

Three Men in a Panic



Written by

Stephen William ROWE

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in collaboration with

Tegwyn Jones

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my friend Tegwyn Jones for his collaboration in preparing, proofreading, and editing this book.

Authors Note

Each of the stories was inspired by adventures or unusual events which happened either to me or to Tegwyn at various periods in our lives.

After drawing up a shortlist of the most suitable ones, I went to work.

I have embroidered each tale with added events and characters, but I am convinced that these extra adventures might very well have happened, had things gone only slightly differently.

All the characters involved are products of my imagination and any resemblance of the characters to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Stephen William Rowe

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Chapter 1 – Unexpected meeting

I heaved the bulging suitcases out of the car boot and dumped them on the uneven flagstones of the quayside.

Stepping back to pull down the hatch, a discarded spider-crab pincer crunched under my heel, and I jumped with surprise.

'Careful!' my wife called back, and I sighed deeply.

'A week in Normandy will do us both good,' she had insisted a few weeks previously. 'Saint-Vaast is lovely at this time of year.'

'Out of season, you mean,' I complained. 'Pottering around small French fishing ports, during the cheap period, is not really my cup of Calvados,' I replied.

'Our hotel is certainly not cheap. In or out of season,' she countered.

'The dead season anyhow.' I shrugged.

'I suppose you're upset about the lack of half-naked bathing beauties for you to goggle at,' said my wife.

'That's what holidays were made for,' I sneered. 'During the summer months they do you well in the half-naked bathing beauty line, in Normandy.'

'Your mind is getting old and twisted,' she retorted. 'You need to get out a bit more.'

'Out more in Normandy? God!'

I was having difficulty working up any real enthusiasm for this holiday.

'Well, we're going anyway,' my wife had smiled. 'It's all booked and paid for.'

This last statement was a lie, but she experienced no qualms about this. She reasoned that, after all, a lie was simply an alternative way of presenting the truth.

She meant well, of course.

The truth is that my early retirement had brought with it, perhaps just a touch more free time than I had bargained with.

We had moved from the south coast of England to Grenoble fifteen years earlier when I was promoted. The job of Head of Research for a big international industrial group was not the sort of position one could easily refuse, so we went. This move had naturally separated from our friends.

When shortly after, my best friends were also promoted to top positions, sharing time together had become more and more difficult.

As a result, I had not seen my best friend, Alun and his wife Margaux for years.

I ought to mention here that, in our early years, Alun and I had often taken holidays together.

Invariably accompanied by our pal Mike, we had got up to all sorts of pranks and into numerous delicate situations all over the world.

Our respective wives still shudder when reminded of certain events which, strangely enough, we three still consider to be amongst the highlights of our existences.

Only a month earlier, I had been chatting to Alun on the phone.

'Hey, Alun!' I had said with enthusiasm.

'No,' he replied, 'I can't lend you a penny.'

'No, come on Alun, I don't need your money,'

'What do you want, then?'

I laughed. 'I've been playing with the idea of organising a trip somewhere with you and Mike. What do you think?'

'Aren't you forgetting something?' came his reply.

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'Sorry?'

'Your little grey cells seem to be depleting faster than I would have expected,' he sighed. 'Permit me to jog your memory.'

'Jog on,' I laughed.

'Well. If I happened to mention the words "wife" and "Margaux", would that convey anything to you?'

'Very funny!' I sighed. 'No, I haven't forgotten. Naturally, we'd have to work out a convincing way of putting the idea over.'

'What do you mean, "we".'

'Oh, all right, "I".'

'I prefer that,' said Alun. 'But do you honestly believe it possible, that time has blunted their memories about our more catastrophic escapades,' he paused. 'Somehow, I doubt it.'

I sighed again, 'No. That is a bit of a problem, I admit.'

'A stumbling block,' suggested Alun.

'Yes.'

'Or more possibly an impassable obstacle,' he added.

'Thanks, Alun. Always optimistic, as usual.'

'I call it being realistic.'

'Yes. But you have to admit time does tend to smooth off the sharp edges of memories a bit.' I said, not all that convinced, but not wanting to let Alun damp my enthusiasm.'

'Are you mad?' cried Alun, 'I can assure you that, over here, on my side of the channel, Margaux's memory has retained a very sharp focus of every single detail of our worst adventures.'

I had to admit that this was true.

'Unlike the evolution of your brain,' he continued, 'in Margaux's case, ageing plays out its game differently. Her little grey cells might have diminished in number, but those that survive seem to be the healthy plump ones. They also appear to be primarily the ones containing memories of our more distressing escapades.'

'Odd that,' I said, 'perhaps that's because those are the cells which have been the most efficiently stimulated,' I suggested.

Alun laughed a sad, rather melancholy little laugh. 'She says that the word "stimulated" is not adapted to the situation. She prefers "stressed", or rather Over-stressed, in fact.

'Not good news that,' I frowned down at the spiral phone-cable.

'She also mentioned that those particular cells concerned with memories of our doings are no longer grey but have all turned snowy white with worry.'

'Hum. Yes, bad that,' I replied.

'Not comforting,' concluded Alun.

'It's strange that you should mention it really because I, too, have noticed this selective neuron survival pattern.'

'The survival of the fittest.' Said Alun.

'The most resilient.'

'So, you've noticed the same evolutionary tendency in your better half too,' He paused. 'Nothing to do with British weather then.'

'In fact,' I took up this point, 'that very observation has driven me to propose a new and revolutionary theory of how the brain functions and evolves.' I paused for breath. 'I was thinking of submitting an article on the subject to "Nature".'

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'Never too late for the Nobel prize,' agreed Alun.

'I must admit that I was thinking more about the prize money,' I admitted, 'than about the fame, glory and celebrity.'

'Fame and celebrity are fine in reasonable quantities,' said Alun.

'Yes,' I admitted, 'One has to know when to stop.'

'Agreed,' admitted Alun. 'It's always a good idea to keep one's feet firmly on the ground, so concentrating on the money side of things would have a good stabilising effect.'

'I've tried a bit of Fame and glory,' I replied, 'and I've often found that a little goes a long way.'

'Agreed, there's such a thing as too much of a good thing. You'd have to do quite a bit of travelling to talk at conferences, of course.'

'And you could perhaps accompany me, acting as my agent.' I mused.

'I'd only take ten per cent,' said Alun.

'Ten?' I cried.

'Or fifteen. Mike could come to carry your satchel.'

'Maybe, after all, it would be simpler to try and convince the girls though,' I sighed.

'Yeh,' agreed Alun.

'I'll see if I can find the right moment when we're on holiday.'

'OK. keep me posted.'

'Will do.'

So, it was with sobering thoughts about the low probability of success of this enterprise that I picked up the suitcases and turned to follow my wife.

Now, about fifty years ago and with typical French attention to detail, some lazy fisherman or other, had discarded a heavy rusted chain on the quay. It was

still there today, rusting happily and enjoying its well-earned retirement.

It goes without saying, therefore, that I was destined to trip over it.

However, picking myself up again, my choice curses were inexplicably covered by an unexpected roar of laughter.

In the near distance, I saw my wife gazing at me, sadly shaking her head. Beside her, doing likewise was another woman I vaguely recognised.

However, behind them, doubled over with mirth was the shape of someone I could not fail to recognise.

It was Alun.

By the time I realised this, however, he had fallen over backwards onto a pile of drying fishing nets and was shaking with laughter, unable to speak.

My mouth fell open. "Margaux? Alun?" I cried. "What on earth are you doing here?"

Chapter 2 – The Scheme

To cut a long story short, which admittedly is not my usual way of going about things, our wives had been scheming.

Since the two of us had retired, they had been exchanging observations about progress, and had eventually concluded that something would have to be done.

‘It seems that our men have been promoted beyond their capabilities,’ said Margaux with her usual lucidity and insight.

‘Yes,’ replied my wife, ‘holding down top retirement positions requires an exceptional skill-set. For men, at least. Change-Management ought to be taught at university, but as it is, one has to learn as one goes.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Margaux, ‘That’s why consultants are paid so much. I wonder if the present situation wouldn’t benefit from a bit of gentle interfering. What do you think?’

‘A prudent precaution,’ smiled my wife.

They agreed that, while both of us were reasonably easy to live with, we needed to be kept busy. This, they reasoned, could not last infinitely and would eventually become a little too challenging. Furthermore, the pencilled job lists on each of our fridge doors were already getting dangerously short.

Both women had already used the age-old tactics of pointing out how much the wall paint has yellowed. They had then pointed at the kitchen, to draw our attention to how everything had aged and had then sighed at how the gardens had become unacceptably overgrown.

However, there is, a limit to this method.

They had already realised that although there's almost unlimited scope to the number of essential tasks one can invent, it is also true that there is an equally inexhaustible number of excuses for not doing them.

Furthermore, they were aware that, while both Alun and I were good at most do-it-yourself jobs around the house, we rebelled against "having" to do them. This was firmly ingrained in our DNA.

'Do you know what I think?' said Margaux

'I think so,' replied my wife.

'I know that it might seem a little extreme at first sight,' she hesitated and bit her lip, 'but I wonder if we should not permit the boys a little freedom.'

'A bold and innovative move,' gasped my wife with a wry smile, 'freedom of a very carefully controlled and surveyed amount, of course.'

'That goes without saying,' smiled Margaux.

'That would fit in very nicely with our plans too,' said my wife.

'Exactly.'

The Girls, (we always referred to our wives as "The Girls"), had there and then taken a decision.

They decided that we were all going to take a series of holidays together and would travel to a new destination every month or so.

What is more, we were to escort them to the scenes of some of our past adventures.

This incredible news was imparted to us during that first evening meal.

We had taken a long, relaxed aperitif on the terrace of the port-side bistro and had then dined on lobster and champagne and were by then naturally prepared for anything.

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Even so, it was only after the second bottle of champagne had arrived that the full extent of the plan was revealed.

'Why don't you ask Mike to come along. It would do him good, too,' smiled my wife.

We goggled at the Girls and shot worried looks at each other.

'Yes,' said Margaux, 'I know what you're thinking.'

'Sorry about that.' Said Alun, 'I didn't really mean it.'

'Shut up a moment, will you,' scowled Margaux.

'OK.'

'I know that, as the saying goes, two heads are better than one...'

'Three in our case.' Interrupted Alun.

Margaux sighed and looked at my wife. 'I wonder if we aren't making a big mistake.'

My wife shrugged, 'go on.'

'I also know,' she continued, 'that I have often and perhaps a little unfairly, said that, in your cases...'

'Yes, I know,' said Alun, 'that the capacity of the sum of our three brains in action, is less than any one of them taken singly.'

'Nothing unfair about that Margaux,' said my wife, 'It's a well-documented fact.'

'A case of the lowest common denominator, perhaps,' added Margaux.

'Hey!' I cried, 'I don't know about Alun's, but there's certainly nothing common about *my* denominators.'

'Except perhaps the lowest ones,' said Alun.

Margaux ignored this bit of attempted humour and continued, 'But even so, we feel that anything would be preferable to having bored husbands mooning about the place.'

'And getting under our feet,' added my wife.

We both brightened, 'Oh yes. Absolutely!' cried Alun.

'Certainly, the worst thing that could happen,' I added.

'A complete catastrophe,' completed Alun.

'Be quiet, you two.'

We became quiet and sipped some more champagne.

'How about a third bottle,' smiled Alun.

'Be quiet,' ordered Margaux.

To understand why we were so surprised at the inclusion of Mike in the plans, it's important to point out something. In nearly all cases, Mike was the person who suggested the ideas which landed us in our darkest enterprises.

When challenged, he always replied that he had not influenced our decisions in any way and that we had each had a free vote.

What he neglected to mention was that he usually omitted to supply us with the critical bits of information which might have swung our votes in the opposite direction.

This, added to Mikes very approximate map reading skills, had often been a source of grave concern to me.

However, in his early years, he had been a member of the regional rugby team, and this gave him an outward aspect which had on several occasions, served as a useful deterrent.

On the other hand, it had also made him a little too sure of himself. This had proved to be a constant source of anguish during exchanges with the representatives of authority in far off countries.

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Alun was, unfortunately, always ready to try anything. He thus tended to look on any sketchiness in Mike's proposed plans as being attributable solely to his poor presentation skills.

He would overlook the most blatant errors in reasoning, as long as the overall scheme looked like being good fun and that there would be cold beer at the end of it.

Having good fun was in fact Alun's key to the enjoyment of our little outings, but the fun was sometimes rather a long time coming.

All the same, he had the quickest mind of the three of us and usually managed to find a solution to any problems, before we had even finished fathoming out what had gone wrong.

All the same, his solutions inevitably carried with them a certain amount of risk. Furthermore, this risk was rarely communicated to us until it was too late to bail out.

For instance, after a while, he might pipe-up and ask something like, "Oh, by the way, you two aren't claustrophobic, or anything like that, are you?" which of course we were.

He might then add, "In any case, the underground part is easy going. As long as we don't get jammed in the narrow bit."

If we drew his attention to our shortcomings, he would be optimistic as usual, "Oh well! Don't worry. We'll cross that bridge when we get there."

This sort of thing had also occurred because one or other of us had been scared of Heights, of insects or snakes, of rough weather at sea or other natural phenomena.

Somehow, however, we always survived.

Now I, on the other hand, was the one who often did the worrying for the other two. I was also the one who grumbled and complained when things went wrong and looked like ending up rather a long way off, "according to plan".

I had excellent excuses for this unsympathetic behaviour because when something went really wrong, it was inevitably I who got the brunt of the thing.

Whatever happened, I always seemed to be the one left holding the wrong end of the stick.

I know I shouldn't say this, but I have always suspected that this was all part of Alun's idea of fun.

My wife grabbed the bottle as I was about to serve my self. 'I'll take that,' she said, but before I could complain, she added, 'Why don't you two pop over and discuss the idea with Mike?'

'Yes,' added Margaux, 'But we will require you to write up a proposal.'

We pulled faces.

'A proposal for an extended series of voyages. Just note down the destinations,' said Margaux.

'No limits imposed.' Added my wife.

'No limits!!' I exclaimed.

'Are you feeling all right?' asked Alun, 'It's not just the champagne speaking?'

'Oh! Perhaps, after all, they are getting a bit too old for it.' Frowned my wife.

'Pity, really,' agreed Margaux, 'Never mind.'

'We'll take the ferry and go and see Mike tomorrow,' cried Alun.

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‘Good,’ said Margaux. ‘Have some more Champagne.’

At the time it did seem to me to be somewhat out of character that neither of the girls had mentioned anything about costs.

I mentioned this to Alun, but as usual, he told me not to worry.

In most cases, unfailing optimism is a valuable asset. However, in Alun's case, it could become an extremely dangerous commodity.

Had we been aware of the terrible truth behind this plan, it would no doubt have astounded even Alun.

It was only much later that we learnt that “The Girls” had negotiated a contract with an English publishing company, for a book telling the story of our future travels.

They had swayed the editorial staff by presenting the outline of several chapters describing our earlier escapades, which wasn't really fair.

The publishing company had also been very enthusiastic about The Girl's idea of setting up a web blog to precede and work-up pre-publishing interest in the book.

The company finance specialist estimated that if well managed, the income from advertising on the blog would comfortably cover all our travelling expenses. This is why they had decided to accompany us and why they were so uncharacteristically enthusiastic about our wildest propositions.

Had we known that we were unwittingly about to be turned into the laughing stock of the planet, we might have rebelled against the principle of the thing.

That being said, we probably wouldn't have rebelled all that much and certainly not for very long.

The evening meal eventually finished in an atmosphere of eager expectation, which we had rarely felt since our childhood Christmas eves.

It would, we said, take more than two bottles of champagne, a few pre-dinner beers, and aperitifs, to affect men of our experience.

At least that's what we were telling the girls, just before Alun had to haul me back out of the oily harbour water.

Chapter 3 – Visiting Mike

The next morning Alun phoned Mike.

We felt it unwise to allow too much grass to grow under our feet, having been presented with such an unexpected and almost unbelievable proposition.

Furthermore, Mike lived near Lyme Regis on one of the most agreeable stretches of the British south coast, so visiting him would be a considerable pleasure.

The girls told us they would prefer to stay together in France and spend a few days in Paris before going down to Grenoble for the week. What they neglected to mention was that this was because they had a meeting with the French branch of their publishers. After this, they wanted some time to finish preparing their secret blog, without anyone looking over their shoulders.

That very same evening, therefore, we took the six thirty ferry from Cherbourg to Poole and were picked up by Mike and taken to Lyme Regis.

Well, in fact, we didn't actually go straight to his cottage. Mike, with his characteristic foresight, realised that Alun and I must have first of all suffered a great shock, and then had had to brave the dangers of the high seas. As a consequence, he suggested, nay, insisted, on a short pause at a hostelry.

Now this hostelry was of good repute, frequented by gentlemen of means and education and the victuals were known to be of the most excellent quality. The beer was apparently pretty good too. So, we stopped off for a drink or two and a bite to eat.

Breakfast the next morning was a quiet affair. It felt vaguely reminiscent of our younger days when we

had occasionally celebrated something or other a little more than might have been deemed absolutely necessary.

After downing a Full English ("A sovereign remedy," said Mike), we stepped gingerly out into the cool sea breeze and followed Mike up towards his father's home. The cottage, a short walk from the sea, was owned by his father, but the old man himself, lived higher up the seaward facing hill. It was a big house with lovely rambling gardens, soaring, timeless trees and impressive rhododendron bushes.

I suppose he must have been roughly eighty years old now and spent most of his time either in the garden or at the pub with his two old friends. This jovial trio sometimes reminded me of Alun, Mike and Myself, but I kept this observation to myself.

'They'll be in the garden I suppose,' muttered Mike, screwing up his eyes a little at the effort of speaking, 'Dad's expecting us.'

A few steps further on he added, 'Apparently he has a little task he'd like us to do for him.'

Alun shot me a quick, frightened look.

'Oh God!' he said.

We had done a small job for him some years earlier and had ended up in court because of it.

'Nothing illegal.' said Mike reassuringly, then added 'Something to do with his cat.'

I started. 'His cat? Didn't he always hate all living things except horses.'

Alun shook his head, 'Last time, it was a little job with that damn dog. Except that he neglected to mention that it was his neighbours' dog and not his own.'

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‘Don’t remind me,’ I said. ‘And we had to take all the blame, to save his so-called local reputation.’

Alun sighed, ‘I can still hear that lawyer and his fruity voice. “Just young men’s pranks, your honour. I’m sure that they regretted it as soon as they were sober enough for their brains to start functioning correctly again”.’

Without actually saying it, he’d given a distinct impression to all present. That impression was that he strongly doubted that any of our three brains had ever really functioned correctly, from birth onwards. The fine had been a hefty one for us in those days, and we were even required to make a public apology.

Mike shook his head, ‘Not an animal.’

‘As far as I’m aware,’ snorted Alun, ‘Or at least as far as my education goes, a cat IS an animal.’

‘Do you know!’ I exclaimed, ‘I really do believe you’re right Alun.’

I nodded, ‘Yes. I have vague memories of our school classes, with the lovely Mrs Noel, where that particular point was covered in some detail.’

‘Yes,’ smiled Alun, ‘and Mrs Noel was certainly more of a cat than a dog.’

‘Ha, ha!’ sneered Mike, ‘I mean his catamaran. His two-keeled boat if you need extra help in getting the gist of the thing.’

‘Oh! Okay.’ I said, and we relaxed a little, but not completely. We’d make damn sure that, no matter how trivial the task should be, we would make absolutely certain that we were doing it to something that actually belonged to him.

We turned off the main road into the close that led to the imposing house. Mike opened the gate. We followed him along the steppingstone path running

across the lawn and skirted the hedge on the right-hand corner of the building. He then pushed open a tall wooden gate set in a high brick wall, and we entered the back gardens.

Three old men were standing near a high stone wall which separated the flower gardens from the vegetable plot. They turned as we approached.

'Well, well,' smiled Mike's rugged and sun-tanned dad, looking us over while shaking our hands, 'Looks like the lads have been out on the tiles.' Saying this, he turned and winked to his two friends who laughed and nodded.

All three had walking sticks, hearing aids and glasses.

All three also had creases around their eyes, indicating a decided tendency for laughing.

One of the two friends stepped forward, 'It's never a good idea to let the blood alcohol content drop too low though.' The two old men shook their head.

'Been proved a thousand times. A man can go completely to pieces, especially if the drop is too brutal.'

'Yep,' agreed Mike's father, 'A brutal drop can be lethal, unless one is prepared and highly trained.'

'Training is essential,' added the third old man, 'Too often neglected by the modern young man.' The three slapped their legs and laughed.

'How about a beer, lads?' he asked and burst out laughing as he watched us grimace. 'See that? Lack of training.'

I looked at the flower bed which they had been scrutinising.

'What's that stuff?' I asked.

'Tobacco plants. You are not smokers eh?'

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We shook our heads.

'Almost ready for harvesting. Another week perhaps, if the weather holds.'

Mike leant forward and put out his hand to touch one of the leaves.

Before he could do so, his dad caught his forearm with his stick and yanked it back, 'Hands off.'

'Must be manipulated with caution.' he said looking at his friends. 'We don't want cigars perfumed with the perspiration of drunks.'

His friend laughed and added, 'Or we'd have done that ourselves.' The three had a good chuckle over this.

'You intend to make your own cigars?' asked Alun, 'Isn't that illegal?'

'Not if you pay your taxes, then you can do more or less what you want.' Mike's dad smiled. 'If you pay them that is...'

'So, you're starting up a contraband cigar outfit.' Alun shook his head, 'Doesn't surprise me.'

'I didn't say we weren't going to pay, did I? No.'

His friend took up the subject, 'We were just reflecting that two hundred and fifty pounds of taxes per kilo is a bit stiff.'

'How many cigars can you make out of a kilo Dad?'

The man shook his head sadly and looked at his friends, 'Mike is always throwing cold water on our ideas.' he said turning to us.

I was quick with mental calculations, so I said, 'A cigar must weigh about ten grams, so you get one hundred per kilo. So that's two pounds fifty per cigar. How much does a good cigar cost?'

Mikes dad reluctantly replied, 'Fifteen to twenty. Up to thirty for top-class ones. Yes, I know, I know, nearly ten times less.'

'But you prefer to smoke with the pleasure of knowing that the smoke is one hundred per cent illegal.' smiled Mike.

'Tastes better,' said one of the old men, 'specially with a drop of illegally distilled pear alcohol...'

Mike started, 'Christ! You haven't started that again, have you?'

The men exchanged glances, 'Keep your voice down,' he whispered, 'or all the neighbours will be round for free bottles.'

'My God. You lot will end up in prison one of these days.' Mike laughed.

'If we declare that the tobacco is for making snuff, there's no tax,' said one of the men, 'but the Exciseman might come and check. So, we were considering declaring that it was being grown for scientific research, which also exempts it from taxation.'

Mikes dad completed this little discussion by saying, 'But we decided that we would go to the police next week and complain that someone had broken into the garden and had stolen it all.' He smiled, 'Clever eh?'

Mike shook his said slowly and sighed. Then suddenly he stiffened. 'Hey! NO. Oh no, we are absolutely NOT going to be roped into your criminal plan,' he cried, then turned to us 'Come on lads. Let's get out of here before it's too late. That'll end us up in court again as sure as that.'

Mike's dad laughed and stretched out a restraining hand, 'Don't worry. We don't need the help of

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inexperienced novices. We can manage this one on our own.'

'Not our first adventure, eh?' smiled his friends, and the three laughed at some secret memories.

Mike relaxed a little but remained on his guard as he asked. 'You said you had a little job you needed our help with. We have discussed this and absolutely refuse if there is anything at all peculiar about it.'

Mike's dad shook his head in mock sadness. 'No confidence? I'm hurt.'

'What is it, this little job?' insisted Mike.

'Well I eventually decided to sell the old catamaran, but it leaks a bit.' He admitted sadly.

'Oh! I get it. So, you want us to repair the hulls so that you can make a quick buck out of it, for nothing.'

Mike's dad smiled, 'That's exactly it. I see I trained you well. What do you think, boys?'

His friends nodded, 'Brilliant.'

'The truth is that we would do it ourselves, but we find wriggling about inside the hulls a little more difficult than when we were your age,' he continued.

He nodded at us, 'Probably only take you a morning, then you could take her out for a sail.'

'Ah!' Alun smiled, 'Just like old times.' He had suddenly warmed to the idea, and a strange light had appeared in his eyes.

'Where is she?' he asked.

'Glad you agreed lads. She is down at Weymouth,' he smiled. 'You could sail over there in the Shrimper. I'm keeping her by the way. Anyway, the trip would get your old nautical juices flowing and the team into shape before the regatta.'

'They could use the motor if the wind's no good.' proposed his friend.

'Yep.' Agreed his dad, 'I had it completely overhauled in the spring. Runs as smooth as velvet.'

'Regatta? What regatta?' Mike had become alert.

His father lifted one of the tobacco leaves with his stick, 'We thought you might like to have a go at the regatta afterwards, that's early on Sunday morning.'

'Regatta!' Mike had always been keen on competitive sailing, so the deal was settled.

The next day we set off from the Cobb at Lyme Regis at about mid-day. We took our suitcases along containing all our gear because there was plenty of space, the Cornish Shrimper 19 having four berths. Mike brought along a change of clothes because he declared that it would not be healthy spending the long evenings closeted up onboard in his "working clothes".

Luckily for us, the wind was just in the right quarter, and Mike proposed to leave the harbour under sail rather than the motor.

'We need to get back in shape before the race. You two are certainly a bit rusty, so I'll keep an eye on you as we go.'

This meant that he intended to sit in the cockpit and shout at us and so perfect his skippers' skills, which he no doubt felt were a little rusty too.

As soon as we cleared the pretty little harbour, the wind freshened, and soon the little Shrimper was sailing along at quite a respectable speed. Mike had already got his commanding-officers voice back. He'd also unexpectedly found a couple of cans of beer just at hand and was now practising the delicate art of drinking beer from a can, on a pitching boat. Although he seemed to have mastered this quickly, he was

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clearly not yet satisfied with his performance, so he opened a second can.

Aided by the relaxing qualities it produced he shouted back to Alun. 'Pull those sheets in and go and see if you remember how to get the spinnaker up. We'll probably need one for the race.'

Mike was unfortunately not one of those people who could take part in a regatta just for the fun of it. Not only did alcohol occasionally flow in his blood but above all the stronger variety of competitive spirit, which must have been at least sixty per cent proof. We knew by experience that when we had eventually been beaten by most of the other boats, he would sulk for days.

With this in mind, Alun struggled along the heaving side of the boat to the tiny foc'astle where the sail was stored.

Mike and I shouted suitably conflicting advice as to how to fix the sail, and it's three corners, green, red and white.

'Which of you two is the most colour-blind?' shouted Alun, doing his best to find the corners in the sail bag.

'Christ, Alun!' shouted Mike, 'Don't let it go overboard, or it'll get dragged under the hull, and that'll ruin it for good.' He took another sip of beer. 'Do you know how much a new one would cost?'

Alun made a noise like an angry bear. 'In a moment it'll be you who will go overboard. And even if you get ruined, I won't bother to buy a replacement.'

'Oh, thank you very much' Mike got on his high horse, 'for trying to train you to do a simple task properly for once.'

'For once?' Alun snorted, 'I never did this before.'

Mike seemed amazed. 'You never put a spinnaker up before? Never?'

'Never.'

'Oh. Okay,' he took another sip, 'Okay. Make sure the sheets are on the outside of the stays. Got the corners on? Good.'

He sat back against the transom.

'Now, watch how I do this. Ready to haul on the sheets?' he shouted to me.

'Ready.'

'Go!'

Mike and I hauled like fury, and the massive sail slid smoothly out of its containing bag. With a startling crack, the gathering wind filled the belly of the sail, and it shot forward, out of Alun's hands and over the water.

'Watch out.' called Mike as Alun toppled about, seeking his balance. 'You drunk or what?'

At this instant a steel cheese-wire, which no doubt has a well-known name, appeared from nowhere and flashed outwards, propelled by the swelling sail. Alun leaned backwards to avoid being decapitated by it and it flashed out along the outside of his arm like a blade. At about wrist level, however, it encountered an obstruction. This was none other than Alun's beloved Rolex. The cable sheared off the wrist strap, and as we watched aghast, it flew up and was catapulted twenty yards or so, spinning and gleaming elegantly, into the waves, as only a Rolex can. At the same instant, the boat surged forward under the impulse of the huge extra sail, and Alun gaped open-mouthed, unable to speak.

Mike immediately became very involved in doing something technical with the mess of loose rope

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under his feet, and I had to bite my lip. Alun worked his way back to the safety of the cockpit after looking absently after his lost watch.

'Christ. That was a close one.'

He seemed to be muttering to himself, then turned back to me. 'That was the best watch I ever had.'

'I'm really sorry Alun.' I replied

'Yeah. I'll never find another as good as that one.'

He seemed lost in thought. 'I picked it up directly from the manufacturer.' He paused and shook his head sadly. 'Cost me nearly ten quid in Bangkok, that did. Most genuine copy in the world apparently.'

Mike and I burst into laughter, and I had to do all in my power to keep the boat on track.

'Hey! Are you two sailing, or what?' shouted commander Mike angrily, more because his can of beer had rolled over the side than anything else.

'Damn it!' he shouted.

Chapter 4 The Regatta

The next morning, we went in search of the catamaran. We eventually discovered it hemmed in at the far back of the Weymouth boatyard, where it had been resting for some years. When we pulled off its two heavy tarpaulin covers, we found it in surprisingly good condition. Ten other boats had to be shuffled about before we could extract the catamaran from the yard and drag it to a space where we could get to work on it. This took us most of the morning, and we, therefore, decided it unwise to start work without a proper meal inside us. Happily, and as usual, Mike knew just the place.

Unsurprisingly, he led us to a pub only a short stumbling distance from the boatyard. The sea air and unaccustomed exercise had given us all a healthy appetite and had somewhat damped our initial desire to get on quickly with the job in hand. The food was excellent and the beer plentiful, so we tucked in with energy. Afterwards, Mike suggested that we had better rest a little to enable digestion to run its proper course before starting.

'The sun's too high still,' he said, 'it'll be far too hot - at least forty centigrade - inside those hulls. You two would sweat to death.'

Now, this was the first time that we realised that we had been lumbered with the hard bit.

'Hey!' cried Alun, 'Who said I was going inside that thing?'

Mike sighed. 'You both know I'm claustrophobic, don't you?'

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This was, in fact, the first time we'd ever heard about this, but he went on quickly before we could argue. 'And anyway, I need to be on the outside, to guide you to the places that need repairing.'

'I could do that, just as well as you Mike,' I protested.

'Oh, can you now?' Mike took on his commander stance with hands on his hips. 'And where, pray, did this in-depth nautical knowledge come from all of a sudden?'

'No doubt from the same shop as your claustrophobia. So, shut up, Captain Cook.'

'Anyhow, it's too hot for the moment,' he said and quickly strode away to the Gents before we could take up the argument.

Anyhow, when finally, he deemed it cool enough to start, Mike walked back to the floating dock to the Shrimper to collect the supplies. Half an hour later, he returned with the information that one of us idiots had forgotten to take the resin on board. Then, inevitably, by the time we had been to the marina chandlery and had purchased the stuff, it was too late to start.

The following day, we were up at six thirty.

This was not because we wanted to, but because some idiot was repairing or trying out, the starting horn for the regatta.

'At least we can get the job done before the sun gets too hot,' said Mike over the sizzling bacon and eggs.

'That is, I suppose an impersonal WE,' I grumbled, 'in that it doesn't include you.'

'Oh, come on you guys, it'll only take an hour, then I'll buy a round.'

‘Two.’ said Alun, “although I’d prefer a few more hours sleep.”

‘OK, two rounds then.’

A little later, while Alun and I were preparing the sheets of prickly fibreglass and mixing the smelly resin, Mike went around the hulls with an indelible felt tip, marking the places where repairs would be necessary.

After a while Alun followed him, ‘Christ, man! It’s like a colander - there must be fifty holes to stop. You said an hour.’

‘Did I?’ He looked surprised to discover this, ‘Oh well! perhaps a little more, but anyhow, we’ll be finished in time for lunch.’

Alun and I exchanged glances and shook our heads sadly. We’d been hoodwinked once more.

Alun and I each had a mains-powered inspection lamp, so that Mike, from outside, could guide us to the places needing repairs. The hot incandescent bulbs had however, the additional effect of intensifying the heady smell of the resin in the confined space of the cat hulls.

Although the respirator face-masks Mike had borrowed cut some of this out, the downside was that that they were unbearably hot to wear. Soon, our faces were streaming with perspiration, and we had to keep removing the damn things to wipe it off — no easy task in the confined space and the cause of much cursing.

Wriggling our ways down the narrow hulls with masks dangling from us, bumping on everything, while transporting both resin and fibreglass mats, was

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a long and painful job and we cursed freely at Mike through the hull's thin walls.

We had decided, or rather Mike had, to start the long job at the bows and then to gradually work backwards.

Now, even to the most inexperienced novice, it will be clear that this job is far from exciting. He will readily understand that Impregnating prickly fibreglass matting with a sticky, smelly resin is a messy and unpleasant job, especially when one's movements are limited by the enclosed space and the cramps one inevitably gets.

Even though, every twenty minutes or so we surfaced for more resin and a welcome breath of fresh air, it was hard going. The hulls were already stifflingly hot by half past ten. When I came out for the third or fourth time, with even less skin left of my knees and elbows, I found Mike sitting on the hull of the neighbouring boat dangling his legs happily, a half-empty pint glass of beer in his hand and another, full sitting beside him.

Following my look and never at a loss, he jumped down and handed me the glass, 'This is yours.'

I shot him a sharp glance. 'Not too hard, your end of the task?' I asked

He pretended not to hear, 'I'll just pop over to collect Alun's. Should be ready now...'

'Ready now!' I shook my head in astonishment.

'Had to change the barrel. Back in a mo.'

Mike always astonished me with the speed at which he could invent excuses. He went over and leant into Alun's hull. 'Hi, Alun! What'll you have?'

There was no reply

'Come on Alun don't sulk. I'm paying...'

There was still no reply.

He leant into the hull, grabbed Alun's foot and shook it. 'Christ! He's passed out, the idiot...' He turned. 'Come on quick. We got to get him out double fast, must be the resin vapour.'

I rushed round to the other side of the hull, and we each grabbed an ankle and pulled. There was a bump, and the body jumped back.

'Christ, Mike. If his chin gets blocked behind one of the struts, we'll break his neck. Quick turn him over.'

We managed to cross his long legs but struggled to flip him onto his back. There is nothing so difficult to handle than a limp body. God alone knows what this twisting could have done to his spine, but we had no time to think about details.

'Now pull quick.' By this time the man in charge of the boatyard had noticed our agitation.

'Trouble?'

'Yep. Call an ambulance quick! He's passed out in there...'

At this moment, a stifled noise was heard from inside the hull. A low moaning sound followed this, but we couldn't make out a word. Mike and I exchanged worried glances; Alun was mumbling in an utterly incoherent way.

'God!' moaned Mike, 'The vapour must have got him. I bet the idiot took his mask off.'

Now, this seemed entirely possible knowing Alun, but when at last we had dragged him back far enough for his face to appear below the hatch, we saw he had it on.

His face was red and was working most strangely and animatedly, and the mumbling continued in an

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uninterrupted flow. I leant down and pushed the mask back up over his head to allow fresh air to reach him.

We then both jumped back.

'What the bloody hell are you two damn idiots doing?' He shouted, clearly not at all half-dead, not very unconscious either, but certainly very angry.

'You took half the skin off the back of my head. If that's your idea of a funny prank, I'm going to show you what I think about it with my boot.'

We looked down at him as he painfully extracted himself from the hull and sat up, half in and half out of the hatch.

Mike cautiously stepped out of reach, 'We thought you'd passed out.'

'Yes,' I added 'when you didn't reply.'

'We had to get you out quick.' concluded Mike.

Alun rubbed the back of his head, and when he removed his hand, it had blood on it. 'Thanks a lot, you two. You might have killed me. I'm probably going to bleed to death now anyway.'

'But...' murmured Mike.

'Can't a man have a few minutes sleep without all the world falling on his head? Christ!'

'Sleep?' cried Mike, but at this moment a siren announced the arrival of an ambulance in the boatyard. Two paramedics jumped out and came running towards us. They spotted Alun's bloody hands and pushed us aside. They immediately went into automatic-mode and checked for all the things that were required of them before attempting to remove Alun from the hull. He shot us rueful glances from time to time. Only after they checked his mask to make sure that it was the correct type did they ask what had happened. Mike and I had a strong

inclination to slink away and get out of the immediate vicinity before the truth came out. However, we were by now hemmed in by a growing group of interested bystanders. It was then that Alun, obviously not too keen about looking a fool in front of the gathered crowd, did some of his better ad-lib work.

'It was the heat,' he wiped his forehead theatrically. 'It must be more than forty centigrade in there. I thought I could stand it but obviously not. I just went out like a light.' He looked around the crowd.

'Good job these guys were keeping an eye on me though. Got me out almost immediately.'

'How do you feel?' asked the ambulance man, 'Can you stand?'

Alun was on the point of saying that he felt refreshed after his sleep, but thought better of it, 'Oh yes, I feel perfect now. I just can't stand the heat you see. I should have been more careful, but you know how it is. The job's got to be done,' he smiled at the crowd adding, 'as I'm the only one who really knows anything about repairing boats, I just got down to it.' The crowd nodded their understanding, 'These two guys are keen enough,' he continued, 'but I wouldn't feel safe in a boat botched up by amateurs.'

The crowd murmured agreement.

'Well,' said the ambulance man, 'you'd better let them to finish the job. You take it easy now.'

'Yes,' smiled Alun, 'Anyway I've completed the really technical and important bits. Mike, there will finish it off, won't you Mike?'

Everyone turned and looked at Mike who was on the point of calling Alun every name in his nautical vocabulary. However, under the scrutiny of the crowd,

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he gulped and forced a smile. 'Of course, of course. Naturally, no trouble, no trouble at all.'

Alun nodded as he was led off to have his pulse and so on checked. 'Good man. Don't worry. You'll get the hang of it quick enough. I'll explain.'

The crowd turned back to Mike again who was once more preparing a few chosen insults. Instead, he smiled, 'Oh thanks awfully Alun.'

'Don't forget you owe me two rounds, Mike.'

This remark struck the crowd as an excellent reminder of tasks which had somehow been neglected in the heat of the action, and it moved off in the direction of the pub, to talk over the event.

Perhaps driven by sympathy, the boatyard owner brought us a big extraction fan with a pipe which he pushed inside the hull, right down to the bows. It drew air into the hull and cleared any accumulation of vapours. It also kept the temperature down.

'Should have thought of that before starting.' I scowled, 'Would have saved a lot of worries.'

Mike didn't reply but moved over and clambered down into one of the hulls.

'I suppose I'll have to finish the damn job now,' he scowled.

'Looks like it.' I smiled. 'We did two thirds, so you've only got your third to do.'

He shrugged.

'Don't complain.' I continued, 'Your part is the easiest third, and at least that third will be done properly, even if the rest has been botched by amateurs.'

'Balls!' said Mike disappearing inside the right-hand hull.

'I hope your claustrophobia, won't be too much of a handicap, Mike.' I said

'Go to hell,' came the reply from within the bowls of the catamaran.

When Alun returned, Mike was beavering away. 'I bought those two guys a round of drinks. Nice lads.' With one hand he was dragging two deck chairs and in the other he held two welcome pints of beer. He handed me one, his finger to his lips. We opened the deck chairs and turned them towards the sun.

'Keep cursing and swearing Mike.' called Alun, 'So that we know you're still alive.'

The reply to this was nautical and carried with it the proof of his long experience of the seas. The richness and variety of his vocabulary was also proof enough of Mikes true vocation in life.

The next day was Regatta Day, and as before, we were woken early by the same fool testing out the starting horn again.

Our eggs and bacon tasted even better, now that the spectre of a blistering hot day of work was gone.

The previous evening we'd taken the catamaran out and had checked her for leaks. We tested the sails and sailed around the outer bay in the dwindling daylight, memorising the course the race would be following. We even practised getting the spinnaker up, and more importantly down again, several times, and succeeded relatively well.

Once out on the water, Mike seemed to forget all about his recent land-side troubles and went so far as congratulating us on our performance. "Just as long as you follow my instructions, we'll do fine tomorrow." I had then reminded him that he owed us two rounds.

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There were a surprising number of boats out that day, but only about fifteen in our race. Mind you, fifteen catamarans take up a lot of room, and the experienced Mike was careful to keep well behind the starting line.

The competitors obviously knew each other, and competition was already apparent in the way that some boats were cautiously manoeuvring around each other. Mike seemed to know what was going on, but it went completely over our heads.

‘See those young guys over there?’ he nodded his head to starboard, ‘We’ll have to watch out for them. They know what they’re doing. Pretty hot I should say.’

Just at that moment, the boat slid behind us and to our leeward side, and the young captain shouted at us. ‘Hey, there grandad. How are you going to manage without your wheelchair?’ He was yelling at Mike, of course.

A chorus of laughter went up from the neighbouring boats. Mike shouted back, ‘We’ll talk about age when hair starts growing around your little pink willie, kiddie.’ He then added something a little too nautical in nature to be included in this text. This resulted in a gust of laughter and a considerable scowling from across the water. The other crew members, who must have been eighteen or nineteen years old, clearly hadn’t expected such a juicy retort and were momentarily at a loss about how to react.

However, the captain eventually rallied, ‘Turn your hearing aid up, or you won’t hear the starting horn.’

Mike shook his head sadly, ‘A bit lame that. Lack of vocabulary. Oh well, they’ll learn.’

At this very moment, the horn sounded, and the other boat slid ahead, having cleverly manoeuvred upwind.

We followed as well as we could but were soon boxed in and were overtaken by numerous other boats. The young crew were obviously hot stuff as Mike had predicted and their captain reminded me of Mike himself.

Perhaps they were rigger players as he had been and well used to a bit of rough and tumble, where necessary.

Anyway, as the various stages of the race progressed, Mike showed he clearly knew what he was doing, and we were soon gaining on the leaders. Coming into the last but one leg, the wind suddenly changed direction, and with lightning speed, Mike threw the tiller over into the opposite direction to the rest of the pack. He shouted, 'Spinnaker, Quick!'

Alun leapt down the boat and with surprising ease, the sail came out of its bag and went up smoothly. On the beam reach now, we got the best of the wind into the spinnaker, and the boat bounded forward. We gained on the others to windward and one by one they all fell astern. However, the young lads spotted our manoeuvre and quickly copied it. Mike shook his head and shouted as we overtook them, 'We'll lend you our walking sticks when you get in, boys.'

However, the lads showed unexpected talent, and by the time we came up to the last buoy they were almost level with us.

'Damn it,' shouted Mike 'they're going to try and steal our right of way, damn them.'

As they passed leeward within about a metre of our hull, the captain shouted, 'Bye-bye granddad. We'll

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send some oranges to the Geriatric ward, Monsieur Pampers.’ and laughed an unpleasant and distinctly unfriendly laugh. Mike growled and replied with the polished invective of a veteran sailor, while keenly watching their boat.

‘Prepare for combat.’ he called.

We were just a few boat lengths from the last marker, and the lead was slipping from us. Then, just as they passed, Mike reached out with an unusually long boat hook, caught their rudder and wrenched it over. Their boat swerved towards the marker. Although the boys reacted immediately, they were forced to pass it on the wrong side, allowing us to round the marker and head for home well ahead of the competition. Behind us, the boys had to do a complete penalty turn, meaning that we’d finish well before them.

A shout went up from the other boats as we slid away.

‘Is that authorised, Mike?’ I shouted.

‘Old-time tactics man.’ He laughed, ‘Many a race was won with that in the old days. Just have to have a long enough boat hook.’

‘The other guys don’t seem to see it that way.’ I said observing the arm waving behaviour of the other teams.

‘Well.’ Mike rubbed his chin, ‘Maybe the rules have changed just a shade since my days.’

We were by now flying down the home straight, but the shouts from several other boats close by seemed to confirm that rules had undoubtedly changed. Then, as we were approaching the referee’s boat, there was angry yelling from behind, and we turned to see the young boys jumping about and waving their fists in a

very menacing way. Mike ran back and took the tiller from me. He threw the rudder around to bring the referee's boat between us and the other boat. In so doing, the long boat hook which Mike had lashed back in place, caught the referee's anchor cable as we passed. It was so firmly held in place by its retaining ropes that it dragged their boat backwards with such a jolt that it sent all the judges stumbling about, arms flailing, in search of something to stop them going overboard.

As we dragged the referee's boat onwards under the force of our massive spinnaker, we heard a sudden roar from behind us. The referee's boat was now directly in the path of the boy's catamaran which had been flying at full speed after us. With a sickening crunch, their starboard hull smashed into the referee's boat and sent everyone sprawling on to the decks again. The crunching noise informed us that they must have breached the hull.

Behind us, we saw the two boats separate, and as the referee's boat righted itself, the gash in the hull fell below the surface and water rushed in. To make matters worse, the rope holding our boat hook, stretched to its absolute limit, broke and like an arrow, the heavy wooden pole was catapulted back and upwards. We watched with horror as it flashed towards the boy's boat. It speared their straining, stretched spinnaker near the foot, slicing a long slit. The tension due to the wind did the rest. With a great tearing sound, the canvas slit open and upwards and the huge sail split completely in two. In an incredible flapping of canvas, it transformed itself into two flapping and useless sheets.

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By now the referee's boat was leaning over at a rather unpleasant angle, and the judges were scrambling either onto the boy's catamaran or onto another which had come up. However, one man - obviously the boss - had kept his head through all this. Seizing the megaphone, he turned to us and screamed, 'Disqualified.' He followed this up with a series of insults which, put in layman's terms clearly indicated that we were requested to remove ourselves from the vicinity at our earliest convenience.

Happily, for all involved, our boat, now freed from the constraints of the hook, bounded forward and we were able to comply with their request with unexpected promptitude. As we shot away, Mike came back beside me and surveyed the scene of the disaster. The other boats had dropped their sails and were gathering around.

'Oh, hells bells!' moaned Mike. Then with the foresight of the seasoned mariner, he came to a decision.

'Full steam ahead lads, let's get out of here double quick, or we are in for one hell of a lot of trouble.'

I set to the task but added, 'And a bit of a punch up too, if I can go by the look on those lads' faces.'

'Yeah. That too,' agreed Mike.

Under the pull of the straining spinnaker, we shot through the gap in the outer breakwater and onto the smoother water of the outer harbour. We sailed into the marina and pulled the catamaran up onto the concrete apron.

Looking back, we saw the lifeboat heading out. Within a record five minutes, Alun had stowed the spinnaker away, and Mike and I had furled the sail.

We cleared the decks and dragged the boat as fast as we could back behind all the other boats. Once we'd pulled over the dirty, time-worn tarpaulins, the boat looked as though it had not been moved for years.

Mike had been keeping an eye on the harbour to make sure that none of the other boats was following us.

'Here they come.' he called, 'Let's get moving.'

We ran out along the floating pontoon to the Shrimper, and by the time the first follower was manoeuvring to enter the marina, Mike had powered up the motor, and we were sliding smoothly past, keeping well hidden inside the cabin. A minute or so later we slipped out of the bay via the Castletown breakwater gap and out into the channel.

'Christ,' sighed Mike, 'That was a bit close.'

Alun and I exchanged glances but said nothing.

'I could do with a beer. What about you two?'

He stepped up onto the deck and leaning over the rail, pulled up a rope to disclose a big, dripping fishing net.

It was bulging almost to overflowing with cans of our favourite beers.

'Cold beer all round.' He smiled. 'And don't forget we have to celebrate.'

We frowned.

'We won the race, didn't we?'

Alun and I fell about with laughter and had difficulty in keeping from collapsing onto the cabin floor.

It was as if we had been transported back in time thirty years to the days when we did this sort of thing on a regular basis.

Mike, as usual, didn't see the funny side of things.

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'Did we or did we not win?'

'Oh yes, I spluttered we won all right.'

'Tactics may have changed, but at least we showed those kids who the bosses were. Old guys rule, right?'

'Which is why we are making a tactical retreat. I suppose.' I suggested.

'Yes. Tactically it seemed wiser to defer any debate about comparing the merits of old school techniques versus modern ones.'

Alun nodded, 'Tactically I too prefer to avoid getting on the wrong side of a young rugby player's fist.' He laughed, 'Age has brought with it a certain amount of wisdom in that respect.'

'That's what I thought too,' agreed Mike. 'Big shoulders too.'

I frowned, 'But surely they'll be onto us quick enough. After all, they have all our data on the Regatta entry sheet.'

'No, don't worry about that,' smiled Mike, steering the boat seaward. 'I think I might have made a few small mistakes when I filled out the form.'

Alun glanced over at me, 'Like what?'

'Well the visitor's book was open beside me, so I just copied a name and address from that.'

'Christ!' I cried, 'Someone is going to get one hell of a surprise.'

'Professor Bright, from Bexhill-on-Sea, to be precise,' said Mike, adjusting our direction slightly.

I shook my head, 'I suppose you call that, Standard nautical tactics.'

'But what on earth made you do that?' laughed Alun.

Mike replied quite seriously. 'Seemed a good idea at the time.'

I opened my can of beer and looked up. 'So now where?'

Mike smiled down at us. 'The weather is perfect, and the wind's forecasted to stay like this for forty-eight hours. If one believes the Met Office of course.'

'Yes...' I said cautiously.

'The fuel tank is full; the motor has been overhauled.'

He took a sip of beer. 'How about dinner in France?'

This took us by surprise, but the last few days had shaken us out of our old routines and had seemed to have knocked ten years or more off our shoulders.

We exchanged glances; and nodded. 'Why not?'

Mike laughed, 'YES!' he shouted and spun the wheel.

'Get me the bearing from the chart, Alun,' he called over his shoulder.

Then to me, 'Get the mainsail tight, that'll stabilise her a bit and maybe save a little fuel. Best to be careful.'

It was half-past seven that evening when we reached the French coast, about six miles east of Cherbourg.

Mike had told us that he knew a fantastic restaurant on the seafront and that he would pay. Under the circumstances, we could see nothing much against the idea and agreed.

When we eventually arrived near the coast, Mike pointed out a white building overlooking the small bay. The lights had just been turned on, and the comfortable looking place beckoned to us welcomingly.

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As the tide was out, we had to tie up to a buoy some way from the shore.

'We'll use the inflatable dinghy to get ashore,' smiled Mike happily.

'I'll get it out while you two bring up the pump.'

He disappeared above, and we checked the cupboard he'd indicated. The pump wasn't there.

'Where've you put the pump, Mike?' I called.

'In the cupboard.'

'It's not there.'

'Hell!'

He jumped back down and rummaged about, opening and shutting various cubby hole doors.

'Hell!' He repeated. 'I was sure it was on board.'

'So?' I asked

'We'll have to blow it up by hand.'

'By mouth, you mean.' I corrected.

Alun and I exchanged glances again.

'That'll take us all night.'

'No. Come on. I'll start. Then we'll take turns.'

He climbed back up onto the deck. 'We'll have it up in half an hour.'

I shook my head sadly. Although the restaurant beckoned from the nearby shore, it seemed unattainable.

I nearly fainted four times, blowing that damn thing up, but we eventually got the dinghy into a more or less recognisable shape.

The lights were now shining brightly from the restaurant, and we could see several groups in the window tables looking down at us. When we finally deemed that the thing would probably just about do, we lowered it over the side. It flopped about softly in

an unconvincing sort of way, but I reassured myself that there could be no more than three feet of water under it. If the worse came to the worse, we could swim, I reflected. Alun seemed to be thinking more or less the same thing.

We climbed down carefully, one at each end and one in the middle and to my surprise, the thing didn't sink.

Mike took up the oars and headed for the concrete ramp that served as a jetty. We were only about halfway across when I had an uncomfortable feeling that the floats were getting softer.

'Mike.' I called, 'Are you sure the thing isn't deflating?'

He went on rowing. 'I got the same impression,' he agreed.

'Then you had better row faster, or we are going to get a bit wet,' shouted Alun.

I looked up and noticed that our progress was now being followed by several other people who were standing by the big windows of the restaurant above.

Suddenly, the boat came to a halt.

'Damn it. We've hit the mud.' Mike made a face.

I looked overboard. There can't have been more than a few centimetres of water.

'Oh hell, Mike.' said Alun, "It's all mud."

'Come on you guys.' said Mike, 'Nothing for it. We'll have to walk.' At this, he jumped out, and the mud came up to his knees.

'I'm not getting into that damn stuff. I have a wet backside already,' complained Alun. 'You got us into this, so now you can pull us up the ramp.'

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Mike's reply has not been recorded, because even we two were shocked. Anyway, he did pull us until he was sweating and until the mud was no longer higher than mid-calf. We sighed and stepped gingerly out into the slime.

'Oh hell!' cursed Alun, 'How come all your bright ideas always end up in some sort of disaster?'

Mike did not answer, but trudged up the greasy ramp, dragging the almost deflated boat behind him in the slime like a dead sheep. We followed slowly, trying in vain to remain as dry and as clean as possible. Annoyingly, our progress was now being followed by a large number of diners, who seemed to be greatly enjoying the unexpected entertainment. One man even raised his glass to us, but I must admit that I scowled and used certain insults which I thought I had forgotten.

I felt better after that.

When we eventually struck dry land at the top of the concrete ramp, we pulled off our shoes and socks and wrung as much of the slime as possible out of the bottom of our trousers.

'Surely we can't go in there now, Mike.' I said, 'Look at us!' Our backsides were wet, and we had stinking mud up to our knees.

'Oh hell,' groaned Alun, 'And how are we going to get back?'

Mike turned and looked over his shoulder at the restaurant. The kitchen door was open, and the staff had come out to have a look at the origin of all the hilarity filtering through from the dining room.

'I'll go and see if we can borrow a boat.' sighed Mike getting to his feet.

'We'll wait here if you don't mind.' I grumbled.

Thirty seconds or so later we heard Mike shout from the restaurant door, 'Come on you guys. Everything's OK.'

He was smiling as we reached the door. 'It's okay. They'll serve us, come on in.'

He ducked back in, and we followed into the long, warmly lit dining room, where the patronne was waiting, hands firmly planted on her ample hips — nodding a generous welcome.

We entered to an unexpected thunder of laughter and applause. Many of the diners rose and clapped us on the shoulders. Some were still red in the faces from laughing.

In French, the patronne cried, 'We are used to sailors here, but what a fantastic show you put on, boys.' Turning to the room, she lifted her voice adding, 'Brilliant entertainment n'est pas, everyone?'

There was another round of applause and shouting.

Several of the couples of diners, united by the pleasure of sharing unexpected events with total strangers, had drawn their tables together and were ordering extras.

Our little performance had clearly had a positive effect on customer spending that night.

'Come with me, you lads,' she said, treating us as if we were younger than her, rather than older, 'We'll dry your trousers while you're eating.'

She dug out some weather-beaten yellow waterproof trousers from a cupboard in the staff changing room and thus attired we were herded back to a table near the wood fire. Our entry was once more accompanied by laughter, which was not surprising

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this time, because of our new nautical look. However, as we sat gazing into the log fire, I notice that Alun was looking concerned.

'What's the trouble?' I asked, 'Cold?'

He hesitated and looked down mumbling, 'I left our money belt on the boat.'

We stared at him, open-mouthed.

'You did what!?' cried Mike.

'What with all the business with the dinghy, I left it on the table...'

I closed my eyes, 'Oh God. I just don't believe this.'

At this moment the patronne appeared at our table. We looked down at the tablecloth, not quite knowing how to break the news. She frowned and looked from one of our faces to the other.

'Ah!' she nodded, 'The boys have a problem, yes?'

'I forgot the money on the boat.' said Alun in his broken French.

I spoke French fluently so took over. 'I can leave you my ID papers if you like and we'll come over in the morning and pay the bill.' I looked up into her face to see how this was going. It didn't seem to be going at all, and I cringed.

'And how do you intend to get back?' she said plumping her hands back on her hips. "Your dinghy, it is in ruins."

I flung my arms up in a typical French way, indicating that I had no idea. Then unexpectedly she turned to the room and raised her voice.

'Well ladies and gents, our group of travelling clowns have apparently left their money on their boat.' She pointed.

A roar of laughter went up.

'Shall we send them back unfed. Would that be fair, do you think? Would that be a true Normandy welcome?' she added.

A thunder of laughter went around the room followed by a long, 'Nooooo...'

She continued, 'And what about each of us paying two euros a head for the cost of tonight's entertainment. What do you think?'

The answer was a round of applause and a thumping of tables, from the red-faced diners.

'Perfect then, I'll add two euros to each bill for entertainment,' she cried rubbing her hand together with pleasure. The waiters were now moving briskly about the room carrying now bottles of champagne now elaborate ice-creams. The patronne turned to us. 'A very successful and unexpected boost to trade, you have engineered. Thank you, boys.'

At this moment her husband appeared carrying a big pitcher of red wine which he plumped down on the table. He looked at his wife. 'I asked John to bring up their dinghy. He says he'll repair it before these showmen need to go back.'

She nodded; he then turned to us. 'A nice tasty bit of steak and some chips... Is that OK for you?'

We accepted gladly, and the patronne swished away to keep things boiling out in the main room.

By about half past ten we had finished our delightful meal and were feeling tired-out after our long day, full of adventures. The other dinners were clearly still full of life, and the number of bottles of wine and the louder and louder blasts of laughter indicated that the evening was going to be long and above all highly profitable to the patronne.

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Reluctantly, we left the fireside and crossed the room to change back into our dried trousers. We were surprised to be applauded and clapped on the back again, to the sound of a dozen different nautical jokes. The patronne kissed us all on the cheeks, and we promised to come over for coffee in the morning.

True to his word, her son John had fixed the leak in the boat, and as we pushed off, we waved up at the diners now gathered by the windows to watch us, just in case there might be an encore of our earlier performance.

When morning came, we washed and dressed as well as possible and rowed over to the restaurant. The patronne and her husband came and stood with us at the bar.

‘Pity you can’t do that performance more often,’ said the man, ‘We more than doubled our normal takings.’

Mike went over and thanked the son for his help. John was about twenty years old and a strong young man.

His mother grumbled, ‘Just finished university and not a job on the horizon.’

‘For the moment.’ corrected John.

That morning we had decided to go down to Grenoble by train, and Mike asked the boy if he would look after the boat while he was away. He said he’d pay him the standard mooring fee and advanced the lad two hundred and fifty euros for the ten days he expected to need.

This brightened things up considerably, and John gave us a lift to the bus stop, from where we headed to Cherbourg to catch the Paris train.

From Paris, we took the high-speed train to Grenoble and were met at the station by the girls.

Mike stayed with us until the end of the week before heading back to Normandy to find a crew and ferry the boat back to Lyme Regis. During this time the girls appeared strangely interested in our adventures and by careful questioning and cross-referencing, managed to piece together all the details of those epic few days.

Later, these would appear in print to our utter surprise and dismay.

On his way back, Mike planned to fill the hull with bottles of wine for his father's cellar and offered Alun a berth.

But Alun said he preferred to accompany Margaux by plane.

Mike said he could not understand why someone would prefer to pay for a trip when he could just as easily have it for free.

But that was Mike, of course.

If you have enjoyed these initial chapters, the full e-Book can be purchased online, in the AMAZON bookshop.