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Usually, when somebody is seventeen, and more than a trifle big-headed, a good friend will make the effort and tell them about it before it's too late to change their ways. I fear that, at that age, I was more than a little conceited. Either I had no *real* friends, or I was more convincing than other teenagers, because I don't ever remember anyone making any efforts to say anything to me! I had plenty of friends and, on the contrary, I kept finding that people believed my stories!

This was late July, 1954, and I was a tall and not particularly thin second year apprentice with a big electronics firm. The famous one with its factory near the Chelmer and Blackwater Canal.

Before I go further you should know that I was mad on boats, and had been since the age of nine, when I had been taught to sail a dinghy on the river Thames. That madness had been helped even more when I started to read Arthur Ransome's children's books at about the same age, and I never stopped reading them. For that matter, at that time, I had just succeeded in buying my own copies of the whole set.

If you need to prove my love of boats, I was so mad that three years earlier, after reading *Coot Club* and *Big Six*, a friend and I had spent half our summer holidays thumbing lifts on Norfolk Broads hire boats.

But that's a story I've already told.

Anyway, to get back to this story, since arriving in Chelmsford at the end of the summer before last, I was getting to be pretty good with canoes and I was one of only two people who could pole the canoe club's wooden punt in anything like a proper style. You could find me down on the water most evenings, doing something or other with boats.

This whole thing really began at that canoe club, late on a warm summer Sunday evening. We had paddled up river that afternoon as a change from going down and round the locks on the shallow river Chelmer that lead the way to the little harbour at Heybridge Basin. Today's exercise had been exploring the narrow streams above the town, and we had just returned to the little club wharf after a long day's boating. I was helping the other members to put the canoes away and, as usual, I was telling exaggerated stories about my trips on sailing boats and motor cruisers.

Luckily, as it turned out, I had been looking at a map of the canals that morning at breakfast and I added a bit about them too.

"Can you really drive canal boats?" Asked someone behind me.

What would you do in my place? I said "Yes", completely automatically, and looked to see who was doing the asking.

"You're just who we need, then."

The person asking turned out to be one of the fifth year student apprentices from our firm, one of twins, both a short stocky well spoken type who always wore the most expensive boating gear and were owners of their own almost new kayaks. I knew them from when I first joined the club, and remembered that he and his twin brother came from over Aylesbury way. They were pretty hot in a kayak or a double canoe, but canal boats? That's quite a different thing entirely.

"When's your holiday?" He asked. "How long are you having off work?"

"End of next week. Two and a half weeks."

"What are you planning to do?"

Actually, I was planning to borrow the club's punt, rig up my old touring tent on it to use as an awning, and set off alone to explore the canal from Chelmsford down to the sea. But I hadn't done much more than think about it, yet. A second year craft apprentice on a government *special aptitude grant* doesn't earn enough money to do anything exciting.

"Probably I'll hang around here." I said.

The twins looked very pleased at my answer.

"No need to do that," Said the second twin. "If you know where Autherley Junction is? Do you know how to get from there to Aylesbury?"

I racked my brains.

"Autherley, It's on the Stafford and Worcester, the other side of Wolverhampton." (I knew that much.) "I'd go through Birmingham to Worcester Bar, Stratford Canal to Lapworth. Then down the Grand Union to Marsworth."

It sounded good, at any rate!

It must have sounded good enough for the twins, too, because they started planning immediately for me to move a boat for them! The one twin dashed off to the phone, while his brother was working out what I'd need.

It was all arranged, and arranged in some detail too, before I went home to my lodging. I lived with a family up the hill in Danbury and it was the last bus that took me home that night.

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It won't surprise you to find me, very early on the Friday of the next weekend, sitting in a train to Wolverhampton with a pocket full of money, a ring with three keys on it safely in my jacket, and a page full of written instructions.

The twins, and their father on the other end of a long telephone call, had decided that I was capable of fetching a boat for them. Much more than that, they were going to put me in sole charge of a fifty foot *day cruiser* (whatever that might be) and I was going to take it, all on my own, from Autherley Junction to Aylesbury.

This was going to be my very first time in charge of anything that big, and they hadn't even seen me work anything bigger than a twenty two foot punt! I wasn't even sure that I knew what to do, but I was going to try.

As a little aside, I want to mention that haircuts were a running joke in my family. One the rare occasions that my hair was cut properly and tidied up, it wouldn't have disgraced the boys in the mail-order catalogues. The trouble was that it was usually too long, and badly neglected, and then it looked terrible. I wondered if I had done the right thing, and if it looked a bit odd now.

You see, this holiday, I had succumbed to a temptation and gone to the other extreme. When I went to the hairdresser last night on the way home I had let him cut my hair short, in a genuine crew cut. It had been taking ages to dry off after swimming, and I was browned off with being able to chew the ends when it fell across my face. When I asked, he assured me that the style would suit my hair, so I let him go ahead.

It was quite a contrast to my normal style when I saw it in the mirror!

All the way down to London on the railway line to Liverpool Street and back up to the midlands I had been watching out for waterways and boats. There was the river Lee at first, then glimpses of the Grand Junction as we went further north, and then at last the Birmingham

canals. You can guess where you are by the look of the canal locks and bridges, which are quite large and wide in London and get smaller and narrower further north as the canal gauge changes.

I changed trains in Birmingham. It seemed a long while, waiting on the nearly empty platform and doing nothing, but at last I was sitting in a crowded local train. I had a window seat and soon we were approaching the station at Wolverhampton. Suddenly, the train slowed with a series of jerks and the platform and station nameboard appeared outside. There was no time to look out any more as I grabbed my canvas kit bag off the luggage rack and jumped off before the train had completely stopped.

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Autherley Junction is a surprisingly long way out from the railway station if you don't know the proper way. I didn't know how far, but a couple of changes of bus later I got there and walked along the towpath to the Toll Office. The door was open and the toll clerk was expecting me. He turned out to be a short elderly man with a happy smiling face below a very victorian bowler hat. He greeted me like a long lost friend and poured me a cup of tea from an old brown teapot.

“Nice to meet you,” He said as he held out the cup and nodded to a tin of biscuits on the desk. “The twins told me all about you. I told their dad to find someone with experience because we were worried about them taking the boat up to London themselves. They're canoeists, don't know one end of a narrow boat from the other. But it'll be OK with you!”

I finished my tea and followed him outside, across the top of his lock and along the edge of the field on the *outside* of the cut. The towpath side is, quite naturally, the *in* side. I was always told that it's because, when you tow your boat, it comes in towards your horse and goes out away from it. When two boats pass, one boat and horse go in towards each other, and the other pair go out as far as possible so the first boat and horse can both go over the other towing rope. At least that's how it was when I worked a horse drawn boat a few years later.

There were quite a few assorted sizes and types of boat tied up along that bank. There were canal boats and cruisers, some quite luxurious and some that were just empty canvas shrouded boxes. Although it was already the boating season, many of the boats looked quite neglected, some even barely afloat as though abandoned. I looked at them as we went past in case my boat was going to be one of those.

It wasn't. I didn't even recognise my charge even when we were finally there!

The *Speedwell* looked just like any other green and yellow painted narrow boat as we came past its bows. It hadn't been painted this year but it still looked quite smart. The cabin colours, since the hull and foredeck were a dusty black, wouldn't have been my choice. The overpainted name panels on the sides and the bulk cabin back were yellow and the frames around them a light shade of green. Rather tasteless I thought but, all the same, it looked to me as if it had been well looked after.

The first sight I had had confused me. *Speedwell* could have been a regular working boat. Really the only difference between this so called day cruiser and an everyday carrier's boat, apart from ballast under its floor to make it deeper in the water, was a shorter than usual cargo hold. However, inside the boat was fitted out in a far different style. Looking in over the high sides, the hold was fitted with several rows of double seats from a bus. There were two doors in the front wall of the cabin and there was a sort of khaki coloured awning thrown across the seat backs.

“You'll have to put that thing up, properly.” Said the Toll Clerk, seeing that I was looking at the open gaps around the awning. “The boat was used up Chester way, and they had to drop the awning to get under one of the bridges coming down here. We pumped the water out after it rained but it needs two people to put it back up.”

As we got level to those doors at the back of the hold, I could see that it also had a traditional crew's cabin and a flat decked counter beyond, that were exactly like those of the normal canal boat. Maybe it had been converted from one, but the Toll Clerk didn't know! Getting up on to the counter, and looking from there across the dark red roof toward the front, I could see that it was a good few feet shorter than the cargo carrying boats I'd seen in London. Yet in every other respect it was a normal working motor boat.

We climbed aboard and I tried to open the cabin. There are two narrow hinged cabin doors that swing out and stay flat against the back wall. I had a key, looking like a bigger than usual back door key, that should have worked two rods inside the right hand door, rods that moved up and down like the ones that you find inside a wardrobe. But the key didn't turn anything! It just went round and round because the rods were missing, as I found after I had rattled the doors and they opened without more than a finger pull.

Canal boat doors are not very tall, so they have a sort of sliding roof above them so that you can get down the steps into the cabin without having to bend too much. I pushed the slide open and looked down inside.

Despite my bragging, I had never been in a boat's cabin before, but everything was quite familiar. Inside it looked just like all the photographs I'd ever seen of the crews quarters on a traditional Narrow Boat. Not quite, though, because this cabin was empty and had none of the decorations, no curtains or plates or brasswork or lace trimmings, which would have shown that it was being lived in.

Once I climbed inside to look closer, I found a long open locker along the right hand side. Its lid was up to let in some air, although it would normally have to be closed down to make a seat, or maybe it would be a narrow bed. I put the lid down, sat on it, and looked further.

A set of light orange-brown painted cupboards and drawers on the wall opposite me completely filled the front two thirds of the cabin side. The green colour from outside had been used for all the inside knobs and fittings. A painted panel hinged down from the middle of its right hand side where it rested on the side seat to make a bed across the cabin. On it was a thin mattress that was half rolled, half folded, to air. Cushions overflowed out of the cupboard on to and around it. I guessed they were intended for the side bed from the size of them.

As I stood up again I could see where the cabin table was folded up into the wall next to the lowered bed, and pulling it down revealed the set of shelves with cups and plates and spaces where small food would be kept. As I pushed it back into place I saw the drawer below and opened to find it full of clean and new looking cutlery and it pleased me to see the one thing that had been modernised in this boat. In a traditional narrow boat there would have been a coal stove on my left inside the door. This boat had been fitted with a modern two ring gas stove and a wash basin, and that meant that, where the chimney should have been, there was a brass filler cap for the drinking water tank under the roof. That promised to be a luxury.

All this time the toll clerk had been standing behind me on the counter and he passed my kit bag in to me before I had time to look any further.

“Get your engine going, and I'll see you through the lock,” He offered.

I took off my shoes and socks and dropped them on the bed before walking the narrow edge along the cabin side to the engine room, which was like another shorter cabin forward of the living space.

There was no way into the *Speedwell's* engine room from the living cabin itself, but it looked as if it had two other entrances. The pair of doors I reached this way were on the left side, made just like those at the back of the cabin. They even had their own smaller cabin slide on the roof. The second way in was through a normal door into the passenger area in the one time cargo hold.

This time, my keys really turned in the lock on the side door and lifted the rods.

I opened both doors back against the cabin side. The engine room turned out to be very small. Even smaller than it looked from outside because it was not the full width of the boat. After I had opened the door into the hold and looked round outside, I found the reason why. There was a very small and narrow toilet compartment next to it on the right hand side.

The quite new looking engine, which wouldn't have been out of place in a big car, had a control panel like a car dashboard with the ignition key already in the lock. I switched it on, pulled out the choke and pulled the starter. The battery must have been fully charged as the motor turned over very fast, and the motor started chugging with a happy sound.

I waited for a few moments before pushing the choke back in and then went back to the back end, again along the narrow side deck.

"Looks good" Reported the toll clerk, looking over the side to where cooling water was spurting out of a round hole.

He opened a little hatch in the floor of the counter and reached a long way down to turn a grease cap half a turn.

"Looks good here, too. Half a turn a day, but you know that. It's full of grease, so you shouldn't need to refill it before you get to Aylesbury."

He stood back.

"Are you ready to go?"

I wasn't quite ready to go, yet. I went down into the cabin and changed into my *boating gear*. I had a pair of old grey flannel trousers, cut down to such short shorts that I had to wear swimming trunks beneath. I put on my trunks and the shorts and folded my shirt and trousers on the bed.

I came back up, ready for anything.

"Looks like you're on holiday, now." The toll clerk commented. "I'll throw your ropes aboard and see you at the lock."

He did. He untied the back rope and threw it to me and then went forward and threw the front rope on to the deck. He waved me on.

If you want to steer a boat, you have to know two important peculiarities. One is that boats steer from the back, sort of pivoting around a point somewhere near the front as the stream of water from the propellor pushes against the rudder. The other fact is that boats don't steer anywhere unless they, or the water, are moving.

This boat was no exception, so I grabbed a boathook that was lying on the roof and pushed the back of the boat out away from the bank. This was the moment when I had to look for reverse gear. There is just one gear shift in a boat, either a wheel on a thread or a short lever inside the door. This has to go one way for forward and the other way for reverse. *Speedwell* had a lever which hung downwards. Logically you should push the end of the handle the way the boat is to drive. I found it on my second try. If I'd read the words on the little brass plate next to it I

would have seen that, perversely, *Speedwell* had one that worked the other way. I revved up the engine whilst the boat backed out into the middle of the cut. Going that way works quite well because when you go backwards the end where you are standing on steers like a car and the rest follows. Sort of, at least.

I steered out into the middle, throttled down as soon as the boat was straight, changed the gear to forwards and ran the boat forward to the lock. I was more than pleased that the boat had been tied up with its bows pointing in the right direction, otherwise I would have had to reverse through the lock and turn in the junction outside, and I wasn't that good. Yet.

The toll clerk had the lock gates open ready for me and closed them again behind before walking along to the other end. To open a gate the water has to be level on both sides, and the easiest way of doing that is to have a hole in the gate that you can open to let the water flow through. The shutters that close those holes are called paddles and they are opened by winding on metal handles to lift them out of the way. The clerk was winding before I worked out what I should do, I took the easy way and left it all to him.

If you look at a book about canals, you might read that “a lock is a method of overcoming changes of height.” If that is true, then the lock at Autherley junction isn't a lock. It has all of the equipment of a lock, but a difference of height of just two or three inches between the *pounds*, that's the stretches of water on each side.

This lock has an entirely different job. Before nationalisation, each of the two canals had to buy their own water. This lock prevents the water in the Shropshire Union escaping into the Stafford and Worcester Canal, or vice versa, except when a boat is paying to lock through.

It took about a minute for the water levels to be right and for the toll clerk to open the gates for me to get out. I needed another minute to start off and turn right into the other canal. He waved as I steered under the bridge, went out of his sight, and set off for Aldersley junction a mile further south.

About half way toward Aldersley, I pulled in to get the canal map out of my kit bag. I hadn't got it out before as I wasn't going to admit that I didn't know exactly where I was going! Mooring meant picking up a rope that was tied to a ring near the front of the cabin and dropping a clove hitch around a post on the towpath to stop the boat from drifting. I was glad that I was well away from expert eyes as I misjudged my speed and hit the bank a glancing blow and then had to reverse suddenly to avoid careering off across the cut. Something fell over in the cabin as I jumped ashore and pulled the boat sideways toward the next post along from the one that I had intended to use. I looked round guiltily but nobody had seen.

I went down into the cabin to see what had fallen. As I stepped on to the floor I glanced down and saw that the windlass, the metal winding handle that I was going to need to work the locks, was on the floor below the doors. I picked it up and stuffed it into the back of the leather belt of my shorts.

I stopped in the light below the open slide and took a few moments to fold the map so that the Birmingham area was on top. I reminded myself that it would be quite a while before my evening stop at the top of the Wolverhampton locks at Horsely Fields. Before I returned to the counter I put the map with my wallet and the boat's license into the long ticket drawer that I had found as expected under the roof inside the doorway.

As I stood on the step, ready to go back on the bank to undo my rope again, I thought I heard a noise in the cabin behind me. I turned back round and peered inside, and was certain I could

see something moving under the lowered cross bed. I suppose that, seeing movement in a boat, you think first that you've sprung a leak, and what you are seeing is water. But, before I had a chance to panic, I remembered that the door hadn't been locked when I arrived.

I jumped back down to the floor, went down cautiously on my hands and knees and looked under the bed.

"Come out!" I commanded, because I decided it wasn't a something but a *somebody* down there.

It was a somebody, because it moved again.

When I repeated the command, not one but two heads appeared. Small heads. When they stood up I could see what looked like two small boys dressed identically in red swimming trunks and, no longer white, sleeveless pullovers.

They followed me out into the open air, where I demanded an explanation from the nearer one, the bigger one by about an inch. The smaller one, looking and sounding about ten or eleven years old, was the one that answered.

"We aren't doing any harm. We just ran away. We're going to Cambridge, and when we heard you coming, we hid."

"How did you know I was going anywhere?"

"We didn't. We just wanted somewhere to sleep last night."

"You'd better get off then!" I suggested. "I'm going to Aylesbury, and you won't want to go there, will you?"

He nodded. "Perhaps!"

But it was the rest of his answer that surprised me:

"You're on your own, aren't you? I can help you drive and *she* can cook."

I looked at the other child. This one was slightly taller, maybe a bit thinner if you looked carefully, and had the same very short hair as the first.

"*She*?" I asked.

"My sister, Lee. That's short for El-*lie* and Ellie's short for Elizabeth."

"Who are you, then?" I asked.

The boy said his name was Peter, he was a few days short of being eleven, and his sister was eleven months older to the day. That meant that he said the day, and to us finding that he and I shared the same birthday, the twenty first of August.

I already knew we had the same christian name, and I sort of adopted him on the spot, and Lee too, I suppose.

According to Peter's story, their mother and father were divorced. Daddy had gone off to live in Cambridge two years ago and was now married again. Meanwhile Mummy had imported a boy friend. Not unusually the kids had decided they didn't think much of her choice, and had decided to go and live with Daddy instead. Decided last night!

They hadn't done any preparing, either, by the look of things. They had been swimming yesterday and, coming across the fields they had found the *Speedwell's* cabin door open and had decided to hide there.

There had been just enough tinned fruit and bottled drink in my cupboards to keep them going over night, but there'd been a lot of traffic this morning and they'd decided to wait until it was quiet before moving on.

Then I'd come along and *Speedwell* had started to do the moving instead!

I'm not making excuses. I was not quite eighteen. I already said that I was big headed, and that includes knowing it all. What the kids told me was not important, really, I would probably

have believed anything they had said. Although I really knew it was completely wrong not to send them home that very moment, I let myself be convinced by their arguments. It didn't take long before I had agreed to take them with me.

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It certainly made the twenty one locks up to Wolverhampton a lot easier, with six hands and the two extra bottoms to lean on the balance beams of the gates.

Peter had his sweater off from the start, it was a stinking hot windless evening, and we were both sweating profusely. I was surprised when Lee took her sweater off too, a couple of locks further up, but she was flatter chested than her brother so I couldn't really complain.

They worked like Indians and we got up in record time, helped because there was traffic coming down hill but we were the only boat going up. Par for a pleasure boat up the 21 locks from Aldersley to Horseley Fields is over four hours and we took less than that, a lot less!

It was late enough when we tied up, all the same, and I was only just in time to run down the road and get half a dozen eggs, a packet of bacon and a loaf of bread from an off licence before they shut up for the night.

After supper, we had to try and organise beds for three. It wasn't all that easy because I had left my sleeping bag at home, having been told there was enough bedding on board for one. There was, just.

There were three pillows and a wide Dunlopillo mattress, with two sheets, a blanket and a zip round single sleeping bag. Unzipped, the sleeping bag made a sort of double quilt, and that was that.

It had to do, and we started that night with Peter bundled in the middle of the cross bed.

2

It is usually only a half day's run from our first night stopping point at Horseley Fields to get to the *Top of the Town* in Birmingham. We were starting today's journey on the Wolverhampton level, which is one of the longest stretches of water without a lock in the whole of Britain, and we weren't in much of a hurry.

At least I wasn't in a hurry and no one else said they were either.

Lee got up first.

In my experience that's always the way it happens. I mean, if there's more than one person in a bed and it is against the wall, the person nearest the floor is never going to be the one who gets up first! At least she was in the middle now. I had found, shortly after going to bed, that her brother had exceedingly wandering hands. I had to banish him to the far side against the bulkhead so I could get some sleep.

Lee washed in cold water, pulled on her trunks and went out to investigate the toilet compartment. Peter trod on me as he got up, so I stopped pretending to be asleep and told him to put the kettle on.

By the time he had washed and gone out, too, it was boiling and I could make a pot of tea and still have enough warm water left for a civilised wash and a once every few days shave.

I was rolling up the bedding and putting it up into its cupboard at the head of the cross bed when they came back into the cabin.

“What's for breakfast?” Peter asked, standing on the bottom step and swinging round on one arm to look into the cupboards.

“Can you make bacon sandwiches?” I asked him.

He said he could, although it was Lee who did it in the end. We ate sandwiches and drank tea until we were satisfied inside.

“I suppose we could start!” I commented as I pushed the bed up into the wall and the two of them, unprompted, started to wash up.

“Any idea what the time is?”

None of us had a watch. My portable radio needed new batteries, I don't remember a time when it didn't, and we couldn't hear any church chimes. We could hear traffic though, and it was already very hot again, so it was certainly getting on.

As Lee wiped the last plates, Peter went out to open the motor cabin and, when he came back, he was carrying a typewritten piece of card that had been sandwiched between sheets of perspex and bound with black sticky tape. He opened the little hatch in the counter and put his hand down inside.

“What are you at?”

“It says here, you turn the grease screw half a turn clockwise before starting.”

I looked at the card. It was a complete set of instructions for the motor.

“Better do the rest, then!” I said, realising that I was saved from admitting that I didn't know anything. “We'll look after the ropes and things.”

Lee threw the front mooring rope on the deck as I untied the other rope. She jumped on the front deck, which pushed the boat away from the bank, and I gave the back end a shove and jumped aboard as the engine started.

By the time I had the ropes tidied up and we were moving in the right direction, Peter had come back to the counter and since I had the boat moving I gave him the tiller. All I had to do was to sit on the roof and watch.

Lee sat next to me and watched the scenery as we went down the middle of the cut.

Like I said earlier, we were on the Wolverhampton level, and we were heading for the *Top of the Town* at Birmingham. About four and a half miles from Horseley Fields there is a junction on the left which goes down three locks to the, so called, "New Main Line." That's a long straight canal that goes eastwards across from the bottom of those locks to the top of Farmers Bridge locks at Worcester Bar, saving masses of time by cutting off the worst of the wiggles of the "Old Main Line." That is the other way which meanders about some way to the south of the modern wider cut.

If you don't go down these locks at Factory Junction, you can still follow the Old Main Line and sooner or later you'll find somewhere else to go down, there's two more chances. All you have to avoid is going too far and finding the six locks at the Titford Canal, which go uphill to the south east and would take you in a different direction altogether to a dead end!

I missed the Factory Junction locks, partly because I was not expecting them so soon, but mainly because I was laying on the cabin roof dozing in the sun.

"What's that big hill?" asked Peter, steering carefully past an oncoming working motor boat and its booty and pointing up a branch canal to the right at the same time. "Does that canal go round it?"

I knew that one.

"This must be Bloomfield Junction" I guessed aloud. "That branch goes down to Worcester through the hill. The tunnel mouths are far too small for us, although it goes through enormous caves under Dudley Castle and the Zoo, that's what's on top there!"

Peter continued looking up at the hill and taking occasional glances at his steering.

"By the way!" I said. "We should have turned left half a mile back. Did you see any locks?"

He had.

"Then watch for some more, in a couple of miles!"

About twenty minutes further on, Lee shook my elbow and pointed to the right of the boat. We were going across a bridge, or rather an aquaduct, at that moment and we could see a canal with boats below us. They were disappearing into a tunnel, but nothing like the only other tunnel that we'd seen so far. Our last tunnel was just a long narrow bridge, and it had no towpath. This new one had towpaths on both sides and we could even see lamps in its roof despite the brightness of the day!

"Netherton Tunnel" Peter announced, and he was quick enough for me not to see him putting the cut map back into the ticket drawer.

I did see his hand come back up, though, so I had an idea where his sudden knowledge was coming from.

"There's some shops up there. Did you want to get some more food?" Peter was probably starting to feel hungry again.

I left the two of them in charge of the boat and went, a surprisingly long way, along the road to find a food store. It was closed when I got there, but looked as if it was just opening, so I waited for them to let me in and stocked up with essentials.

“How about a Salad?” suggested the shopkeeper, “It's far too hot for cooking today. It'll be like an oven in a canal cruiser's cabin.”

I added lettuce, cheese, tomato and ham to my stock.

As I got back to the boat my crew were sunbathing, so I left them to it and prepared the salad. It was indeed hot in the cabin and I looked for a ventilator door in the front wall, until I remembered that there was a toilet and a motor out there and nobody would want those smells in their cabin! I gave up looking and made a large jug of orange squash and pulled down the folding table in the cabin and called them inside..

“Eats!”

They ate like locusts, again, and when we were finally sitting back, full and happy, Peter offered to steer on whilst Lee and I cleared up. I agreed and he disappeared outside.

The motor started and we set off again.

“Lee! Don't you ever speak?” I asked.

I was beginning to wonder. She hadn't said more than a dozen words since we met and those were mainly *yes* and *no*! She nodded.

“Speak then!” I commanded.

She grinned, and then giggled, so I asked her another question.

“What school do you go to?”

I thought I'd failed again when she shrugged her shoulders but, this time, she answered after a pause.

“I don't know, now. We were supposed to be starting at Grammar School after the holidays. I don't want to be in the same class as Peter!”

It suddenly occurred to me that this might be her problem.

“Too yacky?” I asked.

She looked out at her brother up on the counter, standing happily at the tiller and looking ahead

“Nobody else gets a word in edgeways.” she confided. “Not even at school!”

“Did you say locks?”

Peter was looking down at me, so I came up from the cabin.

“Yes! Why?”

“There's a junction, but no locks.”

Peter was already steering us in to the left. I suspected that he'd been looking at the map again, but I pretended he hadn't. I got it out of the drawer and we both looked at it.

I was sure that, once again, we had passed the locks we really wanted a long time back and, I hoped, we were on the last possible way down.

We had a confirmation of that when, quite soon afterwards, we crossed another aqueduct. Looking down from our height we could see what was unmistakably the straight and wide Main Line with its two towpaths running off in both directions into the distance.

“We'll need to turn right somewhere,” I said, and stood aside to let Lee come up beside me.

She looked rather longingly at the steering so I suggested that Peter looked in the petrol tank to see how much was left and gave her the tiller.

He went off very happily, running along the narrow side deck without holding on, just as if it were a wide road. Lee was steering into the right hand arm at the T junction when he climbed out on the narrow ledge along the cabin side and reported that the tank looked about half full. He looked at his sister, confidently steering, and stayed where he was, looking forward.

“Locks, at last!” Peter shouted.

He had climbed up and was sitting on the front of the cabin roof with his legs dangling into the passenger area, so he could see better.

He looked round as soon as he had shouted, to see if we'd seen them too.

“The gates are shut. How are we going to get in?”

“Go and open them?” I suggested, sliding the windlass along the roof to him, and looking at Lee. “Steer close in to the side, where that brickwork sticks out!”

She steered in as I throttled the engine back to half speed, and Peter jumped ashore with the windlass in his hand. He ran the two hundred yards or so to the far end of the lock and back to our end where I could see him winding up the paddles.

The training yesterday evening on the Wolverhampton locks had been all he needed to know what to do.

To my immense surprise, Lee put the slowly running motor into reverse gear without throttling back first. Instead of the motor protesting, as I expected, I heard it slow right down and speed up. As the boat stopped and started to go backwards, she put it out of gear and the motor ran slower.

She grinned at my surprised face and had obviously decided I could be spoken to!

“I read it on that card of Peter’s” she explained. “He's been doing it all time since I showed him!”

Peter was pushing the top gate open now and she put the motor back into gear and steered the boat exactly into the middle of the opening.

A boat hasn't got brakes like a car, you use the backward gear instead when you want to slow down as you have to when you go into a lock. The trick is to know exactly *when* to change into reverse. Lee's first try wasn't quite right, so we stopped short. That's not as bad as hitting a gate, hard, though. As Peter closed the top gate and dropped the paddles the boat drifted slowly in to the place where it should have been.

I dropped a mooring rope over a post and waited.

As I mentioned back at Autherly Junction, paddles are the underwater shutters, fitted into the gates, that you can open to let water run in or out of a lock. Locks in most of Birmingham have a toothed rack connected to the top of the paddle. You wind a gear wheel with the removable winding handle, the *windlass* or *key*, to lift the whole thing to open the paddle. Peter had dropped the paddles by the simple action of hooking the pawl out of the teeth on each rack with the back end of my windlass, so that their own weight made them fall down.

Next, as he ran to the bottom gates and started to lift the paddles there to let the water out of the lock, I showed Lee the trick with the mooring rope.

“Because we were going up hill before, we left the motor running slowly to keep the boat touching the top gate” I explained. “This way, down hill, we have to keep our back end from catching up on the sill. The rudder has to be kept clear, so we just use the mooring rope to hold us about six feet from the gate, letting it out a bit at a time.”

“What's a sill?” she asked.

“Like a *window* sill.” I said. “It's the bottom of the canal in the pound above.”

I anticipated her next question,

“What's a pound?” We both said it at the same moment, and she laughed.

Lee seemed to be quite happy looking after her rope so I jumped ashore and went forward to open the bottom gates. Peter had gone already, walking toward the next lock where a pair of boats were tied up to the towpath.

As our boat came past, I jumped down to the cabin top, where I stayed as Lee seemed to be having no problems in steering us toward the next lock. Several people were helping Peter open the gates this time, so we went straight in.

There were children swimming below the lock and they climbed out and watched as we worked through this lock and then through the bottom one below it.

We tied up to two big wooden posts and went back up the slope to where they were swimming.

The water in the canal was clear by these locks. I suppose there was chalk in the water, because it had that unnatural clear appearance that it gives. Even the disturbance of the water running out of the lock hadn't affected it. The children were swimming again and Peter and Lee dived in with them.

“Going far?”

One of the boatmen who had helped Peter at the locks came up I wasn't quite decided if I was going to swim or not. He looked very old, but he jumped up to sit on the beam as easily as I did. It took a few seconds to understand his question. Lee and Peter had quite strong Birmingham accents, but his was broad enough to be really difficult to understand at first.

I nodded.

“Aylesbury,” I said.

“Bad week,” he commented.

I looked at him.

“Properly, you would have go down the Worcester and Birmingham from Worcester Bar, and into the Stratford.” he said. “But you can't get into the Stratford canal for the next few days!”

“We'll have to wait?” I asked.

“Unless you go down the Old Thirteen,” he suggested.

I knew that way round from my map, I'd counted the little arrow signs on the different ways to the south, just to see how many locks we were going to save by cutting the corner, and now he was telling us we would have to work them after all.

“If the short way's impossible, then we'll have to!” I said. “There's three of us.”

“Best of luck!”

The two of us sat on the balance beam of the lock and watched the children swimming.

“You're not from Aylesbury?” It was more a statement than a question.

I told him the name of the Suffolk village near Bury St Edmunds where my mother was living, and was about to explain it when he interrupted me.

“Barton Mills? On the Coal River! There's a lock and two staunches close together by the gasworks at Mildenhall.” He pronounced staunches as “stanches” in the Suffolk

way. "Then a single on an awkward corner at Barton Mills. I remember it, though it's many years since that I worked from Ely to Bury. Are there still working boats there?"

As we sat, I told him how I had become interested in the River Lark, as it is called by the people *off the bank*, when I was a schoolboy in Bury. Now my mother lived near the river and I sometimes went there. He looked surprised when I told him that the big basin and wharf at Bury had gone, that most of the locks were derelict and the bridge at Judes Ferry stopped all but the smallest boats from even reaching the old fashioned flash lock a mile or so below Mildenhall. He shook his head.

"It was already getting bad when I left" he said. "I went across to the Wisbech Canal to get married, and I never went back."

We sat together for a long while as he told me a story of his own life. It is worth a book of it's own, for he was born in Slough and moved to this area when he was nine years old. He was orphaned at Peter's age, he said, and had made his own way by water to Bury St Edmunds to find his uncle. There he had learnt the craft of canal engineer. Finally he had gone back to Wisbech in the middle of the Fenlands, to marry and move with his wife to the midlands, where his children and grandchildren had also been boat people and possibly still are.

He still sat on as I dived into the water to cool off.

It was nice in the water, and I swam with Peter and Lee for quite a long while. After we got out, at last, he was still there.

The canal children took my crew to look at their boat and I walked back to make a meal. The old man was sitting on the lock beam looking at the *Speedwell*.

"If you've got a map, I'll show you where to go."

He waited on the counter as I fetched my map and laid it on the cabin roof. We leant over it and he ran his finger along the blue lines.

On the route we should have taken, there are just seventeen miles, and twenty locks, between Top of the Town and the Grand Union Canal at Lapworth. The way he showed me now, there were the thirteen locks straight off in the first mile and a half! Then another twenty one in the next eighteen miles. Not much difference in lock-miles but a lot more work if the locks were set wrong!

If we'd known this morning, we might have gone the other way, up toward Stafford, and gone round the north of Birmingham to dodge the lot!

Peter came back with an unusually tall lanky boy of about thirteen in boatman's clothes, so tall that he must have had trouble in sleeping in his family cabin. He greeted me with a squeaky adolescent "Hello", and they disappeared into our engine room. Lee came with two younger children and showed them our cabin.

"Bet it's cold in winter, without a stove." said the smallest.

"We don't have passengers in winter," I said.

It took a while before I had finished explaining to them, and to several others who came along, all about passenger trips and why the boat was so similar and yet so different to theirs. They understood right away why the boat was shorter than usual, they told me it was easier to turn it around, but none of them could understand why we had a petrol engine instead of a diesel.

"It won't half cost a lot to run!" Was the voiced opinion of Peter's new friend and no doubt the unspoken of the others.

At last the visitors were gone and we could eat the sandwiches I had prepared. Three hours after arriving at the bottom of the locks we could get on our way again, to tonight's moorings.

When we reached the Gas Street Basin and tied up it was very late and we didn't have much time to look around. I knew that the Worcester Bar gets its name from a wall across the widest part of the Basin, that was intended to force transshipment of the goods to and from the boats of Birmingham Canals to those of the Worcester and Birmingham. For years there wasn't even a lock, but now there is a stop lock on the towpath side that let's a boat through, and that was the way where we ought to be going.

The lock is on the right hand side if you come in as we did, but we didn't go that far because we found a mooring at the near end of the basin. Lee and I went to look at the barrier and the lock while the kettle boiled and decided that it must have been a very busy place before they cut through the Bar.

We went back in time for me to make a drink and share out the last of our cold meat sandwiches.

"We'll have to do some more shopping before we go," I thought aloud.

Lee was drinking the last of the milk and made a face as she put it down.

Peter sniffed the bottle.

"How could you?" he asked. "It's really rotten! It must have tasted awful!"

3

Peter was the first one of us who had to go outside. It was about two in the morning, and he scrambled over both of us and left in too much of a hurry to worry about leaving us without bedclothes!

As I woke, the cramps in my own stomach told me all I needed to know about his haste! I followed Peter out over the roof and just had enough time to wait for him to finish with the toilet.

When I came out again he was sitting on a passenger seat hugging his knees. By the dim light I could see that he looked like I felt, and I sat on the seat opposite. He spat over the side.

“Yuck!” he commented. “What's up with us?”

“Stomach Chill? Something we ate?”

“Can't be the food!” He said. “Lee's not ill.”

Lee appeared suddenly, across the roof, and practically fell into the open door.

When she had recovered enough to come out it was my turn again.

We carried on taking turns for quite a while before I felt well enough to go back to the cabin and could put the kettle on and serve up mugs of warmed water. That seemed to settle things a bit, and we snuggled up together in case it started again.

Luckily it didn't.

+ + +

I put the kettle on again at first light. We had been half awake for quite a time and Peter had asked, several times in the last half hour, if I was still asleep.

As I went to the door and looked out at the dark sky he got up and came out too.

“I'm as dry as a desert.” I told him, and he agreed that he was thirsty too.

We didn't fancy tea to drink so I made instant coffee, without milk, and Lee got up too, in time to ask for some. We all drank full mugs, after which we were completely awake, so there was no more chance of sleeping.

I pulled the cabin slide open, and immediately pushed it back again. It was raining outside and raining in on me. I pulled on my trunks and went outside to look. It was quite miserable out there!

Lee came out of the cabin, and shivered.

“You two haven't got anything to wear in the rain?” I asked, superfluously because I would have seen it if they had.

“It's only rain” she answered. “We'll be all right if we keep moving.”

I protested.

“You were ill in the night, I don't want you to be bad!”

“We'll be ok!” she answered. “That was just that cold meat and milk we had at supper, last night. They'd gone off!”

None of us wanted to eat, so we had another coffee each and started the boat. I had the plastic cycle cape that I used for canoeing so I took charge. We wended the boat (turned) and ran back to the top of the town, and started our longest days run. With the cabin doors shut, I could stand on the doorstep inside with my arm outside to steer. With the cabin slide partially closed and the cape spread over everything I could keep my legs and feet comfortably dry. For a long

journey that would have been fine, but we were back at the junction with the main line and approaching the next junction within minutes.

The locks called the Old Thirteen start right at the Junction, the arm forks off to the left with the first gate right at the corner, and the flight goes down between dark warehouses. Like a gift, there had been a boat up recently. I guessed some boat had come up last thing yesterday evening. That meant that the locks were all full and my crew could stay in the dry and only I needed to go ashore at the locks to wind the paddles and push the gates.

Despite the rain both of my crew came out to look as we stopped in the second lock. We were there almost as soon as we had left the first and their curiosity drove them to come and see why. They soon saw that the side of the lock opposite the towpath was a very wide wall with water on both sides. The canal itself was about a hundred feet wide!

All the locks on this flight are close together, sometimes very little more than a boats length apart, and the pounds between were built so wide to hold the as much water as possible. I had to explain that a boat using a lock brings a lock full of water down with it and, unless the pound is big enough, the water level would go up and down as traffic passed.

“So that boats being loaded and unloaded would be all over the place,” commented Lee, and I knew that she at least had understood.

It stopped raining for a few minutes as we were half way down the flight. As Lee was standing on the lockside, she pointed up above our heads.

“Look!” she said. “Three layers!”

There were indeed. We were in a lock chamber on the staircase of the locks with a road bridge above our heads. At that very moment a train was crossing the top level far above. I wished that I had a camera to take a picture.

We stopped in the shelter of the next bridge as it suddenly rained even harder than before. There was more than enough time for Lee to brew a pot of tea and for each of us to take a cup, still milkless of course. As she washed up, Peter and I went out and took us on our way through a few more pounds, until we met a boat coming up toward us.

The boat coming up was actually a pair of boats, a motor boat pulling a butty. A *butty* is just a boat that was at one time horse drawn, but is pulled now by the motor boat. On a wide canal the butty is tied alongside its motor boat so that the one steerer can look after both but on the narrow canals, like this one, they use a short towrope or *snubber* from a towing post on the counter to the front of the butty.

Now, Birmingham locks are only big enough to take one boat and, as I mentioned, there isn't all that much room between locks along this flight. The locks themselves need a whole lot of water, which has to come from somewhere to fill them and go to somewhere when you empty them, so the pound has to be wide and deep to keep it from flooding or draining and that should leave plenty of room for us to pass. It just isn't so any more on these old and rather neglected canals. There's years of mud where the should be water, and there had been more than a bit of a leak through the next gates down. I steered out into the free water opposite the towpath to wait, and went solidly aground.

While the three of us tried to pole the *Speedwell* back into deeper water I explained what we were going to see. On a flight of narrow locks, working a pair of boats is no fun. Because only one boat fits at a time, that makes three times the work.

All their locks had been full as they came up and they had to empty each lock as they came to it, before they got their first boat in. Which meant that as we came down one of their boatmen

had come up to empty our lock. They had to run their motor boat into our lock after we came out and fill it with water again. That's where we had to pass them to get into the lock below and why we were aground.

We got free with a little help from the wash of the other boat's propellor and ran into the lock. Lee and Peter looked suspiciously at a long rope that was attached to the motor boat. It dipped through the water and laid on the towpath to hang over the bottom gates of our lock. You see, what these people were doing was simple in the extreme. Their towrope was so long that, when the motor boat was coming up in one lock, the butty was coming up in the lock below. When one moved in or out, so did the other.

We were breaking into their rhythm. As Peter and I explained to Lee with staircase movements of his hands, we were going down with the water between their two boats coming up. The boatman and his boy emptied the lock for us, and as we were coming out into the pound below the motor boat was already drawing the butty towards us. The butty entered the lock we had left and the motor entered the lock above at the same moment.

"It's clever!" said Peter, standing on our cabin roof and looking back up the flight. "They never have to pull a boat by hand and there's always two locks filling or emptying at time!"

The junction at the bottom of the hill is quite unimpressive. The next flight goes off to the left towards Salford Junction and the line on the right climbs again, our way, to Tysley. We worked the last seven locks in double quick time. As we found a mooring at the Tysley wharf the sun came out again.

"Always 'appens!" said a boatman, taking our rope and tying it to a post.

"What always happens?" asked Peter, coming out of the motor cabin after stopping the motor.

"Rains, when you come down the old thirteen."

"Really?"

"You can rely on it!" said the boatman.

"Getting low on petrol!" Peter reported.

"You want petrol, you ask Billy over at the pumps. He'll get you some," suggested the man.

We went and saw Billy who turned out to be a chunky looking black haired man in oily blue overalls. Peter looked at the information card he was carrying in his hand. "It says we can take thirty gallons of cheap petrol" he read.

"Petrol or Paraffin?" asked Billy.

"There's only one tank, and it says petrol."

Petrol it was, and Peter went off with Billy in a LandRover with two jerrycans to fetch some. Lee and I put on our plimsoles and pulled sweaters over our rather damp shorts and shirts before we went off to find some shops.

We went into Woolworths and I found Lee a cheap summer dress and an even cheaper bikini that were on offer. She clutched the carrier bag whilst we bought food and drink and on the way back she looked into the bag from time to time.

"Fish and Chips!" she said as we passed a corner shop.

"After last night? You'll be sick again!"

She grinned.

"No! We won't. That was last night!"

So we took back newspaper wrapped bundles and arrived at *Speedwell* at exactly the right time. Peter was just handing the empty jerrycans back to Billy. I paid for the petrol whilst Peter washed, and then we lunched on our fish and chips before setting off down the hill toward Warwick.

+ + +

It was a really pleasant evening and we hadn't quite reached Kingswood Junction when we found a nice inn at the canal side. Lee looked a different child with a blue bikini under a white dress and I pulled on a short sleeved white shirt to make myself look respectable or, I suppose I should say, more respectable. We left Peter in charge of the boat and investigated the inn's supply of meat pies and fizzy lemonade.

Lee really was a different child tonight! There was a cruise boat tied up and when I came back out she was talking to an american couple sitting outside on the next bench. I gave her one plate and took Peter's and mine to where he was attacking the engine with an oily rag. He was making things shine and asked me to put the things on the roof.

He found some hand cleaner in a jar and washed his hands in the water.

We sat on the roof eating and he looked out at his sister, who was still talking.

"Why this boy business?" I asked. "Lee is a boys name. You two dress the same. Who doesn't like girls?"

"Mother" he answered. "She only wanted boy children, she says. She has to let Lee wear girls clothes to school, but she dresses us like twins otherwise."

He was watching his sister walking across to the cruise boat with the americans.

"I think she looks better as a girl!" he commented.

We finally got Lee back from her americans as the inn closed for the night and they went aboard to bed in their cabin.

"They're nice" said Lee, stepping on to the counter.

I laughed and Peter looked at me and at her.

"She spoke first!" I said.

We were happy and tired as we went inside to bed.

4

Peter was still asleep next morning as I started the motor. Lee was the one who woke me today by getting up and dressing and going outside. I had followed her.

Her other clothes were still damp and she had her new bikini on today and stood professionally at the tiller as I went ashore to cast off the ropes. She put the motor into gear and started to back out past the cruise boat. Her americans put their heads out and shouted goodbyes and Lee waved to them as the man took a couple of photographs of her.

“Hey! Where do you live?” called the woman, jumping on to the bank in pyjamas and slippers and running alongside us with a writing pad and pencil.

I took over the steering and stopped the boat so Lee could hang over the side and tell her. She called out her name and an address, an address in Cambridge which I guessed must be Daddies. I wrote it surreptitiously in my diary and slid the book back into the ticket drawer as the man took more pictures. They were still waving as we went off down the hill toward the junction.

Peter was just sitting up in bed as I went down to put the kettle on.

“Did you remember to turn the grease cap?” he asked.

I admitted that I hadn't, so he crawled out of bed, pulled on his trunks, and went out to the counter to do it for me!

I opened the cupboard and dug out the teapot and our last few bits of food.

“Peter says there's a junction ahead.” called Lee.

“I want to go and have a look.” I called back. “Can you see a place to tie up?”

She could, and the motor stopped just as the kettle boiled so I poured the water into the teapot and came out. Peter was tying the rope at the front and Lee was jumping ashore with the other rope.

“Tea first, and toast!” I called. “But there's no milk yet!”

The Grand Union Canal or, as it was originally, Grand Union of Canals, is the name of the waterway that we joined at the bottom of the Old Thirteen and it runs all the way down to join the Regents Canal in London at Paddington. The Stratford Canal, which we should have used to get here but couldn't, leaves the Birmingham Canals and goes down to the River Avon at Stratford. The two canals come within a hundred yards or so at the bottom of Lapworth, at Kingswood Junction, and there's a single lock between the canals.

We went along the towpath and looked at the other canal and saw a pair of working boats coming down.

The boats came side by side into the junction lock and the children closed the gates for the boatman.

“Is the canal open?” Peter asked.

“Kings Norton Junction?” he asked. “Not till tomorrow evening. You going up there?”

Peter shook his head.

“We came round the other way.”

“You the pleasure boat that went down the old thirteen?” asked the boatman. “You certainly move fast.”

Our fame had spread!

Peter handed back the boatman's windlass after opening the paddles for him and we leant on the balance beams of the gates, Peter on the inside gate and Lee and I on the outside one, waiting for the water levels to equalise.

A man and a boy with a dog came along the towpath and the boy joined Peter. He was about thirteen and dressed in immaculate grey flannel trousers and a blue shirt. He put his hand on the balance beam as if he was going to pull it open.

"Other side" warned Peter. "Push the beam, don't pull it or it'll knock you down when it opens."

The boy climbed over the beam.

"This your boat?" He asked.

"Ours is round the corner" answered Peter.

The gates started to open and we pushed them the rest of the way open. By the time that Lee and I had run round over the gates at the other end of the lock and caught up with Peter, he and the boy were chatting happily.

"Can he come with us?" asked Peter. "He lives near Rugby and his dad says he can."

"Come to where?" I asked.

"Braunston Junction. It's about five miles from where he lives."

I did a bit of maths. It's about twenty seven miles and forty six locks to Braunston. At four lock-miles to the hour that would be after lunch tomorrow. I was explaining as the boy's father came up.

"That's all right. Lawrence and I are staying with my sister across the road here and we're going home in the morning. He was getting bored on his own. If you'll have him, I'll send him down the towpath with his sleeping bag and some stores. He'll soon catch you up."

I agreed, and asked him to give Lawrence some milk for us.

He soon caught us up, too, running as if we were going to take off like an express train. We had started on our way as soon as we got back to the boat and were just leaving the next lock when he came tearing along the towpath. He was just too late. He threw a sleeping bag to Peter but we were just too far out for him to jump aboard so he had to walk alongside.

He climbed aboard at the next bridge and carefully handed over a thermos flask.

"My aunt says milk will go off in a bottle, so she put in in the flask!"

He was a good crew, for all that he had never been on a canal boat before. Lee took him down into the cabin and stowed his kit and by the time that we reached the next lock she had him changed into black gym shorts. She was back in her old red trunks and the two of them jumped ashore with a windlass each.

I was pleased for them to be working us down this hill because, not only are the locks more than twice the size of our Birmingham locks, but the paddles are on worm drives and not on rack and pinion. The result is that you have to wind the paddles down as well as up. Not difficult but boring. Lee had been practicing with locks since we left Autherley and Lawrence was big and strong, yet there wasn't much to choose between them when it came to lifting those paddles.

There are twenty three locks down to the river at Warwick, and then the same number back up to Napton, and the two of them handled every paddle on their own.

Peter worked the boat and Lee and her apprentice worked the locks, leaving me to do the cooking and watch the scenery.

I was surprised how brown Lee looked to the bigger boy and when they came aboard for lunch I compared Lee and Peter. She was by far the brownest of the four of us, Peter and I were

about equal, but none of us were getting burnt. Perhaps the long summer had set us up for the hot sun, but Lee had a different answer.

“It’s rust, from all the rain!” She insisted with a giggle.

We still had eight locks to go through to get down to Warwick after eating and then we started on the long hill up again toward the Oxford Canal at Napton. My crew each took turns at steering. Lee was quite good, Peter was excellent and Lawrence was getting on well when we tied up just past an inn mooring for the night. There were still almost a dozen locks to the top of the hill and we were getting tired.

“There’s some kids swimming,” said Lee, pointing to a sort of sandy beach on the outside by the next bridge hole. “I’m going to swim before we eat.”

She ran off, and took a tremendous running jump from the towpath to land in the water with them. Lawrence changed into a pair of trunks, in the cabin, and he and Peter went off as well while I tidied up, pulled on shorts and sweater and went to buy some drinks and crisps at the inn.

I wandered along the bank when I came back and found Lee and Peter teaching Lawrence to swim.

“Good job I didn’t know you couldn’t swim” I commented. “There’s a rule that non swimmers wear life jackets on our boat!”

5

I was sitting on the step inside the cabin door, waiting for the kettle to boil when Lee climbed out of bed and came over and looked at Lawrence on the side bed.

“Boys can't half sleep!” she said. “It's hot already. Is it late?”

I had looked outside when I got out of bed a quarter of an hour ago. Nothing was moving there, and I had decided it was early. I shook my head.

“It's hot outside, too.” I answered. “How hungry are you?”

“Ravenous!” she said.

“Egg tomato and fried bread - Ravenous?”

She snuggled into me and nodded her head as high and low as she could.

“Me too!” said Lawrence, who had been sleeping on the side bed with his head by the door until our voices woke him.

“How did you sleep?” I asked.

“Good bed!” he answered, sitting up. “Better than the folding bed at my aunt's house. Gee! I'm stiff though.”

“Shall we have a swim whilst he's getting breakfast?” Lee suggested. “That'll help.”

Lawrence pulled his trunks down from the washing line above his head and started to wriggle into them inside his sleeping bag as I poured boiling water onto the tea.

“I'm coming too, then.” I said, grabbing my trunks off the line too.

I swam across and back in the wide sandy pool by the bridge and then ran back along the towpath to get the breakfast started. It was nearly ready when Peter woke up and looked at the empty beds.

“Where have they gone?”

“They went to swim. Lawrence said he was stiff after yesterday.”

“Those locks are hard work.” he said, climbing over the side bed to look out of the roof slide.

“Silly little twit!” he exclaimed, grabbing his trunks and pulling them on as dashed out of the door. “Come on then, Lee! Don't give up, keep going!”

I went out to see what was happening.

Lawrence was on the towpath jumping about and cheering at someone in the water. I crossed to the outside of the boat where Peter was walking along the narrow side deck. Lee was swimming down the middle of the canal and had already done well over a hundred yards. She was nearly level with the bow of our boat and kept looking up, but Peter had run down the middle gangway between the seats and was looking over the side at her.

“She said last night she could swim from the bridge to the boat, and we told her it was too far.” He explained, without looking round.

“Keep going!” He repeated.

Lee did keep going. Lawrence jumped aboard and and up on to the roof and I joined the two boys in calling encouragement to her as she ploughed along. I waited at the side of the counter as she came level with me, looked, swam another two strokes so she was past the boat, and then turned in toward me.

I put my arm down and grabbed her wrist. She gripped mine tightly as I lifted her up and I put her down beside me before grabbing Lawrence's big towel from inside and wrapping her in it.

“Well done!” said Lawrence, jumping back down. “I didn't think you'd manage it.”

Peter didn't say anything, but he was looking very proud of his sister as I rubbed her dry.

“What made you do that?” I asked her.

“My fault!” said Lawrence. “I called her a ‘mere girl’ last night and she said girls can do anything boys can!”

“I couldn't do it!” said Peter. “My big sister is good!”

He looked happy as I shook his hand. He knew why I shook it, too!

After breakfast, I left Lee and Peter to wash up and tidy the cabin and sent Lawrence off with the windlass to look at the next lock. Peter watched critically as I opened the hatch and wound the grease cap under the counter.

“Don't forget the one at the other end by the motor!” he ordered!

I started the engine, jumped over the side to undo the front mooring rope, throw it aboard, and ran back to loose the other rope. I only had to push the boat out before jumping aboard at the counter.

Lawrence had the gates open for me at the lock and I closed them and wound down the paddles as he worked at the top. I started off again in double quick time as the boat pushed the gates open.

Lawrence was already half way to the next lock. Lee came up wearing her blue bikini and sat on the roof. Peter came up and looked around.

“Where's Larry?” he asked.

I pointed ahead to where he was pushing the inside gate open in front. I saw him jump across the gap to the outside gate.

“He'd better not fall in!” said Peter. “I'll go on the bank with him, in case.”

It was a good job that Peter was with him. He finally fell into the water above the last lock of the whole twenty three, just as we were entering at the other end. I was fifty feet away at the back end of the boat. Lee was standing up watching from the roof. Peter was nearest, on the other side of the lock.

Lawrence was running across the top gates and suddenly he slipped and disappeared. There was a tremendous splash.

“Thank goodness he didn't fall our way!” Was all I could think as I stopped the motor.

None of us had moved at first, and by the time that Peter had jumped in from the gate to land beside him he had already come up in the five foot deep water and grabbed the top of the gate. Peter grabbed his spare hand and pulled it across to the wall where he could climb up. Lawrence didn't seem in the slightest bit worried!

“We're going to run along the towpath and get dry.” called Peter, and they jumped across to the foredeck and on to the bank.

We turned into the Oxford Canal at Napton with the two boys still on the bank. Lee was steering and I was in the front of the passenger compartment looking at the awning when she tooted the electric hooter and pointed ahead.

“There's a horse boat coming. Do I keep left or right?” she yelled.

The towpath was on our right and the old coal boat, the *Friendship*, was coming toward us close in to the towpath. Lee had already used her initiative and pulled over to the left, well out from the towpath, and I heard the motor throttle back as the two donkeys went past. The old man on the towpath waved and the old lady in the steering well called out thanks to Lee as they went past. As I came back to the counter the boat was under power again and Lee was steering down the right hand side and glancing over her shoulder.

I took the tiller so she could keep watching.

“Did you hear her?” she asked. “She said ‘well done little girl!’ to me.”

“You did do well!” I said. “You gave a horse boat right of way, like you should do.”

“Where are they going?”

“I don't know, but I guess we will know!”

Peter and Lawrence went quite a long way down the towpath with the coal boat and came running back just before we reached the junction, where Lawrence's father was supposed to meet us.

“They loaded in the Coventry coalfield and they deliver to Oxford” called Peter.

“They're very old,” said Lawrence, jumping aboard. “Both of them. I liked the old man. He talked to us. Most of the boat people don't have time.”

I warned him that we were nearly at the junction and he went in to pack.

Peter waved from the bank, so I steered in close for him to jump aboard. He took over until we reached the junction. Lee jumped ashore and tied up as Peter stopped the motor.

There was no one to be seen. It was hot and quiet, almost silent now the motor was off. The air seemed to be heavy and there were no birds to be heard. I thought it was almost like you get it before a big summer storm.

Lawrence came up from the cabin, still in swimming trunks, carrying his bundle tied with his belt and his shorts tucked under the belt. He dropped them on the roof and sat beside them. Lee and Peter looked at him and at me.

“Dinner?” Peter asked.

Dinner it was. I opened a tin of luncheon meat and made sandwiches, and we drank vast quantities of orange squash. Nobody came along and we carried on waiting whilst several pairs of boats went past in both directions.

After tidying up, the three children dozed on the cabin roof and I pulled the rolled up awning out flat, and worked out how to set it up. There were two ways of doing it and what I needed to do was to fix it across the well at the level of the sides as a raincoat over the seats, rather than standing it on it's legs as you would do to keep passengers dry.

I fished lot's of the long legs out of the locker under the foredeck before I found the roof pieces. They were curved two piece hoops that could go on top of the legs or could be socketed in holes in the side decks at about four or five foot intervals. I put the pairs together and socketed them all in place before stuffing the uprights back inside.

Lee came and helped as I unrolled the awning itself and we finally had it over the hoops.

“It's got poppers along it's edge!” reported Lee, who was right at the front of the boat. “And there's poppers on the outside to pop it to, too.”

We had all the awning spread neatly and secured, except for the last section by the cabin, before Lee asked why.

“I think we're going to have a storm. I want the water to run off, not run inside.” I explained.

“The little pump on the propellor shaft is all right for draining the water from a shower, but if it really rains, we might need more.”

I had just put the kettle on for a cup of tea when someone called from the bank.

“Sorry I'm late! I got a puncture and had to change the wheel.”

Lawrence's father was on the towpath and I invited him aboard. He was dripping with sweat and looked at his son, who was sitting in the sun on the roof.

“I think you have the right idea!” the father exclaimed. “Where's your clothes?”

“In the middle of the bundle. It's too hot to wear them!” answered Lawrence, grinning at his father.

“You've certainly got the right idea, boy!”

Lawrence's father produced a couple of tins of condensed milk from his pockets and accepted a cup of tea in payment, before they finally went ashore and set off along the towpath toward the road bridge. Lawrence didn't bother to put anything on over his trunks and we saw them last with his father carrying the bundle and Lawrence carrying just the empty thermos. They looked over the parapet of the bridge and waved goodbye.

+ + +

We were back on the Grand Union now and it got hotter and hotter as we worked on up the hill. I don't know which was hottest, standing still on the counter or working locks in the sun. At least you had a bit of breeze as you moved!

I tried both.

I was almost ready to drop when Lee asked "Where do we go now? There's no gap in the hill!" "Through it?" I answered.

The entrance to the old tunnel was a welcome change. It was even cold inside the hill and the glow of the headlamp, fifty feet away at the front of the boat, lit up a few yards in front but left the sides in shadow.

We put-putted along in the middle of the bore and Lee and Peter loved it. They climbed on the cabin top and reached up to pat the roof, looked at the uneven curving walls and shivered when they were cascaded with water at one of the underground springs.

"There's a light being waved ahead!" said Lee. "STOP!"

I reversed the engine and stopped in time as she went down into the well and ran under the awning. I saw her in front of the lamp, so I knew she had unpoppered a way through. Her voice came, strangely hollow in the tunnel.

"We can't get past!" she called. "Come and help!"

There was a sort of motorised houseboat in the tunnel in front of us. It was going the same way as us, which was why we hadn't seen a light until the steerer waved the last of his torch. Its motor was stopped and they were trying to push it along with the help of a wooden pole.

"Sorry" said the steerer. "You won't get past, we're too high. We have to stay in the middle. I don't know what to do."

The three of us stood on our foredeck and looked down.

"How far are we in, do you think?"

"half a mile, or so. Perhaps a bit more." answered the steerer.

I thought for a moment. The obvious thing was for us to go backwards to the entrance, pulling the boat, and that was going to take us a good bit longer than we had already taken to get to this point. Another thing against it was that the traffic was stopped coming towards us because the houseboat was expected, but something might come along at any time going our way. Going on would save us the problem of meeting someone, and would mean pushing the boat, but it would take us nearly the same amount of time as getting back.

The same amount of time if they could steer, that is.

"You want to risk me pushing you?" I asked.

"Steering?" asked the steerer.

He did risk it. I worked out that if he stayed on the foredeck of his boat with a pole, Peter stayed on his boat's afterdeck with another one and Lee stood behind my headlight and watched them both, then it might just work.

It did.

With his motor stowed in the cabin and *Speedwell's* nose touching their motor mount we soon got moving at a speed so low that we could have measured the bricks we passed, if we'd had a ruler! We had one panic as the steerer dropped his pole, but Lee blew the whistle he gave her and I reversed to a stop while Peter fished it out and passed it back.

I waved my torch frantically as a pair of working boats came up behind and made stopping signals with my hand when I thought they might overtake.

A youth came along the top plank of the boat and asked what the trouble was. I explained and he ran back to his steerer.

They dropped back.

It was more than an hour later when we finally pushed the disabled boat out into the bright evening sunlight at the far end. Three pairs of boats came past us, and there were another four waiting to go in! The waterways man, who had been holding the working boats back, pulled the disabled boat in to the bank and took our rope whilst a tired and dusty and extremely happy Peter scrambled back aboard. Lee came back after refixing the awning and climbed back round the side deck with an enormously pleased grin on her face.

"It's like an oven out here, after that lovely cool in the tunnel." said Peter, mopping sweat from where it was dripping on his face.

"You'd better have some more to drink, and make us some cheese sandwiches." I suggested.

Lee looked back behind us.

"That must be the longest tunnel ever" Lee commented. "We've been ages!"

"There's a longer one to come." I answered.

"That one's only one and a quarter miles. It just seemed a long way because we went so slowly." Peter pointed out.

A clouded sky was making it too dark to continue when we tied up just before Gayton Arm End where the branch canal drops down toward Northampton. It was so close and oppressive that we didn't feel like going down into the cabin where it seemed even hotter.

Lee went down into the passenger area and worked out how to popper the last of the awning. It involved shutting the motor compartment and toilet doors and hanging down over the front of the cabin. She came back and joined the two of us, sitting in the dark on the roof. We shut the motor compartment door and both the roof slides.

Lee went in and made more orange juice, but our drinking water tank being under the roof the water was warm and it didn't help cool us very much. Finally, we felt our way down into the cabin and got ready for bed. We folded up the sleeping bag and laid between the sheets, and sweated.

None of us slept. We dozed.

Lee woke me up by going to the door. It was pitch black outside and when I went out with her it was hotter than ever outside and felt still and airless. There was a rumble of thunder down behind Northampton in the river valley and an occasional flash of lightning or a distant rumble of thunder.

Lee held my hand.

"Do you mind thunder?" I asked.

"Peter hates it. I don't mind. Much!" she added the last word in a sudden squeak as there was a much nearer roll. Peter came out of the cabin between us, ducking under the still closed slide.

"Is that why you put the awning on?" he asked.

I said it was.

"It's too hot in there." said Lee. "We're staying up here for a bit. Are you staying too?"

Lee took Peter's hand with her free hand and we sat along the side of the roof, looking out toward the valley of the River Nene that was somewhere in the dark below.

There was a sudden breath of cooler air and a rushing sound over the fields. The wind blew stronger and warmer again, and with a flash of lightning and a colossal roll of thunder the rain came.

Not a shower but probably a cloudburst which beat our bodies like wooden rods. We stood up and danced in it, the cool was so welcome after the day's heat that it felt like a luxury. We washed it over our dusty bodies and hair and drank it as it fell in our mouths.

It was thundering on our left now, up the hill toward the tunnel, and we watched the lightning behind the trees. None of us felt afraid and none of us wanted to take shelter.

After twenty minutes or more the rain stopped as quickly as it had started and we looked at each other in the faint light from the clearing sky over the valley. We felt cool and refreshed at last.

I made the right decision.

“Towels. A really good rub down, or we'll all have chills.” I ordered. “Then we'll sleep like babies.”

6

We did sleep like babies and it was much cooler the next morning. I got up and started the motor, remembering the grease cups this time, threw the ropes aboard and set off.

As we entered the mouth of the tunnel both Peter and Lee came out of the cabin. Lee was quite accusing.

“You were going to let us sleep!” she said.

I protested that I wasn't.

She took over the steering as I went down to make breakfast and we were drinking cocoa, made by thinning tinned milk with water, when a pair of working boats went past the other way. They didn't check their speed in the slightest and I heard Lee's little panic noise as the propellers of the working boat pulled our bows across and down for a fleeting moment. At the speed we were going they were past in seconds and the boat was rocking. Even before I could get a hand on the tiller, Lee had let our back end swing out between the motor and butty and was steering our bow in against the wall. Her action helped us pass the butty without problem.

“Canal Hogs!” she protested.

I realised that, to the boatmen, our headlight made us look like another working boat. Boatmen know how to steer to pass at speed. I told her so.

“They should see we haven't got a mast!” she said.

I couldn't agree, well only partly agree. A working boat has an upright board, and a sort of tent called a *cratch*, at the front of the hold and has a towing mast standing a few feet behind on the centre of the keel. We didn't have either one, so that the passengers could see out, but then I too had seen half loaded coal boats without. Rather than argue, I took another draught of my no longer warm cocoa.

We came out of the far end of the tunnel as the next boats were coming in. There were boats waiting to go down the locks so we tagged on to the queue.

This was Stoke Bruerne which I rather wanted to explore. I'd often heard about it and read about it, and it was just as busy as I expected. There was a big mill on the *inside* but most of the buildings were opposite on the no-towpath side, the “outside.” A waterways man was walking up the towpath calling to us and pointing ahead. We listened carefully.

“He wants us to go down with the next boat.” said Peter. “He wants us to pass the others and go into the lock.”

“Maybe next time!” I thought as I untied our mooring rope.

It was a luxury to go down the next seven locks. The boat we were with was a loaded motor boat on it's own, and the locks would take two boats. The boatman and his boy of about sixteen worked the locks, and all we had to do was keep up. As our boat was lightly loaded we had no difficulty in doing that, so it was all being done for us.

At the last lock the boatman's son jumped on to our counter with Lee and Peter as I went forward to fold the awning.

When I came back the three were already good friends. Peter was looking at the map with the boy and showing him where we had come from and were going to.

“Where's Moira?” asked Peter, looking at the map.

“The Ashby Canal” I explained. “Look for Coventry, further up the Oxford canal, past Rugby, that's after we turned off. Follow it to the next junction.”

“Hawkesbury Junction?” asked Peter, reading.

“Sutton Stop” said the boy.

“No. The other way, to the right. From Rugby, up the Coventry Canal about the same distance, and there's a canal up to your right. See it? That's the Moira!”

“The Ashby - de - la - Zouch, canal.” Peter read.

The boy nodded.

“Why're there different names on the map to the proper names?” asked Lee.

The boy had the best explanation.

“Your's is a *bank* people's map, so it has *bank* peoples names.” he said. “We use the *cut* peoples names.”

Peter, Lee and the boy switched between the two boats all morning and part of the afternoon. Both my crew had turns at steering the working boat and the boy tried our steering.

“It feels different, being short and neither loaded nor properly empty either.” He decided. “But it has a nice feel, all the same.”

Peter jumped ashore from the working boat at the next bridge and jumped on to our counter.

“You ought to see their motor!” he said. “He took me and showed me it while Lee steered. He has to pump diesel into it's tank every few hours and he let me try. It's engine is terrific!”

I asked, “how terrific?”

“It's nothing like any other engine I've seen. You have to start it with a parrafin blowlamp in the morning and it hasn't got a starter. You start it by hand!”

I'd heard about the single cylinder Bolinder semi-diesel. but I'd never seen one before or even until long after that day. It was probably one of those legendary machines.

“Did he tell you how to reverse it?” I asked.

Peter nodded.

“There's this lever. You pull it and the motor goes ‘Bang’ and turns the other way.”

“That's a Bolinder.” I said.

We finally split up in the late afternoon. Our two boats had just crossed the aqueduct at Wolverton, a long low bridge above the railway works and the river valley, and were approaching Fenny Stratford and Bletchley. I wanted to do some shopping so I called my crew back from the working boat at the lock.

Lee steered the working boat out of the lock, with the boatman watching, and did a pierhead jump back at the last moment. They stood on the *outside* and waved until the boat went out of sight and I had tied up to the towpath side. They ran round across the gates and jumped aboard as I shut down the motor.

“What have you got in your hand, Peter?” I asked.

“A windlass.”

“Where did you get it? They're valuable!”

For a moment I was worried that he might have just helped himself.

“They gave it to me.” he said. “Honest. They asked how old I was, and I said my birthday was on the twenty first. The boatman said, that's tomorrow, and gave me it as a birthday present. Is it really valuable?”

“Very!”

Lee and I went and fetched milk and bread from a shop in a parade across the road, and then we set off again.

There's a well known set of three locks built together like a staircase. They are midway between Bletchley and Leighton Buzzard, alongside a Pub on the busy main road. It's always

been a fine summer evenings outing, just to sit there and drink at a table outside and watch the pleasure boat skippers making mistakes. As today was dry and warm and yesterday had been stormy here, too, tonight there were even more people than usual drinking and watching.

I was steering as we approached the locks and Peter was preparing to jump ashore. He saw the crowds around the top gate and a boat coming out.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“I don't think so. I think they're just watching, and hoping something will go wrong.”

They were just watching, and when I found it was the staircase and not just a simple lock, I knew we'd have to be on our guard and not make mistakes. The locks were full for us, and that was a point in our favour.

I stopped the boat inside the first lock, waved Peter to close the gates, and left Lee to run the motor and look after the mooring rope. I went on the bank to see what we should do.

You will remember that we had the top lock full of water and the top gates open. Now, this was not like the locks that we had worked before, I had only seen one in books and my crew had never seen anything like it. You see, the bottom gate of this lock was the top gate of the one below and there was another one the same beyond it. Peter looked at the four pairs of gates with a peculiar look on his face.

“How do we work this thing then?”

Luckily for us, the simplest way to do it was printed on my memory - there are only two conditions for a three lock staircase. The top lock and bottom lock are empty with the middle lock filled, and the opposite with the middle empty and top and bottom filled. Whenever you open paddles on any pair of gates - you open them on the next-but-one gates both up and down from it *at the same time*.

What was wrong here was that we were in the top lock, but all three locks were full! Properly we should have emptied the top lock to be able to open its bottom gates, but the next lock down was already full of water and our water would then overflow into the bottom lock which was also full. The inevitable result was never expected by the gongoozling bystanders, however often they were caught by it. The excess water ended up flowing on to the towpath and giving them wet feet.

We had to get the staircase back to the proper state with alternate empty and full before we could go down.

“Hold on, Peter!”

Another complication. A pleasure boat was coming towards the bottom lock. We would have to think where the boats had to be in the staircase as we worked the gates!

[picture] F F F

[picture] F F E

The *Speedwell* is in the top lock and the top paddles closed. I opened the bottom paddles of the bottom lock to empty it, and ran down to meet the oncoming boat, a narrow cruiser. A young woman, really a girl of about nineteen, was trotting along the towpath with a windlass in her hand.

“Are you coming up?” I asked, but only out of politeness because it was obvious.

The cruiser stopped below the locks as the bottom lock emptied. Soon they could run into the bottom lock and the gates were shut. I opened the top paddles to fill it with the water from the middle

“Okay?” I asked.

The young woman was doing some sort of arithmetic with her fingers. She shook her head, grinned, and sat on the balance beam.

“I think so!

Within a minute the middle lock had emptied into the bottom and the cruiser could run into the middle. Lee had deserted her post and was watching the gates, and the girl from the cruiser was walking up towards her. I could see that Lee was puzzled and the girl was trying to explain it to her.

[picture] F F E

[picture] F E F

I was happy because we were in the right position to start, where I knew what to do.

I dropped my top paddles and waved to Peter. He opened his bottom paddles and at last our boat started to drop down to the middle step as the top lock emptied and the middle filled.

The crowd followed Peter down and watched as he opened one gate to let Lee drive our boat from the top lock into the middle. The steerer of the upcoming boat opened the other and the boats passed between by the open gates.

[picture] F E F

[picture] E F E

What they hadn't noticed was that I had been down to the bottom of the staircase and was letting the water out of the bottom lock. It was soon empty and I closed my paddles and came back as Peter dropped his paddles and shut his gates again. The young woman went past him and Lee on her way to the top lock and gave them both a big grin.

“Don't make any mistakes now.” She said, and laughed as she went on up the path.

“What now?” asked Peter as we went together to the top of the empty bottom lock.

The slightly disappointed audience still waited, wondering as always what was going on. We now had our boat in a full middle lock, a boat in the empty top lock, and an completely empty bottom lock. Peter grinned, looked at the audience and went back across the top of the gate to the outside.

Half the audience had gone back and watched as the young woman started to refill the top lock. The other half watched as we opened our paddles and let the water from the full middle lock run down and drop our boat ready to enter the bottom lock. Once it was level, Lee could drive into the bottom lock.

[picture] E F E

[picture] F E F

We shut the gates as the woman came down from the refilled top lock. I opened the paddles at the bottom of the staircase and Peter went up to the cruiser. He came back after helping the young woman to open the paddles to let the water out of the top lock to fill the middle.

“It's clever.” Peter called out to Lee. “All they have to do now is to empty the top lock, close the gates and paddles behind them, and everything's all right.”

[picture] F E F

[picture] E F E - Really there would be a lot more traffic than just our two boats, so it wouldn't waste so much water!

As we went back down toward our boat, an old man, who was collecting glasses, looked up and grinned.

“Spoilt their fun, you did, by getting them started right! When they went down last week they had a right circus! They flooded the towpath coming down from the top and drained all the water out of the middle. Sold twice as much beer afterwards, we did!”

“Did we do it right?” I asked.

“Looked okay to me” he said. “Not your first time was it?”

I admitted it really was.

“Well. I'd buy you a beer if it was my pub!” he said. “You did it fast, too.”

Our destination for tonight was Linslade, the opposite side of the river to Leighton Buzzard. My mother had an old friend whose husband had a boatyard there, and I had been told to visit her and pass on greetings. We tied up at the yard as the owner was shutting up for the night. I recognised him straight off and introduced myself.

“I remember!” He exclaimed. “I met you, with your mother. But you won't be seeing my wife tonight. She's away until after the weekend.”

We refilled with petrol and water at his yard and cleaned down the boat. He didn't seem to want to go and stayed talking to us. I told him that we had birthdays tomorrow and that we were going shopping in the morning.

“Come across to the house for breakfast.” He invited. “Come about half past seven.”

I admitted we hadn't got a watch or clock. He felt in his inside pocket and took out a girl's watch. He wound it up, compared it with his pocket watch, and put it round Lee's wrist.

“There you are, young lady. You can keep that. You tell them when to get up!”

It was quite a nice watch and he saw me looking at it, suspiciously, and laughed.

“It was left in a hire boat. I phoned the people and they said keep it. They'd bought their kid another on the way home. It's like that when you have money!”

I went across the lane to his house, and he showed me the back doorbell. As he opened the door, he made a suggestion for what we could do the next morning.

I thought it was a good idea.

We had a late supper, and Lee looked at her new watch from time to time.

“First one I ever had.” she whispered as we lay in bed. “Mother said I'd only lose it or break it if I had one.”

“You'll have to be careful on the boat.” I warned. “I bet that's how it got lost before. It's owner put it safe and forgot it.”

“I'm going to put it safe.” she said. “But I won't forget it!”

7

Lee woke me up in the morning. After having so little sleep the night of the storm, I could have slept even later.

“We should be there in ten minutes.” she said. “We won't have time to wash.”

“Don't need to” I said. “Bring your dress and plimsoles, We're going to borrow his bathroom!” I shook Peter awake.

“Happy Birthday, Peter. Bring your plimsoles, and sweater.”

I dug in my rucksack for a clean pair of shorts and a shirt.

The boatyard owner let us in and took us upstairs. He put three big fluffy towels on the floor.

“Breakfast will be ready in thirty minutes” he said. “Bath oil, bath salts, soap, hair dryer. It's all here.”

We each took short hot baths. My hair was no problem at all and Lee had short hair that only needed towelling and combing, but Peter insisted on using the hair dryer. When we went downstairs he was still brushing at his hair trying to get it right.

Lee was dressed in her dress and I had a white open necked shirt with a pair of leather shorts that had I swapped at a scout camp the year before. We both looked and felt clean and tidy.

Peter, when he came down, had only his old red trunks and his sweater. He looked clean, but a bit out of place compared to us.

We enjoyed our breakfast. It was good, there was plenty of it, and we hadn't had to cook it. I offered to wash up and the boatyard owner laughed.

“No washing up to do!” he said, to our surprise. “I got a machine to do that. You go off up the town, and don't forget where I said. They will be waiting for you.”

Our first stop was just down the road and we found the clothes shop that we wanted. They fitted Peter up with a pair of corduroy shorts and a shirt at a price I could afford and we were soon off up the main street.

The cinema was just opening, and I sat through the whole ninety minutes of the childrens matinee with my crew. They enjoyed it, and the ice creams, immensely.

I wasn't quite so sure. I was just starting to get a headache from the shouting and cheering when the serial ended and we escaped into the open air.

Lee whispered in my ear as we passed a second hand clothes shop. I looked in the window and nodded.

“Wait a moment, Peter!” I asked. “Lee want's to buy something.”

Lee and I went inside. The shopkeeper came over to us, and I stood back. Lee told him what she wanted and they went to look.

“Can you lend me the money? Really?”

She showed me the price ticket and I handed over the money. The shopkeeper put her purchase in a paper bag and handed it to her. I got a kiss and a hug and she ran out to her brother. The shopkeeper smiled as he gave me the change.

“Nice young lady, your sister.” he said.

Peter was opening the bag as I came out. He drew out the wide leather belt that we had just bought and put it round his waist.

He looked at me and I shook my head.

“Thanks, Lee!” he said. “Thanks. I love you!”

It was his turn to have a kiss and a hug, and I saw him go a little red before hugging her back. “Lunch.” I said, looking for the restaurant that we were to go to.

We found the place on the way back toward the canal. A little Italian restaurant on the corner. They were expecting us, and set us at a table in the window. For the second time that day we ate well, without having to cook or wash up. Both my crew chose Lasagne and, although Lee burnt her tongue, they both decided that they liked Italian food. I like it anyway, and the Mama kept coming up from her cash desk and seeing if we were all right.

As we finished, and the restaurant was quite busy by now, the cook and the waiter came out of the kitchen and she came up with some glasses on a tray.

She handed us one each, and they took one each and sang ‘Happy birthday to you’ to us. We all sipped the drink, it was a very pleasant tasting sweet wine, and Peter and I thanked them.

We thanked them again when we went to leave. They wouldn't let me pay!

“When he phoned, he said it was his birthday present to you.” She said.

When we got back to the yard, the owner was away. There was a lady in the office and she gave us a message.

“He said you weren't to pay anything and you don't owe him anything.” She told us.

+ + +

Back in our working clothes, we spent the evening going up the last eleven locks to Marsworth Junction. We reached the junction at about nine, and I left my crew in charge and went up to the telephone on the road above.

I opened my diary and found the twins phone number in Aylesbury, and called them. They were pleased to hear that I was doing so well.

“See you some time after dinner tomorrow!” They said, and I hung up the phone.

My diary fell open at another page, and I saw the address that Lee had given to the americans. I called Directory and got the Cambridge number.

“Do you have two children in Wolverhampton?” I asked the man who answered.

“Yes.” he answered. “Everyone is looking for them. Do you know where they've gone?”

I explained, and said that I didn't think they should try and carry on to Cambridge on their own.

“No problem. We'll be down with you in the morning.” He said. “where should we meet you?”

I explained Marsworth, and that we would be leaving to go down the hill in the morning. Although its not quite five miles, there are sixteen locks and I reckoned it would take us a good four and a half hours.

“If we're not with you by half past nine, we'll see you in Aylesbury then” he said. “Oh! I'll call their mother and police and tell them it's been a mistake, they're with you. There'll be no problems I promise you. And thank you for phoning.”

I didn't say a word to my crew when I went back to the boat.

8

We packed everything and tidied up, starting as soon as we had finished our breakfast. The dirty sheets and towels went into a shopping bag and my crew packed their things into the carrier bags that they had from the clothes shops.

The weather was going to be warm again and we were still dressed in trunks, Lee in her bikini, and had folded our 'best' clothes on our luggage ready to change. Peter had his leather belt round his waist and had tucked his windlass into the back as the working boatmen did.

I put my shorts on over my trunks and joined them on deck. I'd already told them that I expected visitors and I hoped that their parents weren't going to send the police to frighten them. Then I decided that their father was all right, if the police were coming they'd have been here already. As we waited on and on I wondered if a stranger would find us on the cut, although the pub on the road above was pretty well known.

Lee looked at her watch that was buckled to the handle of the ticket drawer.

"Twenty past nine?" she said. "Are your twins coming?"

"Doesn't look like it" I said. "You get us ready to go at half past, and I'll run up to the road and look."

As I got to the road, a taxi drew up and a man and a woman got out. I don't know what I was expecting after talking to him on the phone, but these two looked like they might be the couple I was expecting. To my surprise they were dressed as if they were on holiday.

The first out of the car was a man in his thirties, wearing short khaki shorts and a striped rugby football shirt. I knew instantly that he was the father of the children because I could see the similarity to Lee's face in his.

He took a rucksack from the woman who was getting out. She was a blonde, wearing tight blue shorts and a summer top. He waved to me and handed money to the taxi driver.

"Sorry!" he said, coming over. "We parked the car in Aylesbury and then couldn't find a taxi."

We shook hands and he introduced me to his young wife.

"I'm Bob." he said. "This is Marianne and you are the kids new friend?"

I liked them both from the start and as the taxi drove off I led the way to the bridge and the gate that led to the towpath.

As we walked along the canal bank toward the *Speedwell* he asked about his children, whether they had behaved themselves and what I thought of them. I reassured him that they were all right, and a first rate crew.

"I just wish that Lee was more like a daughter" he said. "I sometimes think she's more boy than Peter is."

Marianne was in front.

"Is that the boat?" she asked.

There was no sign of Peter, who was inside getting the motor ready, but we could see a little girl in a blue bikini, cleaning the cabin sides with water and the long handled mop. Lee looked like any other little girl on a summer holiday morning.

She didn't appear to have seen us.

Her father ran down and jumped aboard the boat. We heard a shriek of delight from Lee as she threw her arms around his neck and started to kiss him.

Peter heard the noise and came up from the motor cabin and he too went to his father. I glanced at Marianne.

“We aren't needed for a minute.” she said, and we waited on the bank.

Bob sat Lee on the cabin top and looked at his daughter.

“I don't beleive it.”

He looked around at us.

“Come and meet my children.” he called.

Peter took Marianne's hand and helped her aboard.

“Thanks” she said.

“This is Peter.” said Bob, and reached into his pocket. He passed a little packet in coloured paper to his wife. She put it into Peter's hand and kissed him.

“Happy birthday” she said. “I bought this for you, but your Dad is the only one with a pocket.”

Peter didn't seem to mind being kissed, this time, and opened the packet. It was a real swiss army knife with many blades. His face showed that he liked it very much.

“You thank Marianne.” said Bob. “She thought it was the right thing for a boy.”

“It is!” said Peter, reaching up and kissing her. “Just right. Thank you very much indeed.”

Bob handed him a thick envelope.

“I'm sorry. Peter.” He didn't sound serious as Peter started to rip the envelope. “I thought you'd prefer this.”

Peter took out a leather wallet, opened it, and saw two ten shilling notes inside.

“It's just right, Dad. Thanks!”

“This little lady is Elizabeth” said her father, taking her hand and Mariannes in his two hands and drawing them together. “She seems to have changed since I saw her last, a year ago. Maybe she's not as quiet as she used to be, either. She never used to speak to people!”

Lee proved his point by grinning broadly at her and starting the conversation.

“Hello, Marianne!” She said. “Do you like boats?”

“I don't know yet.” Was the answer. “Are you going to teach me?”

“If you like. I like you!” said Lee.

“I like you too. Do I call you Elizabeth? Or Lee? I think I prefer Lee.”

“I like Lee best, too.”

I coughed.

“If you people don't mind, we have to take this boat down to Aylesbury. We're expected. If you want to sit and get to know each other, perhaps you'd like to go down there in the passenger seats and I'll get us moving.”

“It's our last morning!” said Lee. “I'm not going to miss anything!”

Bob looked at her in surprise and glanced at me and Marianne.

“I'll start the motor.” said Peter, jumping down into the cabin and pushing his presents into his bag. “Give me a minute!”

I suggested that, if our passengers didn't want to go to the seats, they wouldn't get in the way if they sat on the roof with their legs in the cabin doorway. They jumped up as Peter went along the side and down into the motor cabin. Lee jumped ashore and untied the front rope as I untied the back rope.

I held my rope as she jumped aboard and gave the boat a good push as she stood at the tiller and reached for the motor controls.

“I'll put the kettle on for a pot of tea” I decided to get out of the way as the motor started to push the boat along. I stepped on board and went inside.

The Aylesbury locks are narrow locks like the Birmingham ones. They were all full as we started down the flight so all the top gates were open as we approached and nobody had to go ahead to get them ready for us. Our visitors sat and watched as Lee steered in and Peter closed and opened paddles. It all looked easy.

Marianne watched what Peter was doing and as we reached the next lock she put her head into the cabin and asked me if I had another windlass. I gave her mine and she jumped ashore.

I heard her ask Peter to show her what to do.

“Come on then” he said. “You copy me. Do on the towpath side what I do on my side.”

When I came up to say that tea was ready, Bob was steering out of the lock and Lee was telling him what to do. She stood at the corner of the cabin and held the mooring rope as we went into the lock below.

“Reverse gear. Wait. Motor slow. Out of gear!” she commanded, and dropped the mooring rope over the bollard. Peter and Marianne shut the top gate and came back after opening the bottom paddles.

“Tea's ready!” I said. “You coming aboard for yours?”

“I'll drink mine here” said Peter, taking the mug of sweet milky tea.

“I'll come down” said Marianne, jumping down to the counter.

“Then, if you don't mind, I'll have mine with my son?” asked Bob.

He climbed up to the cabin roof and jumped up to the lock side. I passed up his tea.

+ + +

“The next lock is closed” called Lee, looking down to where I was putting the mugs away after washing up. I picked up the spare windlass and went up. Marianne was steering and Lee directed her to steer close alongside the bank. I jumped ashore and ran to where Bob and Peter were filling the lock.

“How come they are suddenly empty?” asked Bob.

“Two boats passed, here.” answered Peter. “One going up, one going down. Now there's one in front going our way.”

I left the boat to my crew and visitors and went on to fill the next locks. There is a rigid rule that you don't fill or empty the lock ahead until you are sure that there isn't a boat coming. It wastes water if you don't. I was always in sight of our boat and I saw Bob and Peter running across the gates so I knew it was all right.

Several locks further down, there was another pleasure boat coming towards us. I waved my crew to stop and waited for the boat to come up. I did all the work to lock it up, and Peter and Bob arrived as I waited to be able to open the gate. Bob had thrown his shirt aboard and looked hot and sweaty.

“If you're making another cup of tea” he said. “There's a large packet of chocolate biscuits melting in my bag.”

The pleasure boat went out and our boat came in. Marianne had been in the cabin and changed and now she too was wearing a blue bikini, so they now looked liked mother and daughter. She was steering and Lee was hanging over the side with the mooring rope.

I jumped aboard.

“Your Dad says he'd like another cup of tea.” I told Lee.

“And there's a packet of biscuits somewhere.” called Marianne as I went inside.

“In his bag, so keep your fingers crossed that they haven't melted!”

By the time we arrived in the Aylesbury Basin my crew and our visitors were a team. Bob and Marianne had tried steering and had worked the locks. I had hot water and soap ready and invited them to go down and clean up whilst we tied up the boat and secured everything.

The twins arrived with an older man, I guessed their father, as I came up from the cabin after changing. I jumped ashore and introduced them to Bob and Marianne.

“These are the parents of my crew” I said. “And these are my crew” I added, as the children came up from the cabin after changing and jumped on to the wharf.

The twins shook hands with each of them.

Bob was looking at Lee, in her summer dress, as if he'd never seen her before.

“I bet your mother never dressed you in that?” He asked.

Marianne took Lee's hand.

“It doesn't matter who dressed her. She looks just right.” She said, winking at the girl.

Peter finished threading his new belt through the loops on his shorts, and tucked his personal windlass in the back. He looked up at his father.

“Are you going to send us back to mother?” He asked.

Bob shook his head.

“The lawyers think you can stay with me, for now. If Marianne will have you!”

Marianne hugged Lee and reached out to Peter.

“Of course they can stay!” she said.

The twins and I sorted out the money. After the price of the petrol I'd bought and what they thought food would cost there was some money left for me.

We collected our luggage from the boat and took it to Bob's car, he had offered to put me on the train so I was going to be leaving too.

The four of us went to a café for lunch. It was a long happy meal and Lee did her fair share of the story telling, too.

Several times I saw the look on Bob's face, and I knew he was proud of them.

It all ended at last, and they saw me off at the station as I set off to visit my mother for the rest of the holiday. What a difference it was going to be!

+ + +

We exchanged Christmas cards that year, and I sent a birthday card to Peter next summer. That day I got a picture postcard of Llangollen from him with birthday greetings, and a note to say that they were on holiday with a boat from Market Drayton and it was fun.

“We haven't forgotten what you taught us.” Said an extra line in Peter's writing.

They had all signed it.

That was the last I heard from them. I sent a card that Christmas, but I didn't get one from them. I moved and I guess they moved too, because I moved to live in Cambridge later and the people next door to where they had lived said that the couple with two children had moved 'down south'.

“A real nice family they were. A little baby girl and delightful older girl and her brother.” they told me. “We liked them very much.”