

# The Horror from the Sea

*Wong Steffi Chun Nga*

I thought I would take this secret to my grave. But no, I have changed my mind. These may as well be my last words as I now write this on my deathbed, strangled by old age and illness, choked by unspeakable sadness.

Fifty years ago, something terrible happened to our village. One by one, villagers disappeared after they went fishing. All of them were last seen sailing out due west to Cape Mirage. At that time there was a rumour saying that a mysterious ocean current dragged the fishermen's boat down and drowned them. Another speculation was that there were cannibals living on the outlying islands, where no mainlanders had set foot on, and they devoured the villagers. We were scared out of our wits. I knew those rumours were nonsense, tales that grew wilder every time they were retold. I dismissed any suggestion that the disappearances might have anything to do with supernatural forces or unproved existence of man-eating tribes. One thing though, which I had noticed during my daily work on the beach, that on the days when the fellows went missing, there was always a dark cloud above Cape Mirage, as if a storm was brewing at the horizon.

Dread shrouded the village. My father had fallen ill at that time, and was unable to go fishing. Our family was secretly glad about that because we worried that Father would be the next victim. Unfortunately we ran out of food. As the eldest son, I decided to go fishing, against the wish of my tearful mother.

"Please, son, don't go!" she pleaded. "We have some money left...we can buy food from the neighbours! Please stay!"

"Mother, I'll be fine. Don't listen to those crazy tales!" I looked into her horror-struck face. "I'll be back before dusk."

Despite my reassurance to my mother, I was not as confident as I had sounded. As I was sailing out to Cape Mirage, I caught sight of the dark cloud ahead. It was made up of a dozen slowly circling spots. The cloud is a flock of birds! I realized as I drew nearer. The birds were strange creatures indeed: they had dark grey bodies, with sharp, crimson beaks. Only one had a white beak. I estimated that each had a wingspan of six feet. The strangest thing was that they never swooped down from the air to catch fish as sea birds normally did.

Then something made me jump out of my skin.

"Greetings, fisherman," a deep, gravelly voice said.

I stared around wildly, trying to find who was talking. Nobody was in sight...except the flock of

monstrous birds. I looked up nervously. The birds had stopped circling, all of them hovering in the air and staring at me.

"Look into the sea," the bird with a white beak opened its beak as the rough voice ordered.

I lowered my gaze into the sea. In my amazement I saw a school of fish, shimmering gold and silver beneath the greenish water.

"I know you are an honest man. Now I offer you a chance. Capture these fish and you shall have a fortune beyond imagination." The bird continued.

"Why do you offer me this? What do you want from me?" I asked in a trembling voice.

"Oh, I want nothing from you except a promise of confidentiality. You will do that by cutting out your tongue and offer it to me." It answered, the hunger in its voice barely concealed.

I gulped and looked down at those magnificent fish again. With their golden light dancing on my face, I thought of my family, our lives in poverty, and what comfortable life we would have if...

Suddenly a sharp wail pulled me out of my reverie. "No! Don't do that, Kam Shui!" A familiar voice called.

I started and saw one of the giant birds opening his beak wide. I recognized this voice: it was Ah Ming, one of the fishermen who went missing. The other birds clicked their red beaks and I heard more frenzied voices.

"Go home! Kam Shui! Don't listen to the devil!"

"Don't make the same mistake as we did!"

"You will only die here and become one of us!"

I understood what had happened then: the fishermen had submitted to the devil, made their sacrifices and bled to death on the sea. They had become one of the birds with crimson beaks.

I rowed home feverishly, literally fleeing the devil. I reached home, breathless with fear, sorrow and exhaustion. My family was surprised to see me back so soon. I told them the sea was too rough for fishing.

I have kept my horrifying adventure a secret for years. The gravelly voice haunts me to this moment, so does the clicking of the crimson beaks.