



# Woodenface

GUS GRENFELL



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*Woodenface* is for Jess, Emily and Peter,  
who have often been in mind while I was writing it.

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## FIGURES

Meg crept into the graveyard. It was close to home, but hidden from it by the looming bulk of the church of St. Thomas à Becket. The perfect place to steal a few minutes.

Other girls in the village were frightened of the graveyard. They would go out of their way to avoid it. At night there were strange noises, they said; dim, flitting lights, and so cold that if you put your hand on a gravestone it would stick there. That's what they'd been told, of course, because most of the grown-ups were frightened of the graveyard too.

Meg walked down the path, enjoying the warm sun of a June morning on her face, until she was sure she was out of sight. She wasn't frightened, but not because she didn't think the place was haunted. It had

to do with what you thought about ghosts. Most of the graves were like empty houses – no one there. But a few restless souls were still below, not being good enough to have floated off to heaven, or bad enough to have been pulled shrieking and screaming to the other place. If she concentrated hard she could see them, glowing gently, hovering over their skeletons which lay stiff and still, arms by their sides or crossed over their chests.

She used to think that St. Thomas was buried in one of these graves, or in the church. But Heptonstall wasn't grand enough for a saint. "You don't get saints in the Yorkshire Pennines," the vicar had told her. Only local people lay here – Greenwoods, Sutcliffes, Redmans – generations of families who had lived, worked and died in the village.

Heptonstall church was old. The massive stones from which it was built had been quarried nearby – coarse, Yorkshire gritstone hacked from the earth. It wasn't tall and elegant like more recent churches, but its squat, top-heavy tower had withstood the buffeting winds that swept across the hills from the Lancashire side of the border for centuries. Its east end faced across the wide expanse of the Calder valley. It pointed to Jerusalem, so the vicar said, but as far

as Meg was concerned it only pointed to Hepton Brig a mile below. She'd only once been any further than that.

Other village buildings clustered round it – the Cloth Hall, the Chantry House and the huddled weavers' cottages, all built of the same stone – seeming to seek protection from the elements, and from the dark forces that their inhabitants feared, at loose among the crags and cloughs that interrupted the even swell of the surrounding moorland. Despite Cromwell, despite the Puritans, the church was still the most important building in the village. Meg had been born within sight of it. Every day since she could walk, she had run and played in its shadow.

With a flick of her hand, Meg brushed her unruly black hair away from her face and fixed her gaze on the letters carved on a gravestone beside her. She had large dark eyes, deep-set, with thick brows like her father, and she had also inherited his firm mouth and slightly jutting chin. “Not a pretty child”, as she heard more than one neighbour remark coolly, but then she didn't particularly want to be pretty; she liked looking like Father. He wasn't at home today. He always went to Halifax on Tuesdays, to sell the woollen cloth he had woven and dyed during the



week. Today there was a fair, too, so he might not be back till evening.

This gravestone was unlike most of the others – a flat, grey slab resting on little stone legs, like a low table. There was someone below, she could sense them. She stared at the carved inscription, forcing herself not to blink, until her eyes began to itch and water. The surface went out of focus and began to waver. If she kept on staring and imagined hard enough, she'd soon be able to see through it to the faint glimmer of the presence underneath...

“Hello.” She jumped. It was Dan Greenwood, the gravedigger. She knew his voice. “I didn’t know tha could read.”

“I can’t,” she said, turning round half-guiltily. “I was just...looking.”

Dan took his spade from his shoulder and rested on it. He smiled, adding more wrinkles to his weather-beaten face. “I can’t read much meself, but I know the letters, and I know who’s buried in all these graves. Does tha want to know whose that is?” She nodded. “Well look.” He put his spade down, came forward and traced out the deeply cut letters with a finger. M.A.R.T.H.A, that’s Martha. P.Y.G.H.I.L.L.I.S, that’s Pickles. Only her. There’s not many plots with only

one in. She's been gone a long time. It's 1650 now, so it's nigh on three-hundred year since she were laid to rest. There's the date, see?" He pointed to some weather-worn figures.

Meg looked up at Dan. "She's still there."

"Aye, she will be, unless someone's dug her up." He chuckled and turned to walk away.

"No, I didn't mean that; I..."

Meg stopped herself. She had been going to tell him that poor Martha wasn't at rest, but he would think she was being fanciful. He dug up bones every day; threw them on a heap without a second thought. He'd broken the spell now, but that didn't matter.

Alone again, she undid the strings of the bag that dangled from a rope belt at her waist, hidden by the long apron she wore over her plain dress. Inside the bag were her dolls – "figures", she called them. She took them out and sat them on the edge of the gravestone. There was Dilly-Lal, with her fixed smile, Drum-a-Dum with his sticks held out, ready to beat his drum, and Bolly-Bolly with his sly, knowing look.

What did they want to do? Dilly-Lal wanted to dance, and Drum-a-Dum would play for her. Bolly-Bolly didn't even want to watch. He thought they were foolish. Well, maybe Martha Pickles and the

others might like some entertainment after all those years. They could be an audience. She picked up Dilly-Lal and fitted a straight stick into the hole in the middle of her back and held her out by it, her jointed limbs swinging idly.

Her mother thought Father had made Dilly-Lal, but he hadn't. He had sat on his stool, out here in the graveyard, and patiently shown Meg how to do it; how to shape the body, legs and arms, how to make the wooden pins that held them together. He'd let her use his tools. He'd said she was good at it. Very good. She'd even done the knee and elbow joints, held together with metal nails passed through from one side, and the points bashed flat on the other. He hadn't shown her how to make the other two figures. They were all her own.

"Don't tell your mother," he said. "She'd say it was a waste of time." Then he paused. "And...and maybe she would worry."

Meg was puzzled by that. "Why should she be worried?" she asked. "You carve things. She doesn't worry about that, does she?"

"No, lass." He smiled and ruffled her hair. "I can carve a bit, but at the finish up it's nothing more than a lump of wood. With you it's...it's different. You put

something in them figures o' yours." Meg thought she knew what he meant. But didn't everybody's figures have lives of their own? In any case, she couldn't see what there was to worry about.

Dilly-Lal wanted to dance, but she needed a platform. A low branch from an ash tree behind the grave swept down across it. That was just right. Meg sat on the gravestone and held Dilly-Lal out by her stick with one hand, until her feet just touched the surface, and hit the branch with the other hand. Dilly-Lal's jointed limbs picked up the vibration. She kicked her legs out and whirled her arms round. Yes, she could dance here.

Meg stuck Drum-a-Dum in a fork where the branch divided, so that he could pick up the rhythm too. His arms went up and down and the sticks kept time on the stretched skin of his little drum. Then Meg pounded the branch with her hand and diddled a tune. YADDLE-ADDLE UM-PUM YUM-TUM RUM-TUM, RUM-PUM YUM-PUM DIDDLE-IDDLE UM-PUM.

Dilly-Lal danced, Drum-a-Dum played, Bolly-Bolly didn't watch. And the unseen audience grinned their toothy grins.

After a while Dilly-Lal grew tired and lost the

rhythm in her tapping feet, and Drum-a-Dum began to miss beats. Meg stopped and laid them down beside Bolly-Bolly on the edge of the gravestone.

Bolly-Bolly wasn't like the other two figures. He had no moving parts, and she'd hardly carved him at all. He was made from a piece of wood she'd found one day last summer, in the field next to the graveyard. Men had been grubbing up a hedge, and Meg had climbed over the wall to have a look.

It was a neglected hedge, left to go wild – a straggly line of trees. Some were dead, held there by tangled branches and ropes of ivy, some were half-dead but still struggled to put out new shoots and leaves year by year. Hawthorn, hazel, holly, scrub oak, rowan.

The men had brought in horses with chains, and hauled trees out by the roots. But one tree remained standing; still alive. An ancient hawthorn, raised up on a low mound. It looked as though it belonged there, on its own in the middle of a field, not part of a hedgerow. Why had they left it? Had it been there before the hedge had been planted, the oldest tree of them all?

According to Gaffer – Meg's grandfather – hawthorn was a "difficult" wood. What did he mean by that? He didn't say, but Meg knew that he wouldn't

have it in the house. It didn't burn well and it was unlucky. Meg wasn't sure about that. It looked hostile with its impenetrable branches and sharp thorns, but, if it was on your side, then these things could protect you. She had walked across to the tree to take a closer look.

And that was when she saw him, lying at the foot of the mound.

At first Meg hadn't recognized what she saw as part of the tree – it was just a dark lump – but when she picked it up, then looked at the tree, she saw where it had come from. There was a new cut at the base of the trunk; a raw wound caused by a single axe blow. When she turned it over, the object she was holding had a similar mark on the other side. It had been hewn from the tree.

It was about the size and shape of her fist; a knobby protuberance covered in bark – apart from where it had been attached to the tree. It seemed alive. Meg felt as though she was holding a hibernating animal just waking up from its winter sleep. It seemed to pulse and vibrate, and maybe the warmth on its surface wasn't just from her hands.

There were other things at the bottom of the tree too – a wooden bowl, a rabbit's foot and a packet of

pins. Meg wondered who had put them there. She kneeled down and looked closely at the newly exposed wood of the axe cut. The blade must have been sharp because the slash was clean; there was no ragged tearing of the grain. But the surface was spattered with red blotches. Blood. Whoever had wounded the tree had not escaped unscathed.

Meg fitted the detached piece back in place, almost expecting it to cling there and regrow, but it fell back into her hands. It was hers now.

Back home she borrowed Father's tools and set to work. First she stripped the bark. It came off easily, revealing the pale wood beneath, twisted and lined like knotted rope. It was impossible to tell which way the grain went, or how it had grown into that contorted shape, but Meg could sense the power locked within it. She could see the face of a figure lurking there; a wooden face, waiting impatiently for her to give him life. With a gouge she scooped out the two dark hollows of his eyes and emphasized the twisted fissure of his mouth – a smile or grimace, it was impossible to tell.

And there he was. Bolly-Bolly. The name flashed into her mind, as though it, too, had been released by her carving.

Now she was looking at that face again, wondering why he was being so grumpy. She gazed into his eyes, waiting to see if he was going to talk to her. Sometimes he didn't; sometimes she couldn't get anything out of him at all. There was something down there in those dark holes she had made, a suggestion of movement as though some tiny creature was wriggling its way out. Then there was the spark of contact – not a physical spark like a flint would make, but that's how Meg thought of it. She felt the familiar tiny jolt in her head, the flash behind her eyes which told her that Bolly-Bolly was going to give her the benefit of his opinion.

Bolly-Bolly thought Dilly-Lal was vain and empty-headed, and Meg shouldn't encourage her to dance. He didn't think souls could see, not down there underground. She was silly to believe she was entertaining them. He thought that maybe they could sense her presence, like she could sense theirs – if they were there at all. If it wasn't all her imagination.

That was the trouble with Bolly-Bolly, he rarely gave you a straight answer. You didn't know where you were with him. He was too... Meg didn't know a word for what he was. You always felt he knew more than he was prepared to let you know just now. But was that just what he wanted you to think?





## VISITORS

**I**t was time Meg went home. Mother would be getting cross, wondering where she had got to. She put Bolly-Bolly and the others back in the bag, jumped up from Martha Pickles's grave and walked back the way she had come. She pulled open the iron gate in the churchyard wall and walked down the steps into the narrow alleyway below.

Abruptly the world changed. She was out of the brightness into a dark chasm as the churchyard wall cut off the sunlight. The opposite wall formed the back of the short terrace where Meg lived. It was windowless on this side. Only three doors broke the monotony of dark stone blocks. Her mother was standing outside the middle one, holding a closed wicker basket full of newly washed yarn ready for