingers in the village and the assiduously averted eyes. Even his own father, with whom he had romped and gambolled as an infant, was becoming estranged and would leave him behind more and more when he went out on the farm. There were fewer rides on the tractor these days, fewer invitations to ride up in front of him on his great shining horse. William knew that he had become a nuisance. What he could not know was that an inevitable guilt had soured his father who found he could no longer even look on his son's stumbling gait without a shudder of shame. He was not a cruel man by nature, but he did not want to have to be reminded continually of his own inadequacy as a father and as a man.

Only his mother stood by him and William loved her for it. With her he could forget his hideous foot that would never straighten and that caused him to lurch whenever he moved. They talked of the countries over the sea's end, beyond where the sky fell like a curtain on the horizon. From her he learned about the wild birds and the flowers. Together they would lie hidden in the bracken watching the foxes at play and counting the seals as they bobbed up and down at sea. It was rare enough for his mother to leave her kitchen but whenever she could she would take William out through the fields and clamber up onto a granite rock that rose from the soil below like an iceberg. From here they could look up to Zennor Quoit above them and across the fields towards the sea. Here she would tell him all the stories of Zennor. Sitting beside her, his knees drawn up under his chin, he would bury himself in the mysteries of this wild place. He heard of mermaids, of witches, of legends as old as

the rock itself and just as enduring. The bond between mother and son grew strong during these years; she would be there by his side wherever he went. She became the sole prop of William's life, his last link with happiness; and for his mother her last little son kept her soul singing in the midst of an endless drudgery.

60 For William Treggerthen, school was a nightmare of misery. Within his first week he was dubbed 'Limping Billy'. His brothers, who might have afforded some protection, avoided him and left him to the mercy of the mob. William did not hate his tormentors any more than he hated wasps in September; he just wished they would go away. But they did not. 'Limping Billy' was a source of infinite amusement that few could resist. Even the children William felt might have been friends to him were seduced into collaboration. Whenever they were tired of football or of tag or skipping, there was always 'Limping Billy' sitting by himself on the playground wall under the fuchsia hedge. William would see them coming and screw up his courage, turning on his thin smile of resignation that he hoped might soften their hearts. He continued to smile through the taunting and the teasing, through the limping competitions that they forced him to judge. He would nod appreciatively at their attempts to mimic the Hunchback of Notre Dame, and conceal his dread and his humiliation when they invited him to do better. He trained himself to laugh with them back at himself; it was his way of riding the punches.

His teachers were worse, cloaking their revulsion under a veneer of pity. To begin with they over-burdened him with a false sweetness and paid him far too much loving attention; and then because he found the words difficult to spell and his handwriting was uneven and awkward, they began to assume, as many do, that one unnatural limb somehow infects the whole and turns a cripple into an idiot. Very soon he was dismissed by his teachers as unteachable and ignored thereafter.

80 It did not help either that William was singularly un-childlike in his appearance. He had none of the cherubic innocence of a child; there was no charm about him, no redeeming feature. He was small for his age; but his face carried already the mark of years. His eyes were dark and deep-set, his features pinched and sallow. He walked with a stoop, dragging his foot behind him like a leaden weight. The world had taken him and shrivelled him up already. He looked permanently gaunt and hungry as he sat staring out of the classroom window at the heaving sea beyond the fields. A recluse was being born.

On his way back from school that last summer, William tried to avoid the road as much as possible. Meetings always became confrontations, and there was never anyone who wanted to walk home with him. He himself wanted less and less to be with people. Once into the fields and out of sight of the road he would break into a staggering, ugly run, swinging out his twisted foot, straining to throw it forward as far as it would go. He would time himself across the field that ran down from the road to the hay barn, and then throw himself at last face down and exhausted into the sweet warmth of new hay. He had done this for a few days already and, according to his counting, his time was improving with each run. But as he lay there now panting in the hay he heard someone clapping high up in the haystack behind him. He sat up quickly and looked around. It was a face he knew, as familiar to him as the rocks in the fields around the farm, an old face full of deeply etched crevasses and raised veins, unshaven and red with drink. Everyone around the village knew Sam, or 'Sam the Soak' as he was called, but no-one knew much about him. He lived alone in a cottage in the churchtown up behind the Tinnens' Arms, cycling every day into St. Ives where he kept a small fishing boat and a few lobster pots. He was a fair-weather fisherman, with a ramshackle boat that only went to sea when the weather was set fair. Whenever there were no fish or no lobsters to be found, or when the weather was blowing up, he would stay on shore and drink. It was rumoured there had been some great tragedy in his life before he came to live at Zennor, but he never spoke of it so no-one knew for certain.

100 'A fine run, Billy,' said Sam; his drooping eyes smiled gently. There was no

sarcasm in his voice but rather a kind sincerity that William warmed to instantly.

'Better'n yesterday anyway,' William said.

120 'You should swim, dear lad,' Sam sat up and shook the hay out of his hair. He clambered down the haystack towards William, talking as he came. 'If I had a foot like that, dear lad, I'd swim. You'd be fine in the water, swim like the seals I shouldn't wonder.' He smiled awkwardly and ruffled William's hair. 'Got a lot to do. Hope you didn't mind my sleeping awhile in your hay. Your father makes good hay, I've always said that. Well, I can't stand here chatting with you, got a lot to do. And, by the by dear lad, I shouldn't like you to think that I was drunk.' He looked hard down at William and tweaked his ear. 'You're too young to know but there's worse things can happen to a man than a twisted foot, Billy, dear lad. I drink enough, but it's just enough and no more. Now you do as I say, go swimming. Once in the water you'll be the equal of anyone.'

'But I can't swim,' said William. 'My brothers can but I never learnt to. It's difficult for me to get down on the rocks.'

'Dear lad,' said Sam, brushing off his coat. 'If you can run with a foot like that, then you can most certainly swim. Mark my words, dear lad; I may look like an old soak - I know what they call me - but drink in moderation inspires great wisdom. Do as I say, get down to the sea and swim.'

William went down to the sea in secret that afternoon because he knew his mother would worry. Worse than that, she might try to stop him from going if she thought it was dangerous. She was busy in the kitchen so he said simply that he would make his own way across the fields to their rock and watch the kestrel they had seen the day before floating on the warm air high above the bracken. He had been to the seashore before of course, but always accompanied by his mother who had helped him down the cliff path to the beach below.

Swimming in the sea was forbidden. It was a family edict, and one observed by all the farming families around, whose respect and fear of the sea had been inculcated into them for generations. 'The sea is for fish,' his father had warned them often enough. 'Swim in the rock pools all you want, but don't go swimming in the sea.'

140 With his brothers and his father making hay in the high field by the chapel William knew there was little enough chance of his being discovered. He did indeed pause for a rest on the rock to look skywards for the kestrel, and this somehow eased his conscience. Certainly there was a great deal he had not told his mother, but he had never deliberately deceived her before this. He felt however such a strong compulsion to follow Sam's advice that he soon left the rock behind him and made for the cliff path. He was now further from home than he had ever been on his own before.

The cliff path was tortuous, difficult enough for anyone to negotiate with two good feet, but William managed well enough using a stick as a crutch to help him over the streams that tumbled down fern-green gorges to the sea below. At times he had to go down on all fours to be sure he would not slip. As he clambered up along the path to the first headland, he turned and looked back along the coast towards Zennor Head, breathing in the wind from the sea. A sudden wild feeling of exuberance and elation came over him so that he felt somehow liberated and at one with the world. He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted to a tanker that was cruising motionless far out to sea:

'I'm Limping Billy Treggerthen,' he bellowed, 'and I'm going to swim. I'm going to swim in the sea. I can see you but you can't see me. *Look* out fish, here I come. Look out seals, here I come. I'm Limping Billy Treggerthen and I'm going to swim.'

160 So William came at last to Trevail Cliffs where the rocks step out into the sea but even at low tide never so far as to join the island. The island where the seals come lies some way off the shore, a black bastion against the sea, warning it that it must not come any further. Cormorants and shags perched on the island like sinister sentries and below them William saw the seals basking in the sun on the rocks. The path

down to the beach was treacherous and William knew it. For the first time he had to manage on his own, so he sat down and bumped his way down the track to the beach.

He went first to the place his brothers had learnt to swim, a great green bowl of sea water left behind in the rocks by the tide. As he clambered laboriously over the limpet-covered rocks towards the pool, he remembered how he had sat alone high on the cliff top above and watched his brothers and his father diving and splashing in the pool below, and how his heart had filled with envy and longing. 'You sit there, with your Mother,' his father had said. 'It's too dangerous for you out there on those rocks. Too dangerous.'

'And here I am,' said William aloud as he stepped gingerly forward onto the next rock, reaching for a handhold to support himself. 'Here I am, leaping from rock to rock like a goat. If only they could see me now.'

180 He hauled himself up over the last lip of rock and there at last was the pool down below him, with the sea lapping in gently at one end. Here for the first time William began to be frightened. Until this moment he had not fully understood the step he was about to take. It was as if he had woken suddenly from a dream: the meeting with Sam in the hay-barn, his triumphant walk along the cliff path, and the long rock climb to the pool. But now as he looked around him he saw he was surrounded entirely by sea and stranded on the rocks a great distance out from the beach. He began to doubt if he could ever get back; and had it not been for the seal William would most certainly have turned and gone back home.

The seal surfaced silently into the pool from nowhere. William crouched down slowly so as not to alarm him and watched. He had never been this close to a seal. He had seen them often enough lying out on the rocks on the island like great grey cucumbers and had spotted their shining heads floating out at sea. But now he was so close he could see that the seal was looking directly at him out of sad, soulful eyes. He had never noticed before that seals had whiskers. William watched for a while and then spoke. It seemed rude not to.

'You're in my pool,' he said. 'I don't mind really, though I was going to have a swim. Tell you the truth, I was having second thoughts anyway, about the swimming I mean. It's all right for you, you're born to it. I mean you don't find getting around on land that easy, do you? Well nor do I. And that's why Sam told me to go and learn to swim, said I'd swim like a seal one day. But I'm a bit frightened, see. I don't know if I can, not with my foot.'

200 The seal had vanished as he was speaking, so William lowered himself carefully step by step down towards the edge of the pool. The water was clear to the bottom, but there was no sign of the seal. William found it reassuring to be able to see the bottom, a great slab of rock that fell away towards the opening to the sea. He could see now why his brothers had come here to learn, for one end of the pool was shallow enough to paddle whilst the other was so deep that the bottom was scarcely visible.

William undressed quickly and stepped into the pool, feeling for the rocks below with his toes. He drew back at the first touch because the water stung him with cold, but soon he had both feet in the water. He looked down to be sure of his footing, watching his feet move forward slowly out into the pool until he was waist-high. The cold had taken the breath from his body and he was tempted to turn around at once and get out. But he steeled himself, raised his hands above his head, sucked in his breath and inched his way forward. His feet seemed suddenly strange to him, apart from him almost and he wriggled his toes to be sure that they were still attached to him. It was then that he noticed that they had changed. They had turned white, dead white; and as William gazed down he saw that his left foot was no longer twisted. For the first time in his life his feet stood parallel. He was about to bend down to try to touch his feet, for he knew his eyes must surely be deceiving him, when the seal reappeared only a few feet away in the middle of the pool. This time the seal gazed at

220 him only for a few brief moments and then began a series of water acrobatics that soon had William laughing and clapping with joy. He would dive, roll and twist, disappear for a few seconds and then materialise somewhere else. He circled William, turning over on his back and rolling, powering his way to the end of the pool before flopping over on his front and aiming straight for William like a torpedo, just under the surface. It was a display of comic elegance, of easy power. But to William it was more than this, it became an invitation he found he could not refuse.

The seal had settled again in the centre of the pool, his great wide eyes beckoning. William never even waited for the water to stop churning but launched himself out into the water. He sank of course, but he had not expected not to. He kicked out with his legs and failed his arms wildly in a supreme effort to regain the surface. He had sense enough to keep his mouth closed but his eyes were wide open and he saw through the green that the seal was swimming alongside him, close enough to touch. William knew that he was not drowning, that the seal would not let him drown; and with that confidence his arms and legs began to move more easily through the water. A few rhythmic strokes up towards the light and he found the air his lungs had been craving for. But the seal was nowhere to be seen. William struck out across to the rocks on the far side of the pool quite confident that the seal was still close by. Swimming came to William that day as it does to a dog. He found in that one afternoon the confidence to master the water. The seal however never reappeared, but William swam on now by himself until the water chilled his bones, seeking everywhere for the seal and calling for him. He thought of venturing out into the open ocean but thought better of it when he saw the swell outside the pool. He vowed he would come again, every day, until he found his seal.

William lay on the rocks above the pool, his eyes closed against the glare of the evening sun off the water, his heart still beating fast from the exertion of his swim. He lay like this, turning from time to time until he was dry all over. Occasionally he would laugh out loud in joyous celebration of the first triumph of his life. Out on the seal island the cormorants and shags were startled and lifted off the rocks to make for the fishing grounds out to sea, and the colony of seals was gathering as it always did each evening.

As William made his way back along the cliff path and up across the fields towards home he could hear behind him the soft hooting sound of the seals as they welcomed each new arrival on the rocks. His foot was indeed still twisted, but he walked erect now, the stoop gone from his shoulders and there was a new lightness in his step.

He broke the news to his family at supper that evening, dropped it like a bomb and it had just the effect he had expected and hoped for. They stopped eating and there was a long heavy silence whilst they looked at each other in stunned amazement.

260 'What did you say, Billy?' said his father sternly, putting down his knife and fork. 'I've been swimming with a seal,' William said, 'and I learnt to swim just like Sam said. I climbed down to the rocks and I swam in the pool with the seal. I know we mustn't swim in the sea but the pool's all right isn't it?'

'By yourself, Billy?' said his mother, who had turned quite pale. 'You shouldn't have, you know, not by yourself. I could have gone with you.'

'It was all right, Mother,' William smiled up at her. 'The seal looked after me. I couldn't have drowned, not with him there.'

Up to that point it had all been predictable, but then his brothers began to laugh, spluttering about what a good tale it was and how they had actually believed him for a moment; and when William insisted that he could swim now, and that the seal had helped him, his father lost his patience. 'It's bad enough your going off on your own without telling your mother, but then you come back with a fantastic story like that and expect me to believe it. I'm not stupid lad. I know you can't climb over those rocks with a foot like that; and as for swimming and seals, well it's a nice story, but a story's

a story, so let's hear no more of it.'

'But he was only exaggerating, dear,' said William's mother. 'He didn't mean ...'

'I know what he meant,' said his father. 'And it's your fault, like as not, telling him all these wild stories and putting strange ideas in his head.'

280 William looked at his mother in total disbelief, numbed by the realisation that she too doubted him. She smiled sympathetically at him and came over to stroke his head.

'He's just exaggerating a bit, aren't you Billy?' she said gently.

But William pulled away from her embrace, hurt by her lack of faith.

'I don't care if you don't believe me,' he said, his eyes filling with tears. 'I know what happened. I can swim I tell you, and one day I'll swim away from here and never come back. I hate you, I hate you all.'

His defiance was punished immediately. He was sent up to his room and as he passed his father's chair he was cuffed roundly on the ear for good measure. That evening, as he lay on his bed in his pyjamas listening to the remorseless ker-thump, ker-thump of the haybaler outside in the fields, William made up his mind to leave home.

His mother came up with some cocoa later on as she always did, but he pretended to be asleep, even when she leant over and kissed him gently on the forehead.

'Don't be unhappy, Billy,' she said. 'I believe you, I really do.'

He was tempted at that moment to wake and to call the whole plan off, but resentment was still burning too strongly inside him. When it mattered she had not believed him, and even now he knew she was merely trying to console him. There could be no going back. He lay still and tried to contain the tears inside his eyes.

300 Every afternoon after school that week William went back down to the beach to swim. One of his brothers must have said something for word had gone round at school that 'Limping Billy' claimed that he had been swimming with the seals. He endured the barbed ridicule more patiently than ever because he knew that it would soon be over and he would never again have to face their quips and jibes, their crooked smiles.

The sea was the haven he longed for each day. The family were far too busy making hay to notice where he was and he was never to speak of it again to any of them.

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320 To start with he kept to the green pool in the rocks. Every afternoon his seal would be there waiting for him and the lesson would begin. He learnt to roll in the water like a seal and to dive deep exploring the bottom of the pool for over a minute before surfacing for air. The seal teased him in the water, enticing him to chase, allowing William to come just so close before whisking away out of reach again. He learnt to lie on the water to rest as if he were on a bed, confident that his body would always float, that the water would always hold it up. Each day brought him new technique and new power in his legs and arms. Gradually the seal would let him come closer until one afternoon just before he left the pool William reached out slowly and stroked the seal on his side. It was gesture of love and thanks. The seal made no immediate attempt to move away but turned slowly in the water and let out a curious groan of acceptance before diving away out of the pool and into the open sea. As he watched him swim away, William was sure at last of his place in the world.

With the sea still calm next day William left the sanctuary of the pool and swam out into the swell of the ocean with the seal alongside him. There to welcome them as they neared the island were the bobbing heads of the entire seal colony. When they swam too fast for him it seemed the easiest, most natural thing in the world to throw his arms around the seal and hold on, riding him over the waves out towards the island. Once there he lay out on the rocks with them and was minutely

inspected by each member of the colony. They came one by one and lay beside him, eyeing him wistfully before lumbering off to make room for the next. Each of them was different and he found he could tell at once the old from the young and the female from the male. Later, sitting cross-legged on the rocks and surrounded entirely by the inquisitive seals, William tasted raw fish for the first time, pulling away the flesh with his teeth as if he had been doing it all his life. He began to murmur seal noises in an attempt to thank them for their gift and they responded with great hoots of excitement and affection. By the time he was escorted back to the safety of the shore he could no longer doubt that he was one of them.

340 The notepad he left behind on his bed the next afternoon read simply: 'Gone to sea, where I belong.' His mother found it that evening when she came in from the fields at dusk. The Coastguard and the villagers were alerted and the search began. They searched the cliffs and the sea shore from Zennor Head to Wicca Pool and beyond, but in vain. An air-sea rescue helicopter flew low over the coast until the darkness drove it away. But the family returned to the search at first light and it was William's father who found the bundle of clothes hidden in the rocks below Trevail Cliffs. The pain was deep enough already, so he decided to tell no one of his discovery, but buried them himself in a corner of the cornfield below the chapel. He wept as he did so, as much out of remorse as for his son's lost life.

Some weeks later they held a memorial service in the church, attended by everyone in the village except Sam whom no one had seen since William's disappearance. The Parochial Church Council was inspired to offer a space on the church wall for a memorial tablet for William, and they offered to finance it themselves. It should be left to the family they said, to word it as they wished.

Months later Sam was hauling in his nets off Wicca Pool. The fishing had been poor and he expected his nets to be empty once again. But as he began hauling it was clear he had struck it rich and his heart rose in anticipation of a full catch at last. It took all his strength to pull the net up through the water. His arms ached as he strained to find the reserves he would need to haul it in. He had stopped hauling for a moment to regain his strength, his feet braced on the deck against the pitch and toss of the boat, when he heard a voice behind him.

360 'Sam,' it said, quietly.

He turned instantly, a chill of fear creeping up his spine. It was William Treggerthen, his head and shoulders showing above the gunwale of the boat.

'Billy?' said Sam. 'Billy Treggerthen? Is it you, dear lad? Are you real, Billy? Is it really you?' William smiled at him to reassure him. 'I've not had a drink since the day you died, Billy, honest I haven't. Told myself I never would again, not after what I did to you.' He screwed his eyes. 'No,' he said, 'I must be dreaming. You're dead and drowned. I know you are.'

'I'm not dead and I'm not drowned, Sam,' William said. 'I'm living with the seals where I belong. You were right, Sam, right all along. I can swim like a seal, and I live like a seal. You can't limp in the water, Sam.'

'Are you really alive, dear lad?' said Sam. 'After all this time? You weren't drowned like they said?'

'I'm alive, Sam, and I want you to let your nets down,' William said. 'There's one of my seals caught up in it and there's no fish there I promise you. Let them down, Sam, please, before you hurt him.'

Sam let the nets go gently hand over hand until the weight was gone.

380 'Thank you Sam,' said William. 'You're a kind man, the only kind man I've ever known. Will you do something more for me?' Sam nodded, quite unable to speak any more. 'Will you tell my mother that I'm happy and well, that all her stories were true, and that she must never be sad. Tell her all is well with me. Promise?' 'Course,' Sam whispered. 'Course I will, dear lad.' And then as suddenly as he had appeared, William was gone. Sam called out to him again and again. He wanted confirmation, he wanted to be sure his eyes had not been deceiving him. But the sea

around him was empty and he never saw him again.

William's mother was feeding the hens as she did every morning after the men had left the house. She saw Sam coming down the lane towards the house and turned away. It would be more sympathy and she had had enough of that since William died. But Sam called after her and so she had to turn to face him. They spoke together for only a few minutes, Sam with his hands on her shoulders, before they parted leaving her alone again with her hens clucking impatiently around her feet. If Sam had turned as he walked away he would have seen that she was smiling through her tears.

The inscription on the tablet in the church reads:

WILLIAM TREGERTHEN  
AGED 10  
*Gone to sea, where he belongs*

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From 'The White Horse of Zennor'*