



The  
Boy with  
the  
Bronze  
Axe

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will enjoy this story*

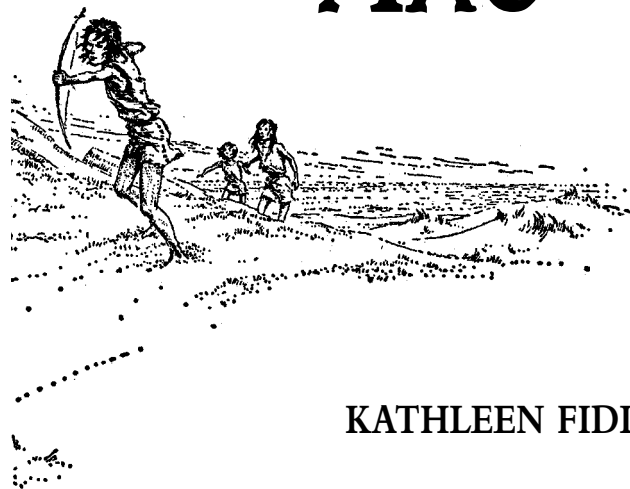
THE SCOTS MAGAZINE

KATHLEEN FIDLER

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KATHLEEN FIDLER

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*For my dear friends James and Jean Taggart*



## Foreword

In the winter of 1850 a terrible storm struck the coasts of the Orkney Isles. The sea rose higher than it had ever done there within the memory of man. It washed away part of the high sand dunes that fringed the Bay of Skail and laid bare the ruins of some ancient dwellings, which had been covered by sand. There were seven stone huts connected by passages, which had been paved and roofed. There were signs that there had been more huts, but these had been washed away by the sea. There was also a central paved area which was like a small market place.

People interested in ancient things began to explore and excavate these ruins. It was discovered that there was stone furniture in most of the huts: paved floors, stone hearths, stone beds and cupboards, stone seats, stone water tanks and even stone dressers. When the sand was cleared away treasures of stone hammers, axes, knives, carved stone balls, earthenware bowls and necklaces of bone and animals' teeth were found. The storm had stripped bare a Stone Age village more than three thousand years old.

From the way the Stone Age people had left their treasures in their beds and cupboards and their tools scattered on the floors of their huts, they must have left the settlement in a great hurry. One woman, in her haste to get away, had caught her necklace in a stone doorpost. It broke and the bone "beads" were left lying on the floor.



What caused these Stone Age people to flee from their homes? There were no signs of battle, no corpses slain in a fight, no evidence of fire, save on the hearths. But there was sand, sand everywhere. The dwellings were filled and covered by sand. A great storm must have set the sand dunes moving like the waves of the sea. The villagers fled before the choking, suffocating sandstorm. It took another great storm in 1850 to give back to the world the ancient Stone Age village of Skara Brae.



## 1. The Boy from the Sea

Kali sat up in her stone bed filled with heather and thrust aside the sheepskin robe which covered her. She listened. From the Bay of Skaill she heard the complaining sharp cries of seagulls. A peewit answered plaintively from the moors to the south, while from the Loch of Skaill there came the honking of swans. Kali knew from all these sounds that the dawn must be reddening in the eastern sky. Her mother still slept in the stone bed-place on the other side of the hearth. Stempsi always slept longer when Birno her husband was away quarrying the stone for the building of the great Ring of Brodgar. Kali's six-year-old brother stirred in the other bed-place. In an instant he was wide awake like a small animal of the wild.

"Kali! Kali! I can hear the swans. Is it time we were going?" he whispered.

Kali hesitated.

"You told me you would take me to the island today if the sun shone," Brockan reminded her.

"We will see first if there is no mist," Kali told him. "Do not wake Mother."

She girdled her sheepskin robe about her with a leather thong. She picked up a bag also made of sheepskin and dropped two flint scrapers into the bottom of it. The fire was still smouldering in the hearth in the centre of the dwelling. Kali carefully placed a couple of peats in the glowing heart

of it. That would take care of the fire till her mother woke. The two children tiptoed to the narrow entrance and Kali stooped under the stone doorway to the passage beyond. The entrance to the passage was closed by a slab of stone held in place by a stone bar fixed into holes on each side of the wall. Brockan helped her to lift the bar out and to haul the thin slab aside.

Quietly they crept along the paved passage which curved round their stone house till they reached a gap in the wall, which led upwards and outwards to the daylight. They stood on the sand dune that lay about their house, almost level with the beehive-like roofs of the stone village of Skara. The sun was rising, a half-circle of fire above the horizon. The two children faced about to the west, where the sea moved placidly. The tide was very low and a large stretch of sand was uncovered round the Bay of Skail.

“Look, Kali! It is just right for us to go.” Brockan pointed to the sands in the south, where there rose a group of rocky islets.

Still Kali hesitated. “When Father took me to the rock that is furthest in the sea, he told me I was never to go there alone. It is uncovered only when the tide is very low.”

“If we wait for Father to come back from hauling the new stone to the Ring of Brodgar then the tide will not be low any longer. You promised me you would take me to find the large limpets, Kali,” Brockan urged her. “You know we can only wade out to that large rock when the tide is very low.”

It was two years since Birno had taken Kali to the small island. She still remembered the feast of limpets they had that night and the large crabs that her father had found in the rock crevices. After all, she had been two years younger then. Now she was thirteen years old and well grown. She hesitated no longer.

“Very well! We will go. You must watch your feet over the slippery seaweed,” she warned Brockan.

They scampered across the dunes and the wide sandy shore till they came to the chain of rocks stretching out to sea from the south side of the bay. Kali kilted up her sheepskin tunic above the leather girdle. Brockan hitched his tunic up too. Between the islets the sea lapped gently. The tide was very low, a neap tide.

“Now we must wade,” Kali said and clutched her sheepskin bag more tightly under her arm. It was drawn together by a plaited cord of strong marram grass threaded through pierced holes.

The children plunged and splashed their way through pools and over the rocks. Once Kali’s foot slipped and she almost fell into the channel below.

“I shall have to step carefully when I come back with the heavy bag of limpets,” she told Brockan.

At last they reached the island furthest out into the sea. It was little more than a large rock. The limpets clung all round it just below the fringe of green seaweed that marked the level of high tide. Kali handed Brockan a sharp flint with a razor-like edge.

“Come, now! Work quickly! As soon as the tide rises we shall have to go.”

“You spoke truth, Kali. The limpets here are much bigger than those on the shore rocks,” Brockan said with satisfaction.

The children chipped away with the flint knives. They had to get the edge of the flint knife under the limpet shell and prise it upwards. Their hands grew sore as they worked, but the bag grew heavier.

“We shall have a feast for my father when he comes back from the Ring of Brodgar,” Kali said happily.

A few miles from the stone houses of Skara a great stone ring was being built for a temple. Birno had gone to shape the enormous stone the men of Orkney had hewn from the quarries. The tribesmen had only stone and flint axes with which to work. Already men had grown old and died in the labour of hewing and hauling the stones to the Ring of Brodgar. Birno was a clever man at working in stone and he supervised the labour.

“Brockan! There are great crabs in the pools here,” Kali told her brother. “Down near the bottom of that gully is the best place to get them.”

They climbed down the rocky gully to the pools left by the tide. A big crab scuttled under a shelf of rock.

“Ah! I’ll soon have you out of there!” Brockan cried with delight.

He parted the trailers of seaweed. The crab cowered beneath a pebble and waved his great claws menacingly. Kali felt at the bottom of her bag for the small stone axe her father had hewn and polished for Brockan. It was fitted into a handle of antler horn and bound tightly with strips of sheepskin. Every boy of the village carried a stone axe as soon as he was able to use one. She handed it to Brockan; then she snatched the pebble from above the crab. Brockan brought the axe down smartly before the crab could scuttle away. Kali caught hold of the crab by his shell and tossed him into the bag with the limpets. “Mother will boil him in the pot tonight,” she laughed gaily.

A small flatfish tried to bury itself under the sand at the bottom of the pool, but Brockan stunned it with a quick blow of the axe. It, too, joined the crab and limpets. The children were so delighted at their catches that they went on searching the pools, clambering up and down among the rocks. They

caught two more crabs, and then Kali spotted a small eel in a crack between two rocks. She put a limpet down at the entrance to the crevice. Both children watched, holding their breath. The eel emerged to snatch at the limpet but Kali moved faster still. She pounced and caught him behind the head with her hands. The eel writhed, but Kali held on. She dropped him on a flat rock. Before he could squirm away Brockan's stone hammer dealt him a death blow.

"Here are some great big limpets!" Brockan pointed to a nearby rock. They began chipping away again with their flint knives. They were so absorbed that they lost all track of time. A splash in a near pool made Kali jump round smartly. The water was rising fast in the gully made by the outlet of a small stream from the land. Already the flow of the stream had been driven backwards into a whirlpool by the rising tide. Between them and the shore the waters were lapping and foaming over the rocks.

"The tide has come up!" Kali shouted in horror.

"Oh, Kali! What shall we do?" Brockan looked frightened.

"It's too deep to wade. There's a channel between us and the shore. We'll have to swim for it, Brockan." She looked doubtfully at him. At six years old he was not a very strong swimmer.

"I ... I don't think I can do it, Kali. The waves would batter me against the rocks. You go and leave me here," Brockan stammered.

"No, no! I'll not leave you. I brought you here. I should have remembered what my father told me and not disobeyed. It's my fault. Oh, what shall we do?" Kali cried in desperation.

They looked round about them. Already the sea was churning and foaming between them and the land.

"We'll climb to the top of the rock and shout. Perhaps

someone will hear us at Skara,” Kali said, but there was little hope in her heart. The rising wind would drown their shouting, and no one at the little stone village knew where they were.

Even in her fear Kali did not forget to put the flint knives and the stone axe in her sheepskin bag. She hauled it up with her to the top of the spray-drenched rock. Then she and Brockan shouted and shouted till their lungs were fit to burst. No one answered. The blue peat smoke curled lazily from the holes in the beehive-shaped roofs of Skara. The wind carried away their shouts and the roar of the tide drowned their voices. Panic-stricken, they clung to each other as the tide rose higher and higher. A large wave curled slowly over the flat-topped rock and lapped at their feet. Soon it would be impossible to hold on.

The water rose to their ankles. They could hardly keep their balance. Brockan began to sob. Kali held him close to her. How long would it be before the waves overwhelmed them? She turned her face from the land and looked towards the sea. Below them a small creek made a tiny harbour on the seaward side.

“If only my father was at Skara! He would come out with his boat,” she wept.

“You could still swim to land, Kali,” Brockan told her. “One of us might be saved then.”

“No! We will stay here together.”

They felt the cold water rise about their legs.

“Shout again! Let’s try again!” Kali cried desperately.

Again they faced the land. “Help! Help!” they shouted at the top of their voices, but the wind made mock of their cries.

“Help! Come and save us!” Kali gave one last despairing cry. To her surprise there was an answering hail, but it came to them from over the sea. They sprang round.

There, a few hundred yards away, was a boat, a strange boat to their eyes, but nevertheless a boat. In it a lad was scooping at the water with a broad paddle.

“Try to hold on! I’m coming!” he shouted.

Though Kali could not make out his words properly, the sense of it reached her. She gave a gasp of thankfulness. This must be a god out of the sea, coming to save them.

“Sit down, Brockan. It will be harder for the waves to wash us off if we cling to each other.”

The boat came nearer. It was made from a hollowed-out tree trunk. Brockan looked at it in surprise and fear. “I have never seen a boat like that before. It is not like our father’s sheepskin boat.”

“No, but it is a boat and a strong boat too that will hold all of us.” Kali waved her hands and shouted to the lad in the boat. “This way! This way!” She pointed to the entrance to the tiny creek opening up beside them. With a deft turn of his paddle the lad swung his boat towards the rock. The set of the tide brought it nearer, but it seemed as if the boat would be swept past.

“Oh! He cannot reach us!” Brockan cried. “Let’s swim to him.”

Kali tightened her hold on Brockan. “Wait!” she cried. “You would be pounded to death on the rocks. Look! He is turning to try to reach us.”

Once more the boy swung the great dugout canoe. This time the waves and current helped. The boat floated between the protecting pinnacles of rock and into the slightly calmer water of the little creek. A few more strong strokes of the paddle, and he brought his craft alongside the rock.

The boy steadied the craft with his paddle and Kali gave



Brockan a hand into it, then she stepped in carefully herself in order not to disturb the balance of the boat. She still clutched the bag of limpets and crabs.

“Thank you for saving us from the sea, stranger,” she said.

The lad pointed towards the sand dunes. “I will put you ashore,” he said, using his paddle vigorously. Even without the gesture Kali found she could understand his speech, though it sounded a little different from her own.

“You speak the same words as we do. Are you from this island? I have not seen you before.”

The boy shook his head and pointed over the sea. “I come from a long way over the water.

“Did you come alone?” Kali asked in surprise.

“There was a quarrel between our tribe and another one about the right to hunt in a certain place. There was fierce fighting. My father, the chieftain, was killed before my eyes. Most of my tribe were slain.”

Kali looked at him in pity.

“They tried to capture me, but I ran faster than they did and hid in a cave on the shore. At sunset they gave up looking for me. In the darkness I managed to reach my father’s boat. I launched it and pulled away from the shore. I thought I would land further along the coast, but the wind blew strongly and carried me out to sea.

“How long ago was this?” Kali asked.

The boy held up two fingers. “All night and the next day the wind blew hard and carried me northwards. Sometimes I slept. Sometimes I wakened in the darkness to the howling of the wind and the roaring of the sea. I did not think I would be alive when the second day broke. Then, as the sun rose, the wind lessened and the sea no longer tossed me about. I saw a long low cloud far away that I thought might be land.



I took up my paddle again and steered towards it. As I came near the shore I heard your shouts.”

“It was lucky for us that you heard us. Your name, stranger?” Kali asked.

“Tenko.”

“I am Kali and this is Brockan, my brother. It is strange that we speak nearly the same tongue.”

“There is an old tale in my tribe that some of our people went in their boats to the north and never came back again.”

“And there is a tale in our tribe that the people of our island came over the sea from a land in the south,” Kali told him in wonder. “There must be some truth in it, when we can understand each other although our words are not all quite the same.”

“Where is your home?” Tenko asked.

Kali pointed towards the sand dunes. The wisps of smoke rose from the beehive roofs of the sunken houses. Tenko gave a strong swing of his paddle and urged the boat towards the shore.

Kali looked at Tenko. He was a strong, well-built lad of about fourteen years, bigger than most boys of her tribe. His face was long and narrow and his head round like those of the people of the tribe of Skara. His dark hair grew down to his shoulders, but the ends of it had been lopped off by a flint knife so that it did not straggle. Like Kali and Brockan he was clothed in animal skins, but these were not sheepskins. Tenko’s garments were a tunic of some soft supple skin and a cloak from an animal with long dark fur. Kali pointed first to the tunic.

“What animal?” she asked.

“A deer.”

“There are deer that roam our hills.” She pointed next to the cloak. “But what animal is that?”

“A wolf. I hunted and killed him myself,” Tenko told her proudly.

Kali shook her head, puzzled. “I have never seen such an animal on our island. Our men do not hunt often, and then it is only the deer.”

“What then do you eat?” Tenko asked, surprised.

“We have herds of sheep and cattle, so we have meat. And we eat limpets and crabs and fish from the sea.”

“Do you go hungry in winter?”

Kali shook her head. “Not often. We kill our sheep and salt the meat. Then we keep it in a stone keeping-place under the ground.”

They were drawing in to the shore.

“You will come with us to our home?” Kali asked him.

Tenko hesitated. “How will the men of your tribe treat me? Do they not kill strangers?”

“Why should they kill you? You have saved our lives. Besides, how can you be a stranger when you speak as we do?” Kali said.

Still Tenko hesitated. “Perhaps I had better put you on land and go away again.”

“But that is foolish,” Kali told him. “You cannot go over the sea for ever and ever. What will you eat? Come with us and share our limpets and meat.” She shook the bag of shellfish.

Tenko felt the keen pangs of hunger. It was nearly two days since he had eaten the last steak of deer meat he had carried in the pocket of his tunic. The girl was right. Where could he go? He would have to land soon and then he might meet with unfriendly people. This girl, Kali, would speak for him to her tribesmen. Had he not saved them from the sea? The words of an old wise man, a priest of his tribe, came back to him.

“In the great water one will be lost, yet two will be found.  
Out of this, good will come.”

The sea had brought him, the lost one, to Kali and Brockan.  
It was a sign.

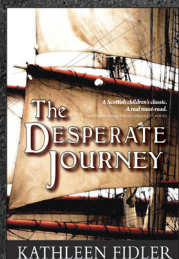
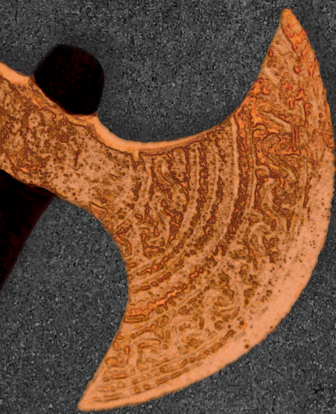
“Very well! I will go with you to your people,” he told  
Kali. He turned the nose of the boat in towards the shore. It  
grounded and he set foot on the island of Orkney.

## Explore the mysteries of the Stone Age

Kali and Brockan are trapped by the tides when a mysterious rescuer appears – a strange boy in a strange boat, carrying a strangely sharp axe. The people of Skara Brae must decide what to do with this boy's new ideas and strange ways. But as a deadly storm brews, the whole village is plunged into danger.

The daily life and rituals of the ancient Stone Age village of Skara are brought to life in this vivid portrayal of life nearly 3000 years ago.

Kathleen Fidler's books have enthralled generations of readers. She is the author of over eighty books for children.



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