

## Chapter 1

### FIRST DAY ON THE LAKE

The early June sun was hot and the cool clear water of the little lake looked inviting to tall thin ten year old Alan and to Sally, his still rather chunky eight year old sister. They walked slowly down the green meadow from the old thatched cottage above the sunken lane. The two fair haired children, lion coloured hair their father had called it, had already explored both ways along the shadowy lane with its high banks covered by grass and flowers that were starting to dry out in the hot sun. They had looked into the cobwebby summerhouse beside the cottage and through the rotting boarding into the over full garden shed, and last of all they had searched the orchard for apples without success! Now they were on their way down the long sloping buttercup dotted meadow to the inviting waterside.

The two children were living in the country for the very first time and were finding everything new and very different to the streets and parks around the flat where they had lived in the north of London. They and their quite young mother had just moved into the pretty little house, after arriving in the big Pickford's removals van from the city yesterday afternoon. The heavy work was done the same day by the three cheerful men, but the little family had finished with unpacking so late last night that they had no time to see anything outside.

It was almost an hour since mother had sent them out to play because she wanted some time alone to tidy up after the unpacking. So at last they could explore on their own, and their hot and dusty exploring had led them, finally but inevitably, down to the lake.

"It's so hot, I'm going to get into the water, just to cool down," Alan announced, sitting down on the grass at the top of the crumbling sandy bank and undoing his shoelaces.

"I wish I could paddle too," Sally complained, squatting down on the bank edge and looking down into the water. "I don't think I've ever been so hot, ever."

Alan was taking off his shoes and socks and looked at her as he stuffed the socks into his shoes. She was wearing her old green check school dress with sandals on her feet and looked as hot and sweaty as he felt.

"Perhaps if you take your dress off? Nobody will say you mustn't," He suggested. "It doesn't look too deep so you'll be quite safe."

He took off the grey school shorts that he was wearing over an old pair of blue hand knitted swimming trunks, laid them carefully over his shoes, added his grey shirt to the pile and slid down the bank into the water.

Two minutes later they were both splashing around in the shallow lakeside water. Sally had taken Alan's suggestion and had joined him, and she was glad that she had done so. She started to splash her brother with showers of water from her cupped hands, so that he stepped backwards into the gradually deepening water until he was far enough away that he could get a good aim at her. He splashed back, laughing. She closed her eyes against the cold water and splashed harder, walking towards him and giggling happily.

Alan stepped back too and splashed harder until, suddenly, he found that the bottom was dropping away steeply beneath him. His feet slipped on a muddy edge and as he tried to jump in toward the bank, he lost his balance completely, splashing forward on to his face. Somehow, luckily, he had time to clamp his mouth shut to avoid taking a mouthful of water as he sank below the surface.

Sally screamed as he disappeared, and then stood silently, mouth wide open, as he came up and splashed about, a long way out of her reach.

But somehow Alan's splashing held his head out of water, and he took a quick gasp of air before he went under again. He waved his arms about and moved toward Sally's legs that he could see through the dusty beams of sunlight in front of him. She grabbed his hands and pulled.

"Oooh-ow!" He exclaimed, standing up in front of her. "That was a surprise!"

"You were swimming" Grumbled Sally. "You said we could just paddle."

Alan looked at his sister in amazement, his heart was still beating so very fast. He thought for a moment. Perhaps he had been swimming? After all, he had been under the water and had come back up.

"Show me what you did," She commanded.

"Can't!" Said Alan, rather sharply because he wasn't quite sure what it was that he had done.

"That's not fair" She complained. "You can do everything. Nobody ever let's me try."

"Try then." Suggested Alan, moving closer to the bank. "Lay down on your back and I'll hold you up".

After Sally had played swimming for a minute or two, laying on her back with Alan's hand behind her head at first, she said it was enough and tried to stand up. But that was hard to do, until she pushed water backwards by sweeping both her hands out to her sides. That had a far different result to what she had expected. It was just as it was when she learnt to ride a bicycle last year. At one moment she was unsure what she was doing, at the next she had everything under control.

She had folded up her knees, pushed water back somehow with her open hands, and found that it was easy after all to get her legs down.

Alan had let go of his sister as she moved away on her own and he watched her stand up and turn round. She pushed her hair out of her face.

"Hold me again," Ordered Sally, squatting down and leaning backwards.

Alan put his hands under her shoulders as her legs floated up. She leant even further back until water came up over her hair to her forehead, just as she did in the bath at home. It had always felt like swimming. She started to wave her arms under water, rather as she had done to stand up.

"Let go!" She whispered.

He did, and she floated off on her own. Alan stood aside and watched as she moved her arms under water and pushed water toward her feet. She had moved head first, nearly three feet past him, before she doubled up and struck out with her arms as before.

She stood up and grinned.

"I did it, too! It's your turn again."

Alan tried to imitate her. Without someone to support him it was nowhere as easy as it had been for his sister, but he had no intention of being beaten by an eight year old, and by his little sister at that! The water felt funny as it ran into his ears and into his hair and it made him shiver.

Now he felt his legs coming up as he leant back. He kicked out with his legs, and that made him move backwards quite fast. He started to push water down and away towards his feet, using both hands, and then gave another kick. After the third kick he stood up and looked back at Sally standing more than six feet away.

"Did I swim that far?" He asked in amazement.

"Yes!" Answered Sally, trying again. "Now me!"

Half an hour later they had tired arms, but happy hearts. Each had managed to swim several yards along beside the bank and they wanted to do more, but they needed a rest before their next try. Alan helped his sister to climb up the crumbly bank to the grass, and they ran back to their clothes, sat side by side on the grass and looked out across the water.

Their lake was long and thin, not much more than a very wide river really, and just where their meadow ran down to the water it was made thinner by an overgrown island near the other bank. Alan said that he knew that it was an island because, from the dormer window of his bedroom in the back of the thatched roof, he had seen a narrow line of silver behind it and behind that a stretch of uncut grass and a line of bushy trees. From down here, however hard they looked, the trees were all that they could see behind the bushes of the island.

“If we could swim out to the island, we could go and see what was behind it?” Sally suggested.

“We'll need to practise a lot before we can do that,” Answered Alan, leaning on one elbow and looking at her. “But I want to explore it. Shall we practice again, now?”

Alan looked up as he heard a voice calling somewhere up behind them.

“Oh! It's Mother! I think we should have been home ages ago. Come on Sal! Just put your dress on and run!”

Mother was waiting at the back gate as they ran up, barefoot and with Alan carrying his clothes and both pairs of shoes in a bundle. She waved and went indoors. Alan went through the open french window into the living room, dumped his clothes on the bottom of the stairs and went into the kitchen where mother was serving up dinner.

“Well done, Kids.” She praised, putting plates on to the table. “That was good timing. Had a nice morning?”

Alan nodded, and sat down as his sister came in pushing her fingers through her hair. Mother kissed her and they sat down too.

It was Sally's turn to say Grace, and as soon as she had finished they ate hungrily. Mother looked in surprise at their empty plates.

“My! The country air is doing you good already. You didn't eat like this in London. What are you going to do this afternoon?”

Sally looked at her mother.

“Have you got jobs for us then?”

Her mother shook her head.

“You've done enough, with all that packing and moving and unpacking again. No! You can have a little holiday today. I have a lot more to do on my own.”

After dinner the children went upstairs and rummaged around in the big brown cardboard boxes that were filled with the books and toys that they had brought from London. During dinner, Sally had remembered seeing a little book about swimming, one that had lots of pictures in it. They went through the boxes of books several times before they found it. It was sandwiched between two Christmas annuals and because it was very thin, and it was wide not tall like an ordinary book, they had missed it the first times.

They packed the box again and took the book into Sally's bedroom.

“Look and see what we have to learn next,” Sally told her brother, starting to turn out drawers. As Alan looked at the pictures Sally was taking piles of clothes out of her drawers, looking through them and stuffing them back less tidily than before.

She sighed.

“Have you seen my old red shorts?” She asked. “I had them for school when I was littler?”

Alan nodded.

“In mother’s duster bag, with all the other old rags.” He said, looking at her back as she dashed out and ran downstairs.

Two minutes later she was back, waving red material with great glee. She pulled off her still damp knickers and started to wriggle in to the shorts. Alan laughed.

“You'll never get in there.” He said.

Alan was wrong. The shorts were very small and tight now but they were quite stretchy and she could, and did, manage to get in to them. More important she could still wriggle and bend with them on. She folded her dress and put it on the chair.

“Now I'm dressed for swimming just like you. Show me what to do.”

They lay side by side with their chins supported on their hands and looked at the book, page by page, until they had read it from cover to cover. Then they read it again.

Sally opened it at a page showing children practising on land and looked carefully. She laid on the bed and tried the arm and leg movements as best she could. Alan picked up the book and commented when he thought she was going wrong.

“I'm going down to the village on the bus,” Called mother from the hallway. “Be good”.

“We're going down the meadow” Shouted Sally, running to the top of the stairs. “See you at teatime!”

“Do you really want to try now?” Asked Alan, waiting whilst Sally looked for something else in their mother's room.

“Of course!” She answered, sounding very confident. “We've just read it, now we can do it.”

She held out a rubber band that had been around a roll of mother’s knitting patterns.

“Here! Make me a ponytail. Then my hair won't get in the way.”

Swimming was not much easier at first, when they got into the water that afternoon, even though they had brought the book with them and had read the chapter on back stroke again.

They both seemed to sink under the water whenever they tried a stroke, and Alan was about ready to give up. That was until his sister accidentally hit on the secret.

Like Alan, Sally had already managed to float on her back and, so long as she didn't move her arms and legs, she had no trouble in staying up. But every time she tried the strokes they had read in the book her mouth and nose went under water. All the same, she wasn't going to give up now and was trying to do back stroke again, not the windmill sort from the book but the sort that is rather like breast stroke but the wrong way up.

She was pretending to be tired, or maybe she really was a little tired, and as she moved her arms and legs very slowly she realised that she was moving in the water. Only, now she was moving much faster than before, and not sinking. She suppressed an urge to jump up and shout, and took several more slow strokes.

“You've got it!” Exclaimed Alan. “What did you do?”

“Nothing. Just what I did before. Not so quick, though.”

“Slowly?” Alan asked, and tried it too.

He still found it difficult to control the urge to thrash his arms about, but was rewarded when it worked for him too.

After two or three successful strokes on his back, Alan stood up, bent forward and launched himself on his front. As he brought his arms from in front of his head, pulling them round and down to his side, he felt himself moving. He automatically kicked back with his legs, just at the moment when he pushed his arms forward again.

“That looked like breast stroke,” Sally commented as he stood up in front of her. “I think that book is good!”

They climbed out after that, and dried in the sun. Mother was very surprised to see them coming up the meadow when she came back. The children were chattering and didn't see her. She stood watching and smiling.

They jumped as she spoke.

“You look very summery.” She said. “Have you been far?”

Sally looked at Alan and frowned.

“Only just outside the meadow, Mummy.”

“Good. But don't go out on the road with bare feet, will you?”

Both children nodded agreement and followed Mother indoors to help make tea.

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Despite having their book, swimming wasn't turning out to be as easy as Sally had said it would be. Alan was quite used to his sister having a new idea and then losing interest after a few days. As he had no one else to play with here, he was happy to join in the new game at first. Then, as Sally didn't give up and got even more enthusiastic, it started to be a challenge to him. Especially a challenge as his sister was still getting along much better than he was!

Several times this week, Alan had dearly wished that he had someone big enough to help him, just to help him in the way that he was helping her would be all he needed. It was easy for Sally because he could tell her when something looked wrong. When he was attempting something, he had to try and feel for himself whether he was doing it right or was completely wrong.

Sally occasionally said “That's wrong,” usually when he thought he was doing all right, but that was all the help she gave him.

At least they were getting to swim further and further at each day's practice.

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“That's as far along the bank as it is out to the island!” Sally was standing up in shoulder deep water near their boundary hedge and was looking around with her hand shading her eyes.

Alan, who had been swimming beside her, stood up and looked back. They had been practising for nearly ten days, every morning without missing even once, and often in the afternoon or evening too. This morning they had done breast stroke from one boundary of their meadow to the other and then back again without stopping even once.

“Let's try going to the island, now?” She suggested.

Alan was tempted, but he thought for a moment and shook his head.

“No!” He was emphatic. “We'd have to swim it twice. There and back. And we're a bit tired already. Let's go home for lunch!”

Mother was used by now to her children having wet hair. She had been worried about bathing at first, but the post lady had told her about the people who lived in the cottage before the children's grandparents had bought it. They and their children had bathed from the meadow bank for years.

“It's shallow down there,” She had said when mother saw her one day at the gate. “They'll take no harm.”

So mother had tried not to worry too much and had gone on with her housekeeping.

Today, lunch was ready and the children were late, so she went down to find them and met them coming up the field.

“I was coming to look for you. Dinner's been ready for ages. I want you to do some jobs for me in the garden this afternoon.”

Dinner was very cheerful today. Neither Alan nor Sally said what they had done, or what they were planning, somehow knowing that it might not be quite what an adult wanted to hear!

“We were just bathing,” Sally answered, when her mother asked, and that was that, although mother did say again that they should be careful and not go too far from the edge.

Then they all talked about the garden, and the right flowers and vegetables it should grow, until long after they had eaten their ice cream. That was time for Mother to set them to washing up and they carried the plates out to the tiny kitchen.

“Finished?” Asked Mother, as Sally passed the last dish for Alan to dry. He wiped and nodded as he put it in its place on the big black dresser.

“All done. What's now?”

“Want to mow the lawn?” Mother suggested.

So there was no swimming before tea, and none after either, because mother had found some deck chairs and a folding table in a corner of the garden shed. Alan fetched a bowl of warm water and Sally went to get the scrubbing brush from the kitchen so they could clean the mould and mud off the canvas and wood of the chairs. Mother used bleach and another scrubber on the table.

“We'll be able to sit out here and eat our meals in the sun, won't we!” Said Mother.

Sally wanted to try sitting in `her' deck chair, one with red and white striped canvas that she said she liked, and it was getting late before it was dry enough. As they stacked them away in the empty summerhouse, mother looked into the kitchen window and saw the clock.

“Well done little people. Lets have cocoa with all milk before we go to bed shall we?”

## Chapter 2

### THE ISLAND

Mother put the morning kettle on the electric cooker and looked out of the window. It was just eight o'clock, and it was going to be another fine day. She always enjoyed the first hour of a fine morning like this, luxuriating in the peace and quiet that reigned in the time before the children got up, and she was making the best of it.

She was just going to pour the boiling water on to the leaves in the ready warmed teapot when both children came into the kitchen. She smiled at them, both barefoot and dressed as was usual now with Alan in bathing trunks and Sally in her shorts. She finished pouring, put the lid on the pot and sat down to watch them as they fetched corn flakes and milk and started to eat.

She sighed.

It was hard on the children she thought, in fact it was hard on them all. They had come here after her divorced husband, their father, had died in an air crash in South America. All their money had stopped overnight and their home had been put up for sale. It was just luck that her own father and mother had gone to live in Spain and that this cottage was up for sale at the time. Grandfather had said straight off that they should move in rent free until someone bought it.

"It's not the sort of place that people want to buy, so it will be empty for ages. You go there and enjoy the peace and quiet!"

It was peaceful and relaxing all right, but life wasn't going to be easy with the little money she would have coming in.

Sally saw her mother's look, and came over and kissed her.

"Thank you" Said Sally.

Her mother hugged her.

"Have a good day, Kids," She said "I've got to get our money at the post office. I'll come down and see you when I get back."

Ten minutes later, after rinsing the breakfast dishes and stacking them on the draining board, the children came out too as mother went out to the front gate to get the bus. They both kissed her before she climbed into the back of the bus. She waved, they waved, and then ran off around the cottage and down the meadow.

"Today!" Called Sally to her brother in front of her.

"You think we can?" He called back, turning and running backwards so he could see her.

"Course" She said.

They ran to the edge of the lake and stood looking out at *their* island. It didn't look so close this morning, and they both felt a tingle of excitement, or maybe fear?

Sally looked once at her brother, and then jumped as far out into the water as she could, She started a splashy breast stroke, out toward the island.

Alan waited a little longer before following her. He tried crawl stroke to try and catch up, because he thought it would be faster, although it was only the second time that he had attempted it. He got water in his mouth a couple of times, spat it out and finally changed back to breast stroke.

Sally was only just ahead of him, bobbing up and down as she pulled with her arms. He kept going and came up alongside. She looked sideways at him.

"What if - we can't - do it?" She asked between strokes.

He looked forward to the island, still fifty feet away, rolled on to his back and looked back over his feet to the meadow.

“We can. We're - over half way - already. Nearer to go on - than go back! Do back – stroke if you – feel tired.”

Sally was getting a bit worried about getting there as they approached the island at last. She was getting out of breath and her arms felt tired, just as they did when they first started learning.

Alan was in trouble too but he was seconds ahead to reach the wooden piles that protected the sandy bank of the island. They had got that far without resting on their backs. He let his feet drop down, feeling for the bottom with his toes.

He didn't find it! On the verge of panic he quickly kicked his legs and pushed himself back up on to his back. He started swimming backstroke so he could see the bank.

As he swam along beside it, Alan saw the root of a tree that stuck out from above the water, so he grabbed hold of it with a surge of relief and looked round for Sally. She was splashing along just out of reach, so he held out his hand and waited until she had grabbed it.

He towed her in beside him. She took hold of his tree root too and looked over to where the dormer windowed roof of their cottage was just visible across the meadow.

“What a long way!” She said, after the minute it took to get her breath back.

“We did it though.” Answered Alan, happily.

He let go of the root, and remembered again that there was still no bottom below his feet. He kicked up and grabbed the root higher up. By wriggling his legs on to the underwater part of the root he got a foothold and hauled himself up. Sally held up her free hand, which he grabbed and pulled her up beside him.

They had done it! The first step of their adventures. They stood on their island at last.

As Alan had said, it was an island, but only a small piece of land, perhaps thirty yards long and about half that wide. Two or three stumpy trees on their side of the island and a few bushes round a patch of sandy grass were the only growing things.

They walked across and stood at the other side of the island, looking across at the other shore little more than forty feet away. It was more built up than on their side, with properly bricked edges. That other bank looked as though it was an overgrown garden, right down to the water's edge. Behind its neglected grass there was a low concrete wall. One end of the wall held up a small green tiled sun roof and at the other end an uneven red brick path wound up and round and led off over a strip of meadow grass to disappear into the trees.

That was not all because, to their surprise and pleasure, there was something they hadn't guessed. The little garden was a bathing place! In front of the grass there were bricks a few inches above the water with a rusty metal ladder sticking up in the middle, and there was a real diving board sticking out from the bank at the side of the grass near the red path.

“We can learn to dive, now!” Sally exclaimed, pointing to the board.

“It's not ours, you know.” Warned Alan.

“No one uses it, I bet.” Said Sally, before jumping in and swimming even more splashily than ever across to the ladder. “Look how long the grass is!”

She climbed up and waved across to her brother on the island before running off up the path. Alan watched her out of sight and then, remembering that he was supposed to be in charge, jumped into the water and followed her across.

As Alan came up the little ladder, his sister came running back.

“Told you!” She said. “There’s a big overgrown garden, and a great big empty house with closed up shutters on all its windows. We can swim here as often as we like. It’s ours!”

A whole hour later, just as they had started the swim back from the island to their meadow, they heard a shout. They both looked up from their breast stroke to see mother standing right on the edge on the other bank, but neither felt safe enough to wave and they kept swimming. Mother stood motionless, looking worried, until both children had their feet on the sandy bottom and were looking up at her.

She let out her breath. “Phwooh!”

“How?” She asked. “Who? Where - did you two learn to swim?”

She pulled Sally up from the water and hugged her.

“I suppose it was your idea?” She accused Alan, who was just climbing up the bank.

He went red but Mother was looking down at Sally who was looking up and shaking her head violently.

“No?” Mother asked. “Not this time?”

“No!” Said Sally, sounding very proud. “We read it all in our swimming book. Then I made him teach me.”

Mother looked at her son, and hugged him too.

“I suppose I’ll have to forgive you, then. The ladies in the village shop said you shouldn’t really bathe alone until you could swim, but I don’t have to forbid you now, do I! I’ve seen that you *can* swim, and all that way too! Thank goodness I didn’t know what you were doing, I’d never have been able to rescue you if you’d got into trouble, you know. You’ll have to teach me to swim one day.”

She turned round and started to lead them off toward the cottage.

“I suppose we’d better have a celebration lunch. I wonder why I got your favourite meat pies from the butcher today?”

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It started to rain that afternoon, and there was no more swimming for the rest of the day. They played indoors until it was bedtime and when they got up in the morning it was still pouring down as if it would never stop.

Alan had woken up several times in the early hours to see rain running down the window pane and dozed off again. At last he got up and came down from his little room in the attic and stood at the bottom of Sally’s bed, looking at the raindrops splashing on the little leaded panes of her window.

Sally looked at him and wriggled back down under the bedclothes.

“Why did it have to rain?” She asked. “We could have explored. Now we can’t do anything.”

“You can write to Granddad after breakfast,” Suggested Mother, coming in. “I thought you were going to sleep all day. I finished my breakfast ages ago. Come down and have yours.”

They both wrote letters to their grandfather in Spain, telling him how they liked his cottage, and that they had learnt to swim. Sally drew a picture of the cottage especially for him, and another of them on the island for their grandmother, and put them in the envelope with their letters.

Mother found some little jobs for them to do around the house all morning while she wrote more letters and, in the afternoon, they played a long game of Monopoly with mother before going out to the letter box down the road. They came in and shook their raincoats in the porch.

“Maybe tomorrow” Said mother reassuringly, looking past them at the pouring rain outside.  
“Don't worry, It won't go on all summer!”

### Chapter 3

## SHOPPING AND DIVING

Alan and Sally were already in the kitchen when mother came downstairs next morning, still in her dressing gown. They had certainly been busy. She looked at the kettle starting to boil, saw the table laid ready for breakfast with the cereal packet spoons and bowls, but she couldn't miss the unhappy faces.

"It's *still* raining!" Sally complained. "It's not fair! We can't even go swimming without getting wet."

Alan and her mother both burst out laughing and Sally looked at their faces, not getting the joke.

"We'd get wet anyway, in the water," said Alan, after a minute, and then he paused. "Mother?"

Mother looked at them.

"Go and get ready then, just a short swim, and we'll have breakfast when we come back. Wait for me though!"

She switched off the kettle and followed the children upstairs.

Mother came down, dressed in a pair of shorts and a blouse, and threw their two biggest bath towels across the back of her chair. The children were already outside the door as she picked up her red umbrella and came outside, putting it up.

She made a cold noise as Alan and Sally ran ahead, jumped into the water and started swimming out toward the island. She stood on the bank and watched.

Alan expected Sally to stop, but she touched their tree root and turned straight round to swim back, so he had to stretch himself to catch up with her. She even beat him to the home bank by quite a long distance and was standing knee deep in the water, looking at her mother when Alan arrived.

"I beat him," Sally announced, gleefully.

Alan stood up next to her.

"She cheated," He complained.

Mother laughed.

"It was a tie, really, Sally." She said. "Alan gave you a start and you got here first. Now, run in and dry yourselves, and we'll have something warm to drink."

Mother took their bathing things as they wrapped themselves in the warm towels, and put the wet trunks and shorts into the washing machine. As soon as the kettle boiled, she made cocoa and they sat eating sugared cornflakes and sipping their drinks while toast browned under the grill.

"Well done, both of you. How would you like to come into town on the bus today?"

Both children nodded enthusiastically.

Sally whispered conspiratorially into her brother's ear.

"Yes please. Can we go into a book shop?" He asked.

"Of course," Said mother.

"And what are you going to wear to go out?" She asked.

Both children looked at her as she buttered toast and put it on their plates. She asked the question again as they started to spoon strawberry jam from the jar.

“I'm not taking you looking untidy, but you don't want to wear Sunday best or school uniforms do you?”

She paused.

They looked at each other, and at mother, waiting for her to tell them.

“Oh! I know!” She said. “We've got just the things upstairs.”

They ran out in time to catch the bus as it came round the corner. Mother had found some clean and tidy play clothes for them, the new blue sports shorts and white aertex shirts that she had bought for the next term at the school, the one that they wouldn't be going to now. She had changed too, into slacks, because she said shorts were right for sunny days at home but she needed to be a bit more formal to go out. They, all three, put on their matching blue rain jackets over the top and were ready.

The red single decker bus was empty except for the elderly white haired conductor and Sally and her mother followed Alan to the front of the bus. They liked to sit there, where they could look out of the window and see what was happening. Mother took the seat behind the driver and gave Alan a pound note.

“Getting quite warm again” Said the conductor, taking the money from Alan's hand and winding out their tickets from his machine in a long curling strip. “You see! It'll stop raining in an hour or so and it'll be sunny again by tea time.”

“Do you think so?” Asked Sally.

“Always like that.” Answered the conductor, sitting on the seat behind them and counting out the change. “The wind's turned. Are you going shopping then?”

Sally nodded.

“We're buying a book.”

They talked to the conductor until the bus drew up in the Market Square where they were to get out. He stood at the back of the bus again and waved as it drove off.

“So it's a book is it?” Asked mother, as they went into the little book shop. “And would it be about swimming?”

“No! Not quite,” Answered Sally, following her brother to the shelf with the sign saying *Sports*. Alan was already looking along the backs of the books.

“Here's the one we've already got,” Said Sally, waving a copy of the swimming picture book that was on a display opposite the shelves. “Oh look! Here's the one we want!”

She had put the swimming book back in its place and then seen the diving book in the same series right next to it. They took it over to the young lady at the cash desk who read its price, tapped it into the cash register and held out her hand for the money. Alan paid for it out of his pocket money and Sally clutched the paper bag tightly as they went out into the street.

“Let's go and find ice creams!” Said Mother.

“Yes, please!” Chorused both children.

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Mother was not surprised the next morning, when the children came down to breakfast wearing their washed and dried bathing clothes. The sun was shining again and it was going to be warm. They washed up quickly after eating just a slice of pork dripping on toast each, and ran out into the meadow.

When their mother looked out half an hour later she could see them moving about the island, and waved. But they were too far way to notice.

She carried on doing her housework and listening to the radio.

“I think you should keep your legs straighter when you come down,” Alan thought aloud as Sally climbed up the ladder for her fifth try at a dive.

She ran round to the springboard again.

Sally had at first done a couple of dives standing on the end of the board, simply bending forward and flopping into the water. The last two times she had done one by walking to the end and gone in head first without stopping. Now she was trying to bounce.

“You want to make the board lift you up” He said as she tried to get it to spring. “Go up with it...”

He was sitting on the brick edge with his feet in the water, and watching. Sally bounced hard and this time she landed right and the rebounding board pushed her up and out. Her legs went right over her head in an almost complete somersault, and she landed on her back with an enormous splash.

“That was too much!” He shouted as she came up. He waited to see if she was hurt, but it seemed that she wasn't and he ran to the board and tried to do better.

He did, almost. He used the bounce to send him up and even came down straight, but he spoilt it by having his legs apart and bending them back at the last moment. It splashed! He heard Sally bouncing as he swam out of the way, and looked back to see that she had got it right this time. She went into the water as straight as an arrow with almost no splash at all. He pulled himself up on to the wall again and waited for her to swim back.

“I'm hungry. Let's go home and see if we can have some elevenses!”



## Chapter 4

### WHO ARE YOU, THEN?

Alan beat Sally to the island next morning, to his pleasure. They dived into the water on the other side at exactly the same moment and he was disappointed to see her ahead again on the ladder at the bathing place. Sally climbed up the metal rungs while her brother held on to the sides and waited. She ran round, out to the end of the diving board, and dived.

It was the most awful belly flop and Alan winced for her.

As she came up and rolled on to her back they heard a voice. A voice they didn't know.

“Bet that hurt!”

Sally forgot the pain and swam to the ladder where Alan was standing frozen on the top step, looking over toward the wall.

The voice came again.

“I've seen some rotten dives in my life, but that one was the tops!”

Alan sprang to his sister's defence.

“She's not bad at all! You do better!” He commanded, climbing up and walking toward the little sun roof where someone was sitting on a chair in the shade.

“Oh!” He said, seeing that it wasn't a chair but an old fashioned hospital wheelchair.

“Sorry. I didn't see. You can't.”

“I can!” Said the boy indignantly.

He stopped and looked shamefaced at Alan and Sally. Alan looked at Sally and back at the boy, hating himself suddenly for saying something hurtful.

“Hello!” Said Sally, running over to the wheelchair and looking at the boy. She could now see that he was a lot older than her brother, with long dark brown hair and a pinched looking face. He seemed to be wearing pyjamas under a tartan dressing gown and had red bedroom slippers on his feet.

“What's your name? I'm Sally, that's my brother Alan. He's eleven next month and I'm nine the month after. Is this your garden? Sorry we didn't ask if we could come in.”

“You can swim here if you like,” Answered the boy, in a quiet voice. “I can't, anymore.”

“What's your name?” Sally repeated her question.

The boy looked at her. She was standing, her legs apart with her hands on her hips, facing him and waiting for an answer.

“Nosy, aren't you?” He asked.

“No! You know *our* names, So, we ought to know yours,” She answered indignantly.

Alan *ssh'd* her, but she wasn't going to stop.

“How can we say *thank you* properly, for letting us swim, if we don't know your name?” She demanded, starting to walk back to the ladder. “Come on Alan, let's go home!”

“Don't go away, please!” Called the boy, sounding so different that they both stopped and looked at him. “I didn't mean it. Come back and talk to me. Hey Boy! Alan? Push me over to the edge so I can watch you.”

He paused.

“Please?”

Alan pushed the chair over the rough grass to the edge and the boy watched as they dived and swam. He pointed out where Alan was going wrong in his breathing and he apologised to Sally when she did her best dive ever, even better than yesterday's last one.

“I was wrong.” He said. “You can dive better than I used to do.”

“Why can't you swim?” Asked Sally who was climbing back up the ladder.

She sat cross legged on the grass and looked up at him.

“Yes!” Asked Alan, stopping on the end of the board and looking at the boy. “Why can't you? There was a man with no legs where we used to live. He used to take his metal legs off and swim with just his arms.”

“Do you think I could still swim, then?” Asked the boy, looking down at his own legs as if he hadn't seen them before.

“Of course.” Said Sally, sounding confident. “If you could swim before?” She added.

The boy laughed, and nodded.

“We used to come here every day in the summer. My mother taught me to swim when I was loads younger than you are.”

Alan managed a really good dive too and swam round to where Sally was waiting. The boy looked at them, Alan in the water holding to the two sides of the ladder and Sally sitting beside it, both looking up at him expectantly.

“Sorry. I'm rude, I should have said. My name's Alistair, Alistair Duncan. I live here with my Dad, except that he's not home much. I'm thirteen, since last month.”

Alan climbed up and shook hands with him.

“Do you go to school here?” Asked Alistair. “I can't go to school now that I can't walk, so I have a tutor to teach me. Or I did have. He went away last week, and we're going to be getting a new one to come to me after the summer holidays.”

“Why can't you walk?” Asked Sally, looking at Alistair's pyjama'd legs.

Alan looked shocked, but Alistair didn't seem to mind.

“Car accident.” He said. “I said you were nosey!”

He stared across the river, looking as if he wasn't seeing anything.

“When I was eleven, and Mum and Dad were taking me to start at boarding school, a motor bike skidded in front of us.” He said, turning and looking at Sally. “Dad swerved to miss him and our car went off the road and rolled over and over.”

He shook his head and went quiet.

“My Dad was okay.” He said after a moment. “Mum died in hospital and I hurt my back so I can't walk anymore. My legs won't work. I can only sit in this chair or lie in bed now.”

“But you might be able to swim?” Prompted Sally.

“Here, help me up. I'm going to try. It might just work. Like you said, my arms are all right!”

Alistair started to take off the long dressing gown he was wearing over his striped pyjamas. Sally pulled off his slippers and Alan helped him to wriggle out of the thin trousers and jacket. Undressed he was very white and extremely thin. He took off the brakes and rolled the wheelchair forward so that the foot board hung over the edge. He pulled the brakes hard on.

Alan and Sally stood one each side of him and took hold of his arms.

“How are you going to get in?” Asked Sally, as Alistair sat thinking, looking at the water with a puzzled expression.

He nodded.

“Let go of me, hang on to the pushing handles so the chair won't tip forward, and you'll see,” And bending forward, he let himself fall with his hands together over his head, straight into the water.

His dive was as good as Sally's best, and he came up swimming a crawl. Alan and Sally both dived in and swam beside him.

“I can do it!” He shouted. “I can still swim”.

He turned at the island and swam back to hold on to the ladder.

“Alan! Sally! I can swim! Really!”

As he turned and swam out toward the island again, Sally turned round at the top of the ladder and called out in surprise.

“I thought you said your legs don't work?”

Alistair rolled on to his back and paddled away from them, looking down at his legs. They were kicking up and down in the back crawl action. He stopped and floated, started again, and swam back to the ladder.

He held tight.

“Alan! Sally! I'm stuck!” He said in a troubled voice.

Alan climbed out of the water near the diving board, with a little bit of help from Sally. They hauled Alistair up the ladder with their combined strength, his arms were strong and he was lighter than they expected so it wasn't too hard. Alan held him balanced until Sally pushed the wheelchair round so that it was sideways on. He fell back into the seat, shaking his head in amazement.

As they dried him off with his dressing gown, he grinned all over his face.

“What happened?” Asked Alan.

“I forgot!” Said Alistair, with a sort of laugh. “I was so surprised that my legs worked, that I tried to climb up the ladder. I think they only work in the water.”

“Don't they work at all?” Asked Sally, all interested again.

Alistair seemed to be used to her indelicate questions now.

“They don't do anything.” He pointed down to his feet on the foot rests. “I tell the toes, wiggle, but they don't. Look!”

He paused, as if for effect.

“Wiggle!” He commanded.

As they looked his right big toe moved slowly up and down. Alan and Sally looked into his face. It was full of amazement. They looked down again as he repeated the experiment on his left foot.

It worked even better than with the other foot! The second toe was working together with the big one.

Half an hour later Alistair had proved, by swimming to the island and back several more times, that it was not a once off and that his legs did really work in the water. He had also found that he could make his left ankle move when he was out of the water, but nothing more.

“Don't worry,” Said Sally as they helped him to dry and to dress again, “Can you swim again tomorrow?”

“Will you come, then?” He asked. “Yes, Please!”

“Of course!” Chorused Alan and Sally together.



## Chapter 5

### WE CAN SWIM TOO!

Mother was busy making a pile of sandwiches as Sally came downstairs to breakfast.

“Are we having a picnic?” She asked.

Mother smiled.

“You are, if you like, I'm not. I've got to go to London on the train.” She explained, looking around. “Find the little biscuit tin and you can take these sandwiches with you for lunch.”

“Can we have a flask of lemonade too?” Asked Sally, fetching the tin from the larder and picking up the empty thermos from the dresser shelf on the way back.

“Why not” Said mother. “That's a good idea.”

And so, loaded with the biscuit tin and a flask of iced lemon in a plastic shopping bag, Alan and Sally waved to the bus as it went down the road. They watched it out of sight and ran down the meadow to the water.

“How are you going to keep it dry?” Asked Sally, as Alan wrapped the bag tightly round the lunch things.

“The tin lid should be tight enough not to leak, and Mother says the bag is waterproof.” He explained. “I'm going to swim on my back with it. I'll carry it as if I'm doing lifesaving, like in the book!”

He got into the water and held the bag on his chest with the handles at the top. He started back stroke, kicking hard with his legs alone. It worked! He moved slowly, head first, but he moved and Sally followed close behind and told him which way to go.

It took a longer time than usual, but they arrived at the island, where Sally climbed up the tree root and took the bag from him. Alan followed her up and looked to see if Alistair was already there on the far bank. He was, so she put the bag under a bush right at the edge and dived in. Alan jumped in, reached up for the picnic, and followed her.

Alistair wasn't wearing his dressing gown today. He had a dark blue blanket over his knees, and he was just pulling a grey sweater off his top as they climbed out.

“I'm glad you're here.” He greeted them. “What have you got in your bag?”

“Lunch,” Said Sally. “Mother's gone to London.”

“Hey! That's good.” Alistair sounded pleased. “The *Screws* have gone out too. They abandoned me here”.

“*Screws*? Abandoned?” Asked Alan.

Alistair laughed.

“*Screws* is what you call Jailers, Prison Warders.” He explained. “The funny couple that Dad employs to look after me and the house. They said they were going to be out until very late tonight, so I'd have to stay indoors. They brought me a salad for lunch and some sandwiches for tea, and then they just went.”

He pointed at a basket beside his wheelchair and grinned triumphantly.

“So I got myself up, loaded up, and rolled down here.”

Under the blanket, Alistair was wearing what must have been a pair of grey flannel long trousers, before he had hacked the legs off with a pair of nail scissors. His feet were bare. He threw the blanket to Sally.

“Put that down for us to sit on.” He told her.

He rolled the chair up to the blanket and put on the brakes.  
“Watch this” He said, proudly. He pointed down to his feet.

He supported his right leg by linking his hands behind the knee and lifted it a little. Slowly, he moved the foot forward until the heel dropped over the edge of the foot rest. He looked up and grinned.

“I practised all evening,” He explained. “In between looking for some clothes to wear. Do you know, these trousers came half way up my shins before I attacked them? Now, watch this...”

He pulled up on his leg again, and hooked the heel under the folding rest so that it lifted up out of the way. When he had lowered the right foot to the ground, he slid his left foot across without help until it dropped to the ground.

“See. It worked!” He said proudly. “Would you help me stand, Please?”

They pushed and pulled until he was standing, and as soon as he was upright, he waved them aside.

Alistair held his left arm out and looked straight in front. In a sudden movement he threw his right leg and his right arm forward. He wobbled a lot before he took his weight on the leg, and as soon he was steady he stopped still and nodded at Sally. She wondered what he was going to do but he followed on by doing the same thing with the other leg and arm.

Sally cheered, but he held up his hand and looked at the blanket just in front of him.

He started to take one more step with his right leg but he twisted round to fall onto the blanket, laughing and almost crying.

“Thanks” He said, without looking up, as if he was hiding his face.

“Thanks? For what?” Asked Alan, dropping down to his knees beside him.

“Showing me I could do it, of course! Can we swim now?” He stripped off his home made shorts, rolled over and over toward the edge until he fell into the water, and started to swim as he came up.

In the next half hour the three children swam backwards and forwards between the island and the wall, trying all sorts of different strokes. Alan was slow and steady, but Sally was getting quite fast, though she had to work hard to stay ahead of Alistair who seemed to be getting faster and faster every time.

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“What time's your mother coming back?” Asked Alistair.

It was late afternoon and they were lying in the warm sun drinking the last dregs of the lemonade and recovering from the exertions of yet another hard swim.

“Soon I guess” Answered Alan. “What a day!”

Alistair nodded.

“It was wonderful. Please come again.”

He managed to dress himself again without help, but standing up on his own was still much more than he could manage. Alan helped him into the chair, and Sally passed him the blanket and the basket that had held his salad and sandwiches.

“Back to prison, then!” Said Alistair, turning the chair. “Give me a push up the slope, and I'll go home before they get back. See you tomorrow!”

## Chapter 6 WALKING AND SAILING

In the next week the three children met at Alistair's bathing place every afternoon, and sometimes in the early mornings too. They all agreed that, with all the practice and despite Alistair helping Alan, Sally was getting much better than her brother at swimming, even though Alan beat her easily at diving.

"I only wish I could walk like I can swim!" Alistair complained nearly every time he helped him out of the water. He could still move two or sometimes even three paces like a robot, but no more, and standing up without help was just not possible.

"Then I could show you how to dive properly."

Alan suspected that their friend was getting unhappy again, but he was hiding it and trying to enjoy himself. He had noticed the look on Alistair's face when they had been running from the ladder to the diving board and round again and wished they could help him more.

"If somebody has an accident and can't walk." He had asked Mother that morning at breakfast. "Can they learn to walk again?"

Sally had kicked him under the table.

"If they are taught to, by people called therapists." Mother told them. "It takes a long while. Sometimes they learn a bit, and can't get any further. Why? Have you been reading my magazines again?"

"Sorry, Mum!"

"Just put them back when you've finished with them."

That afternoon was extremely hot. It was nearly two weeks after they had first met, Alistair had just finished swimming right round the island, followed closely by Sally, when he took two extra strong strokes to make sure of winning the race. As he threw himself forward to grab the ladder a hands length in front of her he suddenly cried out and stopped limply in the water.

He reached out to hold the ladder.

"What's up?" Asked Alan, who was sitting on the very end of the diving board from where he'd been watching their race.

"I don't know." Replied Alistair, with an extremely worried look on his face.

He let go with one hand and put the other behind him. Then he turned round, as he always did, with his back to the wall and used his arms to hitch himself up until he was sitting on the edge with his legs dangling.

He had worked out how to get himself up on to the bank, some days ago. He had chosen this special low spot on the bank to sit on like this. Once there, he would grab his ankles one at a time and lift them up beside him, ready to roll over on to the grass. This time, though, instead of rolling on to his side, he rolled right over on to his knees and put his arms down in front of him.

He stopped for a moment, thinking, and then used his arms to push his body and hips up from the ground.

"What are you doing?" Asked Alan, standing up to watch.

"Shut up. Please..." Said Alistair. "Something went click! My whole back hurt, right up to my shoulders. It feels sort of different, now!"

He was kneeling on the bank, facing the diving board. Sally was standing behind him, knowing that something was happening but, like Alan, not quite sure what it was and if there was something that she should do.

She waited expectantly.

She didn't have long to wait

Alistair dug in his toes and pulled his left foot forward and the knee up with both hands on the leg. At last he was sitting with his right heel touching his buttock. He paused. It needed a tremendous heave for him to throw himself upwards, and suddenly he was standing. Standing alone and unaided.

He looked down at his legs, and took a step forward. He looked at Alan, a tear starting in his eye, and took a second step. Alan jumped down and came toward him as he took a third step and a fourth.

Alistair almost jumped into Alan's arms and Sally grabbed him from behind. He was still standing and his friends were hugging him and jumping up and down with glee.

"I did it?"

"You did it!"

"Hey! Stop bouncing about, Sally. I want to see what else I can do. Stand back."

Alistair was walking again! After two years in a wheelchair, twelve days of swimming had done what the doctors hadn't managed. He walked slowly to the rear wall and back, patting the warm concrete with his hand as he turned.

He looked at his wheelchair, and walked back to where his friends were watching.

"I can't believe it!" Was all he could say.

Ten minutes later he was still walking. He walked slowly and carefully, but he knew it was real. Just like the swimming.

"Hey! I've just remembered." He grabbed Alan by the shoulder. "The *Screws* are going to be away tomorrow. She asked what I wanted for lunch and tea, and I said lots of sandwiches. Can you come all day?"

Alan nodded.

"Mother said she wanted to wash curtains and windows tomorrow. I bet she'll be happy to have us out of her way."

"Then come as early as you can. I had an idea last night. I can't promise, but I might have a surprise!"

They stood and watched as he dressed and then climbed into the wheelchair, tucking the blanket around his body. They watched him rolling off and then ran and dived, one behind the other, off the board.

Today, for the first time ever, they swam round the end of the island instead of landing on it and then on across the lake home without stopping once.

+ + +

They were up very early the next morning and there was no movement to be seen as they swam round the island and climbed out of the water at the far side. Sally picked up the bag with the biscuit tin and the thermos flask, put the long strap over her head onto her shoulder and walked up to the top of the back wall.

She looked towards the trees.

"He's not there, and it's still early. Should we wait here?" She asked.

“Why don't we go up through the wood? We can always hide if his *Screws* are still there.”

“Why not!” She agreed.

They got as far as the house side of the little wood before Sally heard someone coming. They hid behind a tree.

“It's him, and he's walking. He's not got his wheelchair, either.” Alan reported, coming out from behind the tree. “The *Screws* must have gone. He wouldn't want them to know.”

“Hi Al,” He called out, breaking into a trot.

“Hi Al yourself,” Called Alistair, not hurrying at all.

Sally looked at her brother.

“Al?” She asked.

“Glad you've come up. I overslept after all the excitement and then I had a right old job finding the key. That took ages, too. This way, down the path.” Said Alistair, pointing down a grassy track to their right.

“Key?” Asked Alan.

“To the boathouse. I had to turn Dad's study upside down to find it, I don't think he's used it for ages. But I did find it in the end.” He sounded very happy.

“Dad keeps our little boat in the boathouse. I hope it's still there. I haven't been down here for years!”

Alistair walked very slowly and carefully. Today he was barefoot and wearing just his home made shorts. He was carrying a rucksack, which Sally took from him and hung on her other shoulder, opposite the one with their bag. All three were shirtless and barefoot and, even Alistair, were well browned by the sun. Sally ran ahead and stopped at the edge of the trees. In front was a wooden slatted house with flaking white paint under a thatched roof. It stood at the edge of a little river with a padlocked door at the back corner.

The boys came up and stopped beside her.

Alistair took a key on a little wooden hanger from out of his pocket and held it out to Sally.

“See if it fits, young Sal.”

She took it and ran to the door. By the time that the boys arrived she had the padlock in her hand and was inside, looking down at a little white painted wooden boat that was floating inside.

“Why is it called *Swallow*?” Sally asked, reading the name painted on the back of the boat.

“Why not?” Asked Alan. “All boats have names.”

Alistair smiled. He took the padlock from Sally's hand, hooked it into the hasp on the doorframe and turned back to explain.

“Dad named her after the ailing boat in Arthur Ransome's books.” He explained. “He used to read them to me when I was small. She's nothing like their boats, but she does sail, or at least she will if all the bits are there!”

The *bits* were not all with the boat. While Alistair used a bucket, then a tin bailer and lastly a sponge to get a deep pool of water out of the boat, the others found most of the missing things stacked against the end wall. They passed the varnished wooden rudder and its tiller and another narrow flat board to him, as soon as he was ready.

It took them a while longer to find that the white cloth sail had been wound round the mast and laid with the other wooden spars over the beams in the roof. Sally saw them but Alistair was the only one who could reach them. He stood on tiptoe and slid them along so that Alan could fetch them down.

They untied the mooring rope and pulled the *Swallow* to the entrance where Alistair climbed back in and sat down with a look of relief. Under his guidance, Alan lowered the mast and sail into a round hole in one of the seats and Alistair threaded long wooden spars into the top and bottom of the sail. Alistair took a while to remember what went where.

“I was only ten when Dad and I did this last.” He explained, sorting ropes and pulling the canvas up so that it spread out flat and upright.

He worked slowly and carefully, checking everything over and over.

At last he decided that it was right.

“Load up, you two, and I'll see if I can get us going!”

A few minutes later they had the boat outside the boathouse, ready with the sail up and their two bags stowed right at the front of the boat. The sail was out to one side, flapping like a flag. Sally and Alan climbed in and sat each side of a long narrow box near the mast and waited to see what they should do. Alistair was looking very serious, sitting at the back of the boat holding the tiller in one hand and the rope that controlled the sail in the other.

“Al! Push that long board there down the slot.” He commanded. “I nearly forgot that.”

“Push her off Sal.” He ordered. “We're going.”

He pulled on the rope so that the wind filled the sail, and the boat started to move.

They sailed down the narrow stream and out into the lake. As they approached the other bank Alistair told them to put their heads down.

“It's called *jibing*.” He said. “I've got to let the sail blow over to the other side so that we can sail down the lake.”

He pulled the sail in until it was above his head and then moved the tiller across away from him. With a sudden shake the wind filled the sail from the other side and he let the rope out. They were sailing again.

“OK Al, you have a go.” He said to Alan.

“Yes Please Al,” Was the reply, and Sally grumbled.

“What about me?” She asked.

“Age before beauty” Answered Alan, taking the tiller and the rope cautiously.

Alistair leant back and looked out under the sail.

“That's it, just keep going down the middle. We'll be there soon.”

“Where?” Asked Alan, without taking his eyes off the water in front.

“The village of course,” Answered Alistair.

## Chapter 7

### THE PICNIC

The lake turned out to be much broader at the bottom end, where it divides into two arms. The first stream they came to, and the narrower of the two, curves round to the centre of a village and a water mill. The other makes a dog leg bend round to the weir. This village is much smaller than their own at the top end of the lake and is built on the bank beside and below the mill dam that helps to keep the lake deep.

Alistair let Sally steer and hold the rope of the sail as they went down into the weir stream until they had almost reached the set of chains that stopped boats going too far. He leant forward and put his hands on hers and helped her to steer round into the wind and on until the boat was sailing back the other way. He swapped seats with her as they approached the junction of the streams and took over again. He steered back out into the lake.

“Why aren't we going straight back to the other stream?” Asked Sally, as Alistair suddenly turned the boat away from the reeds and headed toward the wrong bank.

“I know. I think.” Answered Alan. “The sail is like a mirror that reflects the wind over the back of the boat to push it along. When you try and go straight into the wind, it just blows past...”

“Then,” Interrupted Sally, “You only go as near into the wind as you can, and when there's a something in the way, you do your best in another direction, until there's something else!”

“Exactly.” Said Alistair. “That's called *tacking*. You should read the Arthur Ransome books. I'll lend you ours if you want. You'll learn everything about sailing there.”

Once their little boat was back into the clear weedless water of the lake proper, they could sail back into the other arm and on down toward the village. Already, as they turned the bend, they could see an old landing stage with a few rowing boats in the middle of a very reedy bank. Alistair looked around and sailed right up to the nearest end at full speed, so fast that Sally wondered if they would hit it hard. She didn't have to worry. Just as they were nearly there, Alistair turned the boat sharply away and let his rope loose so that the wind spilled from the sail. They stopped, just inches away from the wooden decking. Sally jumped ashore with the little mooring rope and tied it to a metal ring.

“We're here!” She said, coming back and pulling the side of the boat to the edge of the wooden staging.

Some village children had been swimming from other end of the staging and three of them came over to look at the little boat, with others behind them.

“Look after her for us, and we'll take you for a sail when we come back from the shop.” Offered Alistair.

A black haired girl in a red bikini seemed to be the oldest, younger than Alistair but not much, and was in charge of the two boys from the way she had her arms around them.

“Ellie will,” Said the smallest boy, pointing to her.

“Of course we will. Nobody will touch it. Rob and I won't let anyone near your boat.”

The other children agreed enthusiastically and went back to their swimming. Sally dug her little purse out of the sandwich tin and let Alan help her out of the boat. The crew of the little *Swallow* went across to the shop to provision their boat.

“Please can we have some fruit and nut chocolate. The very big bar?” Asked Alistair, as soon as the cheery faced shopkeeper had finished packing the bags of a fat lady and it was their turn at the counter.

Alan opened the door for the lady to go out, and she smiled pleasantly. The shopkeeper put the chocolate on the counter and looked at the children.

“On holiday?” He asked.

“No Sir,” Answered Sally, who was looking at some penny chews. “We moved here last month.”

She pointed to the ones she wanted.

“In the village?” The man asked, getting a paper bag and putting in the sweets as she chose them.

“We sailed up from the other end of the lake.” Said Alan, who had found a big box of chocolate marshmallows and brought them across.

“Good! I was going to look for them.” Alistair looked up from where he was searching through clothes on a rack.

“Sailed?” Asked the shopkeeper, taking the box and ringing up the price. “There was never more than one sailing boat on the lake. Lord Warborough's little *Swallow*. Haven't seen him for a year or so. Did he move away?”

“He's away on business.” Alistair explained from the other side of the shop. “He lent her to us.”

He carried a pair of white swimming trunks to the counter. “How much are these, please?”

Alistair paid for the trunks and for all the sweets, although both Sally and Alan protested.

The shopkeeper still held the packages, as if he wanted to keep them there.

“Bad thing, that with his Lordship. He used to sail down here once a week, like you did today. Funny! Come to think of it, he was the one for fruit and nut chocolate and for marshmallows, too! Got in a car crash. Lost his wife and crippled his son they say. Do you know the boy?”

Alistair held his hand out for the bags.

“Yes Sir. They're sort of relatives. Thank you very much! We'll come and see you again, Sir.”

As they held the door open for another customer and ran out of the shop the man smiled at his next customer.

“Always welcome! Morning Mrs Smith. What can I do for you today?”

Alistair was quiet as they went back to the boat.

“Did you used to come here often?” Asked Sally.

Alistair seemed to wake up.

“Sorry!” He said, slowly. “I was remembering. We did come here a lot. That's why I got the chocolate. It was always my treat when he came back or when we came here together.”

He was suddenly cheerful again.

“Hey! We can come here when we want to. Dad or no Dad!”

The village children were still swimming as they came back to the boat. Alistair pulled a rather grey looking white towel from his rucksack, wound it round his waist, and changed into his new swimming trunks. They were soon swimming with the others.

“Can we have a sail, now?” Asked the girl called Ellie, touching the side of the boat at the same time as Alistair swam over to it.

“Ask Al, he'll take you,” Alistair pointed to Alan who was standing in the water watching his sister racing with the small boy called Rob.

Alan climbed out and looked down.

“Can I really? On my own?”

“Of course. Just take care. Oh! Pass the food out and we'll eat when you come back, so don't go too far!”

Alan passed out the thermos and the other things that had been keeping cool under the foredeck of the boat, and the village children loaded into the boat. As they sailed off, Alistair lay on his back on the grass and sighed.

“Are you tired?” Asked Sally.

“Very” He answered, with another sigh. “I didn't know walking was such hard work. Get the lunch ready and wake me up when Al comes back!”

When the boat sailed back, with Alan grinning from ear to ear at being allowed to captain the boat alone, Sally had the blanket spread and everything set out ready to eat.

“Food!” She called, standing up and waving.

The boat hit the side a bit harder than Alan intended, just because he turned it round too late. He looked across to the grass, rather guiltily, but he was relieved when he couldn't see Alistair anywhere to criticise. Sally came over, took the rope and tied it up without comment. The children jumped out as Alan lowered the sail.

“Thank you Al!” Said the other girl, a little very blond girl with pigtails. “I never sailed in a boat before. I wish I could sail as well as you do.”

Alan glowed with pride.

The village children carried their food over to where Sally had set up her lunch table on the blanket, and they all sat down. Alan poked Alistair in the ribs.

“Hey! Al! Eats”.

Alistair rolled over and sat up. He yawned.

“Thanks Al!”

Ellie looked puzzled.

“How come they are both called Al?” She asked, “Aren't they your brothers?”

Sally looked at her two boys.

“It's their silly joke” She grumbled. “They *are* both Al. Alan and Alistair. So they're doing it to annoy me!”

Alistair grinned.

“We're *Al and Al*, and she's *Sal*. Go on. Admit it. It's a good wheeze between us, and we always know who we mean. It's like saying ‘him’ and ‘him’ and ‘her’.”

He looked at the packets open on the blanket.

“Come on. This looks like a real feast. Let's eat, then.”

All seven feasted on the sandwiches they had brought with them. Rob was Ellie's younger brother and it turned out that the other younger boy called Fred was brother to both of them. They had two really big pork pies between them that Rob cut up with a knife into good sized wedges. They all finished up with Alan's marshmallows and sampled each other's bottled drinks.

They finally lay in the hot sun, nibbling the chocolate.

“Do you go to school here?” Asked Fred.

“We are going to, to the Comprehensive, in September” Answered Alan. “We'll be coming on the bus.”

“You'll like it here” Said Ellie, and started to tell them about the school. Alistair was very quiet until the other girl looked at him and asked. “What about you, Alistair. Are you coming too?”

He shook his head.

“I don't think so. I had a private tutor. I guess my Dad will want me to go to boarding school like he did, but I'd rather go with you. It sounds marvellous to live at home and go by bus to school.”

“Oh! But children shouldn't be sent away to school” Ellie exclaimed. “How horrible! To leave all your friends.”

Alistair slept again whilst the others had another sail out into the lake. When he opened his eyes, Sally was sitting next to him, looking into his face.

“Hello!” He said. “You shouldn't have stayed there. You could have sailed too.”

She shook her head.

“I wanted to tidy up. Anyway, you shouldn't stay on your own.”

He sat up and looked at his little boat sailing back down the lake toward them.

“Alistair?” Asked Sally. “If your dad is a Lord, what does that make you?”

He looked at her serious face and hugged her.

“Just me!” He said. “Yours and Alan's friend from across the lake. Lord is only a word, like Mr or Doctor or Reverend. It doesn't make people different.”

“Are you sure?” She asked, not sounding as if she believed him.

“Sure! Scouts Honour, Sal! If I get different, just tell me and you can push me under water next time we go swimming. Come on! Lets get cooled off in the water. We ate ages ago now!”

Alistair and Sally were romping about in the water when the boat came back, Sally was diving between his legs and then standing up for him to dive between hers when she saw the sail at the corner and pointed toward it. They both stood in the water and watched, critically.

Alan was very careful this time to let the wind out of the sail early enough as the boat came into the landing, and he saw Alistair watch with approval as the boat slid smoothly in beside the wooden posts. In a few moments he had the sail down and was diving in with the others.

## Chapter 8

### MOTHER LIKES ALISTAIR, TOO!

It was getting late as they finally packed up after the picnic. Alistair borrowed his purse back from Sally, she had been looking after it in his bag, and went to buy ice creams for everyone. The crew of the *Swallow* sat in the boat licking the cones and the village children sat on the edge of the landing stage with theirs.

“Come again.” Said Ellie, as she finished the last tiny pointed piece of her ice cream cone.

“Yes please, it was fun having people our age to play with.” Agreed her brother, Fred. “We’ll be watching out for you”

“We’ll come again, don’t worry.” Said Alan, putting the last of his cone into his mouth. “Can I start off now, Al?”

Alistair nodded, and untied the rope as Alan pulled up the sail. Soon he and Sally were waving to the children as Alan tacked out of the village stream on the way home.

Mother was waiting at the bottom of the meadow when they came home. Sally waved, but mother didn’t wave back at first. Not until they had tacked out and Alan had turned in again so as to land where she was standing. She stepped down on to the little bit of sand and reached out for the boat. She grabbed the wooden post at the very front.

“You’re late” She accused, sounding worried. “I couldn’t see you on your island, and I didn’t know what to do.”

“It was my fault,” Said Alistair apologetically, jumping into the water and holding the boat for Alan to climb out.

Mother lifted Sally out, and up on to the bank.

“I was the captain, and I was responsible for getting them home on time. Will you forgive them? Please?”

Mother looked at his earnest face.

“If you ask me like that. I suppose I might. Tea has been waiting a whole hour because you were late.”

“This is Alistair,” Sally told her Mother. “It’s his father’s boat. We went to the other end of the lake and back.”

Mother shook hands with Alistair.

“Aren’t you late too?” She asked.

Alistair shook his head.

“The *Screws* left me sandwiches for lunch and tea. We ate them all at lunch time. They won’t be back until late, they said so.”

“*Screws*?” Asked Mother, standing aside so that Alistair could tie the mooring rope to the base of a small bush.

“The man and woman who look after his house. His father is away on business and they make his meals and keep it clean.” Alan explained.

“Well. I expect your tea is ruined and will taste horrible. I made welsh rarebit an hour ago, as a surprise treat. Young man! You’d better come up and have some too. It will serve all of you right if it tastes horrible.”

It didn’t taste horrible, it was a bit thicker than usual but was none the worse for that.

“You can really cook!” Said Alistair, sitting back after eating a big plate of welsh rarebit, grilled on to buttered toast, and several slices of Mother’s best chocolate cake. “I wish you could cook for me. That's the best meal I've had for years!”

“My! That's a compliment!” Said Mother, smiling at him. “You can come over as often as you like. But once the children go back to school I will have to get a job and then I'm not so sure that we'll have so many luxuries.”

Sally looked at the clock. It was just after half past eight.

“Al!” She asked. “What time do the *Screws* come back?”

Alistair looked at the clock too.

“They said ‘late’. Last time it was about midnight. But I ought to get the boat put away.”

“Can you manage on your own?” Asked Alan, hoping that Alistair would say *no* because he would have liked to go back across the lake just once more tonight.

Alistair nodded.

“The mast is short enough to get into the boat house, it came out, didn't it? I'll just sail in and lock it up. Don't worry about me. I'll be okay.”

They all got up and walked down to the meadow. Mother helped Alistair into the boat and Sally untied the mooring rope. He thanked Mother for the meal. She smiled at him.

“Thank you for taking Alan and Sally in your boat. I'm sorry I was upset before. It was nice to meet you.” She said. “Please come again.”

“Thank you for the tea. It's the best I've had for ages. I'd like to come.”

Alistair pulled up the sail and as Alan jumped down into the water and pushed him out, the sail filled and the little boat was on its way. Mother stood with her children and watched as he sailed diagonally across the lake and into the mouth of the little river.

“He sails that boat well. Did he teach you to sail too?”

“A bit.” Answered Sally. “He said his Dad taught him, but we can learn it from a book by Arthur Ransome. Have we got that book, too?”

Mother nodded.

“I think we've still got the first one of his books upstairs in the box. Let's go and look.”

As they searched through the box, mother looked out of the window at the trees opposite.

“He's a very nice boy. Who is he?” She asked. “Granddad said that Lord Warborough lived in that house, but he was always abroad since he lost his wife in a car accident.”

“Alistair must be Lord Warborough's son, then. He's been stuck in a wheelchair for years. He did say his dad is always away on business.”

Mother looked at her children.

“He must be telling you a story. I can't imagine him in a wheelchair, he's as healthy as you are. What's more, I don't think I've ever seen anyone that thin eat so much.”

“It's true.” Protested Sally “We saw him when we first swam across the lake. He was in a wheelchair then.”

“And why isn't he now?”

“He started to swim with us, and then suddenly he could walk too.” Said Alan. “It was like magic. First he could just wiggle his toes, then he could move one leg.”

“Then, when he was swimming, he said his back hurt. Then he got out on his own and stood up. We were surprised.” Sally finished the story.

“Is this it?” Asked Alan, taking out a thick dark green book. “It says *Swallows and Amazons* on its back.”

“That's the first one.” Said mother. “Your father had the whole set once, and I think there were six or seven in the end. If you like this one I'll see if I can get you some of the others.” Sally and Alan looked into the book.

“You tidy up the rest of the books. I'll make us some cocoa.” Said mother.

Half an hour later, as mother brought up some biscuits and the cocoa on a tray, her children were stretched out on Sally's big bed reading the book.

“It's good!” Sally exclaimed. “Alan's reading bits to me, and when he's finished I'm going to read it all myself.”

“It *is* good.” Said Alan. “It's not just about boats, it's about children and a lake like ours, but theirs is a much bigger lake. They are going to get their boat in the next chapter.”

Mother handed over the cocoa.

“Well don't stay up all night reading it. I'll be in later to see if you're asleep.”



## Chapter 9

### THE BIG HOUSE

It was raining when Sally woke up next morning, raining quite hard from the sound of it beating on the window. She pulled on her shorts as usual and ran up the steep steps to the little attic.

“I’m going down to swim in the rain again” said Alan meeting her at the top of the stairs in his swimming trunks. “Come on!”

They ran downstairs, out of the kitchen door and down the meadow.

As they reached the water’s edge Sally saw a sail coming across towards them.

“Look! It’s his boat!” She shouted. She jumped in and started swimming out toward the *Swallow*.

Alistair, wearing an orange coloured waterproof jacket, held the tiller under his arm and waved to them. Alan jumped in too and they both swam out to meet him.

“What’s up?” Asked Alan, holding on to the side of the boat and letting it pull him along.

“The *Screws* didn’t come home” Alistair explained, leaning over and helping Sally over the back into the boat. “I think something might have happened to them.”

Alan let go and stood up as the boat slid alongside the bank. Sally jumped ashore with the rope and looped the rope around the bush where they’d tied it only last night. Alistair lowered the sail and jumped ashore.

“Don’t stand out there in the rain!” Called mother from the top of the meadow.

The children ran toward her and her umbrella.

“Don’t say a word about the *Screws*” said Alistair. “Not yet.”

“Come in out of the wet, you three. And please hang that waterproof in the porch, Alistair. Have you had breakfast?”

He shook his head.

“Come on then. It’s a porridge day today!”

+ + +

“Would you like to come across to my house?” Asked Alistair.

He was just taking a third slice of toast after finishing a large plate of porridge with milk and golden syrup. Mother picked up the first two cups of hot chocolate and put them in front of Sally and Alistair.

“May they please?” He asked.

Mother fetched the other two cups and sat down.

“If it’s all right with your family, Alistair. Are you allowed to invite people?”

He nodded.

“Dad always wants me to have people to play. I was just afraid that they wouldn’t want to come. May they please?”

Mother looked at him.

“And you’re not afraid of my two taking over?”

Alistair looked at Alan and then at Sally.

He stuttered.

“I n-never even thought...”

Mother leant over and kissed him, and laughed at his startled face.

“I know...” She said. “Ladies shouldn't kiss big boys. But you looked for a moment as if you needed it.”

She paused.

“Yes. Of course they can come. And I'll expect you when I see you?”

Mother fetched their rain proof jackets for Alan and Sally, and stood and watched the children running down the field. She wondered if their new friend was being looked after properly, and decided that when her friend the post lady came past she would ask about Alistair and his family.

The children looked round at her as they got to the boat and waved. She waved back and, feeling suddenly lonely, went indoors.

+ + +

Alistair led the way into the kitchen door at the back of his big house. There was a big box full of tins and packets on the table. It had been delivered from the grocers, but the house was completely silent.

“It's ghostly” Whispered Sally as they went into the big hall. “It's all quiet and big.”

Alan looked at the tall Grandfather clock at the bottom of the wide staircase. The dark wooden case stood much taller than any of the children. It had a big brass pendulum and long metal chains hanging motionless behind the dusty glass panelled door below the brass clock face.

“I like that sort of clock. If it was ticking it wouldn't sound so empty. Why doesn't it go?” He asked.

Alistair looked at it, as if he had just noticed it for the first time.

“Wind it up and see.” He suggested. “It always used to go when I was little. Perhaps the *Screws* don't bother to wind it up. Open the door and look for the handle.”

Alan found the key, lying in the bottom of the clock. It wasn't like the clock key at home or even the key for a clockwork toy as he had expected. It was more like a little car starting handle. He climbed a few steps up the staircase and leant over to fit it into one of the holes in the clock face. He wound it round and round.

“One of the weights is going up,” Reported Sally, looking through the glass of the half closed front door into the bottom of the clock.

At last the weight couldn't go any further but, although Sally moved the pendulum from side to side, it still didn't tick.

“Try the other hole.” Alistair suggested. “It has two weights and two holes. That first one might be for the bells.”

“Bells?” Asked Alan, putting the handle in the other hole and winding. The other weight started to rise.

“It used to ding-dong every fifteen minutes when it went,” Alistair remembered. “Hey! Listen!”

Alan stopped, and they all stopped and looked. The pendulum was quivering. They all saw it clearly, but it was Sally who leant over, put her hand inside the door and gave it a push.

Like a motor car starting on a cold day it gave a couple of ticks, paused, ticked again and then settled down to a slow steady beat.

As Alan finished winding, Sally ran into the kitchen and looked at the electric clock built in to the cooker.

“It's nearly five to ten,” She told the others, running back into the hall. “Set it up to the right time.”

Alistair climbed up and wound the minute hand around. Each time it reached the big XII he paused, but except for a big `clunk' somewhere inside, nothing happened.

He set the hands to point just before ten and stood back, puzzled.

“There's a lever there pointing to *silent*” said Alan.

Alistair moved it to the right where it said *chime*. He was just in time. With a whirr and the big `clunk', it started to play the same little tune that they heard on the radio before the news. As a deeper toned bell started to ring the hours they counted aloud. Up to seven. Then it was silent.

“What a shame,” Said Sally. “It's broken”

Alan put the little winder back in the bottom and closed the door. Sally looked back at the clock.

“Can't we repair it?” She asked. “Perhaps if we wind the hands backwards behind the hour and then forwards again it will ring eight. And then again until it's right?”

Alan ran back and leant over from the stairs to reach the hands. He did as his sister suggested and they were rewarded as they counted to eight. Sally was right. After they had done it twice more it rang ten times. Alan ran into the kitchen and checked the minutes. It was just after eight minutes past ten.

They set the minute hand and closed the door again.

Alistair's room was on the ground floor, at the front of the house next to the front door. He looked sheepishly at his unmade bed, but only watched as Sally and her brother quickly pulled it into shape.

“I've never had to make a bed.” He explained as if that explained everything.

They sat on the bed as if it was a sofa.

“It's a nice room, and it's properly lived in,” Sally thought aloud. “But why does the house look empty from outside?”

“I know why!” Said Alan. “It's because most of the rooms have the shutters closed. Can we explore?”

“Come on then. I haven't been upstairs for ages.” Alistair led the way out. “I want to look around too.”

It was a large house. All the other rooms downstairs except Alistair's had the shutters closed and most had white dust sheets pulled over the furniture. One room had a large office desk and a typewriter and another telephone. It looked as if it was Alistair's father's study. Off in a passage at the end of the house there were two rooms behind the kitchen that were apparently the flat where the *Screws* lived.

“Whew! What a mess” Said Alan, looking at their unmade bed and the clothes thrown on the dressing table and overflowing on to the floor. “Those two live like pigs.”

“I'm not surprised, you should see them.” Alistair led the way back through the kitchen.

They went upstairs next, first up the wide staircase that curved in two sweeps around the big entrance hall with Alistair and Sally going up one side and Alan up the other. They met at the top and went through a green cloth covered door to another narrow set of stairs that led up to the attic rooms.

“These were the servants quarters once, when the family had a butler and a cook and a footman and three maids.” Alistair explained as the went from empty room to empty room. “It must have been horrible with all those people looking after you.”

Sally was running in and out of the musty smelling rooms. There were seven, all except the last quite small. Each one had a dormer window, just like the one in Alan's room at the cottage, but they were shut fast. They had no furniture except that each had a bare metal framed bed and a marble topped wooden washstand with white jugs and bowls. They looked the same in each curtainless room.

“They haven't been used for years. Just the two at this end before the *Screws* came. We had a housekeeper then.”

“Where do the other stairs go?” Sally had reached the other end of the long passage and found another narrow staircase going down again.

She didn't wait for an answer but ran down to the next floor.

These stairs had a little door that came out on the end of the first floor landing by the bathrooms. The five big bedrooms down here were fully furnished but the curtains were drawn and the shutters closed. Only one looked lived in, and Sally went to the bedside table and picked up a silver picture frame with a picture of a man and a woman in very formal dress. They were standing on the steps in front of an ornate front door.

“That's this house, isn't it?” She asked. “Are those your Mum and Dad?”

Alistair nodded.

“That was after a really big party. They had been married exactly ten years and it was my ninth birthday party on the same day. They let me take the photograph after the guests had gone. That was the first photo I ever took.”

“They look nice,” Said Sally, holding the picture at arm's length. “You look like your dad, too.”

“You look a bit like your mother too,” Said Alan, looking carefully at the picture. “I bet you miss them. We miss having a father, but we do have our mother. It must be awful knowing your dad is somewhere out there, but not knowing where.”

“Doesn't he love you?” Asked Sally, putting her arm round Alistair.

He looked down at her earnest face and nodded.

“I think he does. My last tutor said he thought that Dad blames himself for the accident, and he's afraid I'll blame him too. That's why he just comes home when he has to, and always goes again the next day.”

“You mean,” Asked Sally with a pause, “That he's sort of hiding from you?”

He took hold of her hand.

“Sort of” He answered, squeezing it.

“That's awful. When I see him, I'm going to tell him how nice you are, and I'm going to tell him he shouldn't go away and leave you!” Sally was very emphatic!

Alistair laughed and patted her hand with his free one.

“I don't suppose you will see him. I expect he'll just show up one night and he'll be gone again the next day before you even know he was here.”

Alan was looking out of the window, a little bit embarrassed and maybe a little jealous at the affection between the two of them.

“Hey you two. It's stopped raining. We can go out again.”

## Chapter 10

### ALISTAIR'S IN CHARGE

As they sailed home across the lake they saw mother running down the field and waving as if she wanted them to hurry. They steered toward the bank and, seeing her waving them in, Alan and Sally jumped out and ran over the sandy beach below where she was standing.

“Children!” Mother said, sounding worried. “I got a telegram. I have to go to London. This afternoon. The lawyer has to see me. I can't get anyone to look after you and you can't come too. I won't be back until breakfast time. Can I trust you? Can you look after yourselves and the cottage?”

She sounded very upset so Sally jumped up on to the bank and held her mother's hand. They looked down at the boys.

“They could stay with me tonight?” Suggested Alistair.

Mother looked even more doubtful.

“Go on. Let us.” Pleaded Alan. “You'll know where we are, and they have a telephone for if anything went wrong and you wanted to tell us. We haven't got one here, so it's safer there than if we're here!”

“But nothing's going to go wrong.” said Alistair, quickly. “You can even phone us tonight to make sure they're all right.”

“She's going to let us!” Exclaimed Sally, holding her mother's hand up in the air. “I can feel it!”

Mother shook her head, not to say no but to express disbelief.

“You little tinker,” She said, pulling her fingers through the hair in her daughter's tangled ponytail. “Yes. I'll trust you, even if I don't know why I should. Alistair! You and Alan are in charge. I'll be back early tomorrow so don't let me down!”

They followed her up to the house and Alistair carried her case out to the bus stop. They stood and waited until the bus arrived. The old conductor took the case and put it under the stairs as she bent down and kissed her children, first Sally and then Alan. Alistair stood a bit away from the others, looking as if he didn't belong. Mother jumped down and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, and jumped back on the platform as the conductor rang the bell.

“Don't forget, I'm trusting you!” She called.

They stood and waved until the bus went out of sight.

“She likes you,” Said Alan.

“She *loves* you,” Said Alistair, “and that's right and proper. Mothers always love their children. Come on. Cheer up you two. We're in charge. Let's lock up and get on with sailing.”

+ + +

They sailed the other way up the lake today, and Alistair rowed the last few hundred yards up the narrow reed edged stream to their own village. Several people looked down in surprise from the bridge as they tied the boat's ropes to rings on a little stone landing stage above the bridge and trotted up the steps.

“It's gone!” Exclaimed Alistair, stopping and looking around.

“What's gone?” Asked Alan.

“There used to be a fish and chip shop there, where that furniture shop is.”

“Been gone for two or more years!” Said a little old man who was leaning on the parapet of the bridge smoking a pipe. “But you're in luck if you hurry. There's a mobile chippie over in the market place.”

He saw Alistair looking down at his boat.

“Don't worry. I'll not let anyone touch it. Run now!”

They ran, and they were in time. They bought big helpings of fish and chips with lashings of salt and vinegar, and walked slowly back to the bridge eating and chattering.

The man was still standing there, and there were a number of children looking down at their boat.

“I looked after it for you.” He said. “I wouldn't let them go down.”

Alistair thanked him, and they leant against the low wall finishing their dinner.

“It's like coming ashore in a foreign port,” Said the man, looking down at the little *Swallow*.

“I used to be in the navy. It's always a thrill to go ashore in a new place.”

“Did you ever sail a boat like ours?” Asked Sally.

The man nodded.

“Nearly like her. We had boats at our school. We used to sail on the river every day, summer or winter, rain or shine.”

“Even in snow and ice?” She asked.

“Especially in snow and ice.” He drew at his pipe. “I passed out in dinghy sailing in the middle of the coldest January of the century. Running water won't freeze, they told us, but us sailing cadets very nearly did!”

Alistair collected their chip papers together and walked across the road to stuff them into a waste bin.

“Well done!” Said the man. “You're always welcome to visit here!”

“Thank you” Answered Alistair. “Would you like to have a sail in our boat?”

The man looked into space for a moment.

“Now that's mighty nice of you!” He said. “I'll take you up on that one day. But not today, I've got to get home now.”

He turned to Sally and Alan and saluted them, then shook hands with Alistair.

“Thank you `Captain'.” He said, saluting him too and then walking off into the village.

“A real Ancient Mariner!” Said Alistair, watching him go. “Let's go. Sally! You can steer and Al can row us out to the lake.”

It was funny being in the big house that evening. Alan had read all of the first of the sailing books at home, so that Alistair had gone up and fetched their copy for Sally and the next book for Alan. This one was called *Swallowdale* and Alan was pleased to find the same children in it. All three were reading as they sat together in the big kitchen, listening to the grandfather clock chiming its ding dong every fifteen minutes and nibbling biscuits from the store of food in the cardboard box.

Sally made the cocoa and was putting the boy's mugs on the table as the clock ended its ten o'clock chime.

The telephone started to ring. Alan looked at the old fashioned instrument, hanging on the kitchen wall. It had been ringing once an hour since they came in from the boathouse and Alistair had stopped the others touching it every time.

“Did we ought to answer it? It might be an urgent message.” Alan asked as he had done when it had rung before.

Alistair shook his head.

“Like I said, it can't be for us, it's got to be for the *Screws*. If we answer it we'll have to say they're not here, and then whoever's calling might come and break in.”

“And if it *is* for us, or for you?” Asked Sally again.

“No-one ever phones me. Remember? I can't get to a phone!”

“What about Mother?” She persisted.

“It started too early, and every hour *exactly* on the hour?” He asked. “She'd know we were still out in the boat.”

Sally agreed, and she collected the mugs and rinsed them at the sink.

“Bed time!” Alan ordered.

The phone rang again as he spoke, and this time Alistair glanced at the clock before he picked it up. It was twenty minutes past the hour. He was right, it was the children's mother calling from London.

“Hello!” He said. “Yes they're here. Hold on.”

Alan took the earphone and spoke into the microphone fixed on the front of the box.

“Hello Mum?”

“Hello Alan. Is everything all right?”

“We're just going to bed. We've had cocoa and biscuits and we're going up now.”

When Alan had spoken for a while, Sally had a turn. The phone was just too high for her to reach and Alistair fetched a chair for her to stand on. She and her mother talked for what seemed to be a long time, and the boys started to go upstairs.

“Alan! Mother says goodnight.” Called Sally. “Alistair! Mother wants to talk to you again.”

“To me?”

“Yes, hurry up her money's running out!”

Alistair took the ear piece.

“Hello?”

He listened.

“Yes. Of course” He said, listening again.

He went red and looked over his shoulder at the others.

“Yes. I will. Good night!”

He hung the ear piece on the hook on the side of the phone.

“She's nice, your mother. But she said you ought to have been in bed hours ago. And she says to say she loves you. Come on!”

Sally helped Alistair make up another bed on the cushions of the wide padded window seat in his room, using bedding and sheets that they fetched from a cupboard on the landing upstairs. They undressed and climbed into bed, Alan and Sally into the big bed and Alistair into the extra one. He switched off the standard lamp that he had put in easy reach of his arm and snuggled down.

“Are you going to be all right there?” Asked Alan, looking across the room. Alistair pushed himself back up on one elbow and looked at them.

“Yes. It's really comfortable. Why don't you switch the bed-head light out and go to sleep too?”

At that moment they heard the telephone ringing again. It was exactly eleven o'clock because the big clock outside started to chime. The phone stopped again after two minutes, and then only a few seconds later it started again and rang for twice as long again.

“Thank goodness it's stopped” whispered Sally as it finished. “They must be really desperate.”

“They won't ring again.” Said Alan. “Go to sleep now!”

+ + +

It was nearly half past five in the morning when something woke Alistair. He got up and crept to the bedroom door, thinking he had heard the back door bang. It was quiet outside so he closed his door again. He had wondered for a moment if the *Screws* were back again, and then he was worried that they might try and make trouble if they found he had visitors. He was also afraid that the couple might be doing something illegal and shouldn't know that he was able to move about.

“What's up?” Asked Alan's sleepy voice from the big bed.

“Sssh. I think there's someone in the house. You'd better get up and come with me.” Alistair was pulling on his shorts as he spoke and picked up his grey pullover before going back to the door.

“Me too!” Whispered Sally.

“Yes, but do keep quiet” Whispered her brother. “Al thinks there's someone else in the house. We're going to look.”

Alan and Sally pulled on their swimming clothes and sweaters that were lying ready for the morning, and followed Alistair to the door. He looked at them, dark shadows beside him.

“Sssh!” He warned them once more, and opened the door again.

It was still quiet outside, but they could all see a faint glow of light under a door across the hall. Alistair held them back, but they tiptoed behind him across to the kitchen door.

There were voices in the rooms where the *Screws* had lived.

“Where do you think we should look next?” Asked an old man's voice.

“Where you would hide them in a house of this size?” The second, younger sounding, voice had a peculiar sounding foreign accent.

So there were two men there, who were banging about and opening and closing doors in the servants' rooms.

“Quick!”

Alistair hissed a warning as he pulled Alan and Sally down under a wooden table. The kitchen door had just opened and a bright bar of light fell on the carpet where they had been standing just seconds before. The two men came out of the room. They were dressed identically in dark trousers and jackets. The first man who came into the hallway had a beard and was slightly bent, the other man looked quite young and he dashed around opening each of the doors in turn, including the room where the children had been sleeping. They went in there and stayed for a couple of minutes.

“It look like a kid's room.” They heard the foreign sounding man saying.

“They'll not have hidden it in a room that's used.” Said the other one, leading his partner back into the hall.

“This might be it.” Said the older man, opening another door under the stairs.

The children saw a light come on, and then the men went in. The door closed with a loud click.

“That's the cellar.” Whispered Alistair. “Go into the kitchen, as quietly as you can!”

He watched them go toward the kitchen door, and crept slowly across to the cellar entrance. He turned the key in the lock, put it in his pocket, and ran as quickly as possible into the room where the others were waiting for him.

“I'm going to have to call the police,” He said, reaching toward the telephone.

He took off the earphone and put his hand to the dial.

“Don't put the lights on yet. They mustn't know we're here or they might try and break out.”

"It's dark with the shutters closed." Asked Alan. "How can you see to dial?"

"Simple. You feel for the hooked stop thing and go back round to find the two end holes with two fingers, that's *nine* and *O*, and you take the end finger out. The end one was the *O*, then it's the *nine* that's left, and you just dial."

Sally heard the clicks as the dial went round, there was a pause as Alistair put his fingers in the dial again, followed by more clicks. He dialled the third nine and waited.

A tinny voice came out of the earphone. Alan and Sally tried to hear, but they couldn't understand the words.

"Police, please." Said Alistair, quietly.

He waited, and when a voice came again he gave his name and the address. The tinny voice came again.

"Thirteen." He answered, and then at last he explained that they had burglars in the cellar.

"There should be." Said Alistair in answer to a question. "They are a married couple. Alfred Groper and his wife. Alice I think she's called. They haven't come home since they went out after breakfast, two days ago."

There was a pause before the voice came again.

"Groper" He repeated, and then spelled it out "G. R. O. P. E. R."

"Yes Sir!" He said after listening a little longer, and hung up the phone.

"Come on, you two!" He said. "The police officer said we should go and wait for them in the driveway."



## Chapter 11

### LORD WARBOROUGH COMES HOME

It was cold at the front gate at that time of morning, although it was quite light by then. Alistair stood between the others and put his arms around their shoulders.

"I hope they won't be too long." Said Sally, shivering a little.

"I can hear a car now." Said Alan, and they all looked down the road.

A big black Rolls Royce car was coming along the road and they moved back toward the gate. The car started to turn in, and then the driver seemed to see the three of them and stopped suddenly with a screech of brakes. Alistair ran to the driver's door as it stopped. The door was suddenly thrown open and a tall man in a business suit jumped out.

Alan and Sally stood in amazement as the man grabbed Alistair under his arms and lifted him up like a baby.

"That's his father. I recognise him from that photograph," Whispered Sally.

The new arrival looked unbelievably in his sons face, then down from head to foot, before hugging him to his chest.

"What are you doing out here?" Asked the man, putting Alistair down, but still holding him tight. "You didn't know I was coming. I didn't either until the Gropers didn't answer the phone. Is something wrong?"

"The Gropers didn't come in since the day before yesterday. We're waiting for the Police," Alistair explained. "We think we've locked some burglars in the cellar."

"Well done. But who's *We*?"

Alistair introduced them.

"This is Alan, and this is Sally," He said. "They live at the thatched cottage across the lake. Alan, Sally, this is my Father."

"Hello Alan! Hello Sally! Let's go and see what's happening, shall we? Get in."

They all climbed in, Alistair next to his father and the others behind. The car had just started to move up the drive when the police arrived. Two big Rover cars dashed past and stopped in front of the front door. Alistair gave his father the cellar key and the children watched as he got out and shook hands with the police sergeant before unlocking the front door and going inside with three of the policemen.

The three children got out of the car and walked round toward the kitchen. Something was banging and rattling as they came round the corner, so they stopped to look.

There in front of them, near the kitchen entrance, were the set of sloping doors that were used to unload coal into the cellar. They were held shut with a heavy bar of wood across metal hooks, and something was hitting at the bar from underneath.

"Go in and shout for someone to come," Ordered Alistair, giving Sally a nudge back toward the front doors.

She ran off to find help. Alistair picked up a large piece of firewood from a heap by the wall, and passed it to Alan. He picked up another piece for himself and nodded to Alan. They stood watching and waiting in case the men managed to come out.

They were just in time, too, because the metal hooks gave way and the wooden bar slid down. Two fingers came up through the gap and explored.

Alistair brought his piece of wood down on the fingers. Somebody below yelled and they disappeared inside. Then, as Sally and a policeman appeared from the kitchen door, there was a lot of shouting down below until everything went quiet.

“That's it then!” Said the policeman. “Seems like we've got them, with your help. You go back indoors and I'll wait here.”

As the children came though the kitchen into the hall, two police constables came up from the cellar with the men in handcuffs and led them outside. As the first police car went off with them, the sergeant came into the kitchen where Alistair's father was sitting holding his son's hand and looking him up and down.

“Well done, young man!” Said the Sergeant. “That was good work. They'd have been away if you hadn't been out the back!”

He turned to Alistair's father.

“How did you happen to come home Sir? Your office said you were in New York when we called?”

“I came in by plane last night, and rang up from the airport at about five past ten. There was no reply. As I employ Groper and his wife to be here, there had to be something wrong. I didn't wait to tell anyone. I just drove down overnight to see what was up.”

“You didn't know about Groper, then?” Asked the sergeant. “He has a criminal record as long as your arm.”

“And what were those two looking for in my cellar?”

“The stuff that Groper was stealing. He and his wife were travelling round the county, stealing things, and bringing them back here.”

“Why did they disappear, then?” Asked Alistair.

“That's easy to answer!” Chuckled the sergeant. “They didn't disappear. They got themselves arrested in Birmingham, and they wouldn't say where they were living. We didn't have a clue, not even a good reason for holding them, until you phoned us this morning.”

He looked at the children.

“Well, you three, you seem to have had an exciting night. You'd better get yourselves organised and come down to the station and see us this afternoon. Will you do that?”

“I'll bring them all.” Alistair's father promised. “Now, If you'll excuse me, Sergeant, I have a lot of things to catch up on before we come to you.”

At last the police were gone, and Lord Warborough let himself collapse into his chair. He looked at his son, and then at the others.

“Come on. Spill the beans! Six weeks ago, I went to America, leaving two well-recommended servants in charge of a severely crippled son. Not just any son but one who has no one to play with and is too shy and scared to meet strangers. Then I come home and find a fit and healthy thirteen year old with two young friends playing detectives! So now you are fit enough to help capture two desperate criminals. Something must have happened in between. How did you do it?”

As Alistair started to tell the story, helped by Sally, Alan was putting the kettle on.

“What a good idea, but make me tea not coffee.” Said Alistair's father. “Put the toaster on too, if you like. Go on you two. Tell me more.”

Lord Warborough was a good listener, and he somehow drew out the entire story, and got it in the right order. At last he put down his empty cup and the plate which had held slices of buttered toast and cheese. He sighed.

“What else can happen after all that?” He asked, and at that moment the front door bell rang.

He looked at the children, and Sally ran out into the hall, followed by the others. She opened the door.

“Mother! Is everything all right?”

“I should ask you that?” Asked Mother, coming in. “The bus conductor said the police had been here and arrested people, so I jumped off in the village and got a taxi to bring me straight here.”

She counted them as the others came out of the kitchen.

“Well. At least you three are safe.”

She sat down on a seat in the hall.

“It's bad news, isn't it?” Asked Sally.

Mother nodded.

“The worst. Granddad's agent has got an offer for the cottage, and we can only stay two more weeks until the new people are to move in. I'm going to have to look for a job and somewhere for us to live.”

“Live here.” Said Alistair, sounding excited. “The Gropers have gone so you can have their job. I need someone when Dad's away, and then I would have Alan and Sally as friends. Please say you will?”

“Oh mother! What a wonderful idea.” Said Sally, ducking under her mother's arm and turning, so that it was holding her.

“It's nice of you to ask, but I'm not sure that it's really up to you to say, Alistair” Said Mother.

“Someone for me?” Asked Alistair's father, coming in from the kitchen.

“Our mother, come to see if we're all right,” said Sally. “This is Alistair's father.”

“I am sorry I didn't greet you at the door, but I drove down from Scotland overnight and everyone has been keeping me awake.”

Mother stood up.

“Don't stand up on my behalf. I'm just going to bed for a couple of hours. Did the children tell you that we've got to go down to the Police station later to give statements?”

Mother shook her head.

“Yes.” Alistair's father explained. “It seems that I employed a pair of burglars to look after my house and their accomplices got arrested here just now. The boys have to identify the rogues and tell the law what they saw them doing. Please let me pick you up after lunch and take you to the police station with us? Alistair can phone for a Taxi to get you home now.”

“I'll sail across with them.”

“Sorry, It seems that my son has got our sailing boat out of mothballs.” He looked a bit surprised, but it didn't show in his voice, “Alistair will ferry you across to your cottage, that is if you trust him? I'll see you all later. Please excuse me now?”

He walked off upstairs, yawning.

“Come on then.” Said Mother, “Let's go home, while we still have one.”



## Chapter 12

### IT ALL COMES RIGHT IN THE END

Mother was very quiet as they ate their meal. It was neither a late breakfast nor an early lunch, maybe it was a bit of each, but it wasn't really a proper meal.

She was tired after her long train rides and the news about the cottage was making her more than usually unhappy. They had all known that it could have happened any time, but they hadn't expected to have to move out so quickly, and especially not just as they were just getting really settled.

The three of them just sat at the table with their glasses of fizzy lemonade. They weren't speaking now, they'd said it all, and the children looked out of the window at the lake they had come to love. At last mother drained her glass and stood up. She started to clear the table.

"Come on. I'll wash, Alan can dry, and you can put things away."

They were ready at half past one, sitting in the kitchen again with the radio on. Mother was wearing her best dress and the children were clean and tidy in school uniform, Alan in shorts and a grey shirt and Sally in a gym slip and white blouse.

"It feels funny to be wearing a dress and socks and shoes." Sally complained, bending down and scratching her heel inside the sock. "I'll never get used to them again!"

At quarter to three there was still no sign of Alistair and his father. Mother suggested that they should go down on the next bus, instead, if they weren't there soon.

"I'll run up to the corner and see if there's any sign of them." Said Sally, and ran down the slope of the front path and off up the lane.

Alan stood at the gate and watched.

"They're coming, Mother!" Called Alan. "Sally's at the corner, waving."

The big black car stopped at the corner, Sally got in, and it drove on to arrive at the gate as mother was locking the cottage door.

Alistair looked different! To start with he had been to have his hair cut. He was wearing a proper pair of grey flannel trousers and a white shirt with a tie, and he too was wearing shoes and socks. Alan got in the back with Sally, and Alistair jumped out and joined the others in the back so the children's mother could ride in front. Sally looked Alistair up and down.

"You look posh." She said. "I thought you said you only had old clothes?"

"That's an understatement!" Said his father, getting back into the car after seeing that their mother was comfortable in the front passenger seat and closing the door. "Apart from those funny shorts, he only had pyjamas, and not a pair of shoes in the place. We had to go shopping. That's why we're late. Sorry everyone!"

They were in the police station for over an hour. Mother and Lord Warborough sat in a waiting room and talked, as the children told their story again to a detective officer and a tape recorder in a small room across the passage way. After they finished and came back to the adults they waited together and Sally told her mother about last night's adventures again.

"Thank you very much, everyone." Said their officer, coming out with everything typed out.

"I just want the two boys to sign, and then I think that'll be all."

The boys signed the papers, and they all went out into the open air.

“Are you going away again today? Like you always do?” Asked Alistair.

His father looked at him.

“I can't go until I've sorted you out, can I?” He asked. “I'll have to find a new caretaker, and work out where you're going to school next term, and that's just for starters. I guess you've got me for a whole week at the very least.”

“You shouldn't leave him alone with strangers” Said Sally, standing in front of him and wagging her finger to emphasise the words. “I told him I'd tell you off for leaving him!”

Lord Warborough laughed.

“Pity you're not older then. I'd leave you in charge if you were grown up!”

“Does Alistair really have to go away to school?” Asked Alan. “We're going to the Comprehensive in September, and you can go in the junior school or grammar or the secondary without being in a different school.”

Alistair looked at his father, and his father looked back.

“Do you have any opinions?” Lord Warborough asked.

“I don't know.” Alistair answered, but he nodded. “I think I like the idea of living at home. But you went to boarding school, didn't you?”

Lord Warborough didn't answer, but looked at his watch.

“Well! Between us all we seem to have ruined our day. Can I take you all home and treat you to a meal?”

+ + +

As soon as they got back to the big house they went into the room next to the big front door, the one on the side opposite to Alistair's room. Whilst Alistair and Sally opened the shutters on each window, folding them back into the sides of the window openings, the others were folding up the dust sheets from the furniture. Their work revealed a comfortable sitting room with comfortable upholstered easy chairs and a long settee. With the windows open to the early evening sun and a warm breeze, it was bright and cheerful.

“Excuse us?” Asked Lord Warborough. “If you want to sit, please sit. If you want to explore, explore. I'm going to borrow my son for a quarter of an hour, and then we'll eat.”

Everyone enjoyed the simple grilled meal that Alistair and his father cooked. They all ate at the table in the big kitchen and, by the time they had finished eating and talking, Sally and Alan had decided that they liked Lord Warborough. It was just as Alistair had said, Lord is just a word. It's the person that counts. They knew that he listened, too, because he didn't have to be reminded of things they had said.

As they had a final cold drink each, he reached over and took Alistair's hand.

“Son! I've been turning it over in my mind and I think you're right. You don't need a tutor any more because you can go to school again, but you reminded me of my time at school. The first year away at school can be pretty grim, if you're as unlucky I was. I hated it for years until I was a prefect. You are older than I was, and you need to concentrate on your studies, so it could be far worse. I've decided that you should go with these two. If they can stand you, and if the headmaster will take you.”

He turned to the children's mother, who seemed to be going to tell him something.

“Alistair tells me that you've less than two weeks to look for a job and find somewhere else to live?”

She nodded.

“I can offer you a position, and a place to live,” He said. “If you would take on an extra child and an occasional lodger. Would you open up my house again, for me and Alistair?”

Mother looked at the three children.

“Go on. Say yes,” Said Alan and Sally together.

“Please say Yes.” Pleaded Alistair.

Sally was holding her mother's hand, and a big smile came on her face. She nodded happily to the boys.

Her mother looked down at her daughter, looked at the boys, and back to Alistair's father.

“If you put it that way. Yes, I think I'd like to.”

The children cheered. Alan grabbed Sally's hands and whirled her round and Alistair flung his arms around both of them.

“Thank you.” Said Alistair, going over and hugging his father. “Thanks Dad!”