

Rogues on the River

Paul Wootten



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For Ione and Ivo

and

Thanks to Louise

for finding the rogues

Chapter 1

The rain fell relentlessly against the window, melting the world into smears of grey and red. David watched the houses opposite sway and dip in obeisance to the passers-by who bowed back and hurried on with collars held tightly at the throat in silent prayer. The crippled and the maimed used this road as a direct route to the hospital which was working harder in this time of peace than it ever had done during the war. The people now had a greater respect for life and health. The troops had long returned, many were injured, most were battle-scarred, but they were troops no more, and now needed a place in a society that was building for the future, and shunning memories of the past. The one-legged man was there again, limping by on two crutches, but today he was not so frightening, as the rain-smearred window gave him back, occasionally at least, his other leg.

The afternoon was wearing on and the light was fading. Reflections from inside the fire-lit room were beginning to compete with the grey street outside. Sitting in the front garden of the

Rogues on the River

house opposite he could see his mother with the darning mushroom in her hand and her box of threads open on her lap; he could see their old piano jutting out of the brick wall beside her; he could see the small boy who was himself looking in at him from just outside, curiously dry in the pouring rain.

"Come away from the window now, David," she called from behind him, "and close the curtains. Let's shut out this dreadful day." David was about to argue that it was fun watching the rain, but he saw the squat figure of the bearded man approach from the corner and so closed the curtains quickly. He had always feared that shaggy face ever since it had appeared above the wall by which he was playing, and growled at him one sunny afternoon. It had sent him scurrying home to hide for the rest of the day. The alley where the wall had been had become a no-go area from that moment on.

Suddenly the world outside had gone, his mother was warm and dry behind him and she had the piano back in its rightful place beside her. In the firelight, the room reassured and comforted even more than usual because of the storm outside tapping at the window and singing in the chimney.

Chapter 1

"Put the light on, darling, and I'll just finish this sock, then I'll get us something to drink." She paused to watch him cross the room, and then turned back to her work.

The light changed the room again, dulling the fire and making it like any ordinary afternoon. But this was not an ordinary afternoon. Tonight was the night of the Christmas tree; this was the night that would see his father stagger home with the biggest tree he could get; this was the night when David would be allowed to stay up late to help with the decorations.

"When will Dad be home?" he asked, not because he needed to know so much as he liked to talk about that moment when they would see the tree, and he knew that his mother liked to talk about it too.

"He won't be long now, dear. What shall we put on the top this year, the star or the fairy?"

There was always this debate, and part of the excitement came from making these decisions.

David's father loved Christmas as much as David did, and though working long, hard hours now that British industry was recovering from the privations of the last few years, he was full

Rogues on the River

of energy and excitement, like a small boy on this special night. He had climbed into the loft and handed down the cardboard box of decorations they had packed so lovingly last January when the old tree came down. Next he handed down the pretty box with the cellophane front, through which the tree lights could be clearly seen, rigidly clasped in their cardboard slots, waiting for the surge of electricity that would make them live again.

David stood on the landing taking each magical thing in turn, while his mother waited in the hall, wringing her hands and pleading with her husband to be careful.

"You know I don't like you standing on that banister rail. You should have brought the ladder in. Oh! For heaven's sake be careful!" First one, then two legs lowered through the hole in the ceiling, waved about a bit, feeling for the banister beneath. Finding it, the rest of David's father dipped into view, winked at his son, replaced the hatch to seal the darkness of the loft away until January, then, armed with the boxes, raced for the lounge.

With a sigh, David's mother went back into the kitchen to do the important things that made the festival a success.

Chapter 1

When the lights were carefully positioned on the tree, the moment of truth arrived. David was told to press the switch. There was a click, but the tree remained in darkness. David's father twisted a bulb in its socket, but nothing happened. As he touched the next bulb the tree burst into light. He tightened the offending bulb, and then stood back with his son, admiring their work. It was beautiful. Hollows of darkness were picked out with twinkles of reds, greens and blues. The tinsel picked up the light, splitting it a thousand times and reflecting it in the coloured, glass balls. The fairy had won the debate this year, and the tree was so big that the top bent over on the ceiling, forcing her to sit among the little crown of branches just below. But she looked fine amongst the tinsel and the coloured balls, lit by a white light bulb deliberately placed to show her beauty, and the tree was complete.

"Open the curtains, David," and suddenly there were two trees. The new one made even more magical by the diffused light through the rain-washed glass.

"Let's go outside and see how it looks." It looked wonderful, and Christmas day, when it came, was once again a time of magic.

Rogues on the River

There were presents, and as David was the only child in the family, he had far more than many children of his age. He had presents from aunts and uncles, presents from his parent's friends, and most particularly, a special present from his parents. Last year it had been his bicycle, this year it was a model yacht. He had pestered his mother for this yacht ever since seeing one on the river when he was fishing with his father. It was a clever piece of engineering, with a rudder that could be set to match the arrangement of the sail so that, when launched it would sail out in a wide sweep and eventually return to the shore.

As happened every year, there were relatives to entertain, lots of food to eat, and as happened every year, David was over-excited and eventually sick.

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The afternoon of the Sunday following Christmas was filled with a watery sun, and after a good deal of pestering, David's father agreed to take him to the river to sail his new boat. David always enjoyed the walk beside the allotments and the railway line. There were two low bridges beneath the converging tracks that crossed the road, creating a short tunnel with a

Chapter 1

deep recess where the bridges met. It was here, that the tramp slept in a hovel of cardboard boxes and sacks. His makeshift home filled the dark corner, safely tucked away from the wind and the rain. David had never seen a tramp there, but sometimes when he passed he could sense the heap move as if something were inside, something very like the bearded man he thought, and would hurry on. This afternoon however, with his father by his side, he was brave enough to linger just in case he might snatch a glance at whoever might be living there.

"Come on, son, we haven't got all day," his father said slightly anxiously as they approached the second bridge, and hurried him on.

The river was magnificent, bathed in the low December sunlight. The empty fields and bare trees gave a melancholy to it that was winter's own. The animals were penned safely indoors, the boats were laid up in boathouses and few people were about.

David rushed to his favourite spot, a place where the bank shelved to a gravelly beach and he could see the bottom for a yard or two, far enough at least to paddle in his boots to find

Rogues on the River

water deep enough for his boat.

"Be careful, David: the current is very strong here and the river's much deeper than it looks. If you were to fall in here, old son, I don't think anyone could get you out."

"I know, Dad! They were on about it at school. A boy fell in somewhere near here and they found his body sucked under the bank half a mile way." David pretended to fall in just to make his father jump. Then he laughed. "It's all right: I've done this before, you know, when we've been fishing."

The boat sailed well and the afternoon soon became evening. The only other boat on the river that day had been a barge with a red tarpaulin over the cargo part at the front and a green cabin with pictures painted on it. It threw up such a wake that David's little yacht was hit by a tidal wave that nearly capsized her. A girl on the barge waved but David was too busy trying to save his craft to take much notice.

The cardboard twitched and groaned as they passed under the bridges. David and his father hurried home.

Chapter 2

When early man explored the downlands of southern England he walked along the high ridgeways, safely away from the wolf-infested forests or the swamp-filled hollows of the lowlands. These tracks became known as the "high ways". Over time the word "highway" has come to mean the main road: the road that links, most directly, the centres of commerce of a busy nation. But the waterways of England had been the real highways that carried the earliest explorers through its wooded valleys, from the coastal reaches to the bottom of the mountain passes. They had carried the stone for its great cathedrals, and the coal for its mighty industry. Along its banks had grown a network of hostelries that refreshed the summer travellers and sheltered those who ventured out along its grey, forbidding surface when the winter winds blew cold.

In one such hostelry, on a cold December night, a few years after the end of the Second World War, a little girl fidgeted on a large, grey sofa. She had been there too long and the coarse

Rogues on the River

hair of the sofa pricked her neck. How she longed for the soft security of her narrow bunk with its wooden side to keep her safe, and soft, warm, duck-down mattress to snuggle into on winter nights. And this was a winter night. The wind's groaning rose above the clamour from the other room where the adults drank, making merry preparation for the Christmas stopover. She loved Christmas as all children should, but this year was different: her friends were miles away in a county far to the north, where the waterways wove across snow-covered fields, or froze completely, forcing a lay-up of snowball fights, skating and slides. This southern trip was unusual. Grace's mother, Martha, argued that they were going the long way round, but her father, Jack, was adamant, he had acquired a new cargo, and this was a new run, with things to pick up on the way.

The noise from the next room rose again. They were singing now. She turned over and tried to sleep. A door opened.

"Come on, Gracie. Let's be getting home." Her father's powerful hands lifted her to his shoulder where she could feel his warmth and smell the strong drink on his breath.

The sounds of bustle and voices faded

Chapter 2

behind them as the cold wind took them to itself, and buffeted them along. The crunch of the gravel under her father's boots was less regular than usual as he held her tightly to him. She could feel him sway as he fought to keep his balance. She clung on, shivering against his coat. But the warm, earthy smell of the river reassured her, hinting that they would soon be home.

"Martha! We're back!"

Grace loved the sound of her father's voice, even when he had been drinking. It was full and brown like the river; it had laughter in it, an honesty rippled in its cadence and, like the river, you could trust it.

"It's all right, Martha, we can stay for Christmas." It was the rich voice that seemed to lift Grace through the air and drop her beside the tiller as her father stepped aboard their narrow boat, kicked off his shoes and flung open the cabin door. Light spilled out across the small, partly closed rear deck, called the counter, and with it came the smell of cooking. Night returned with a jolt, the light shut out by the head and shoulders of Martha as she rose up from the cabin, and with the darkness came the storm.

Rogues on the River

"Where on earth have you been? You said that you were only going to pay the man for the mooring. And you've been drinking, and the girl with you too. I don't know what will become of us, I'm sure. Get in here and eat this supper. It's nearly ruined as it is."

The light returned and she felt her father give her a little squeeze. She could sense him grinning at her, as the two revellers slunk submissively into the cabin.

When the door was closed and Jack had hugged Martha, and Martha, after a brief resistance, had hugged Jack, the storm abated and they sat laughing together in the cramped warmth around the little table with the prospect of a holiday before them.

"Oh Mum! You've put the decorations up." Grace's heart leaped with the first real thrill of Christmas. Pretty little streamers, all different colours, looped across the cabin over Grace's head, and, best of all, the little nativity figures lined the windowsill. There was not room for a proper nativity scene with Mary and Joseph sitting behind baby Jesus, the wise men bowing before them, and the shepherds crowding round for a look, but every year Martha had arranged them along the side window of the cabin. Mary

Chapter 2

was first, and then came baby Jesus then Joseph. The wise men and shepherds completed the line. "Can I go outside and see what they look like through the window?"

They all went outside and inspected the decoration, admired it and said how wonderful it looked this year, especially with the light that flooded round it from the warm cabin. Then, with a shiver, they hurried back inside for their supper.

*

Christmas soon passed, but what a Christmas! Grace had never, in her ten long years, known one like it. Christmas was always special, even on the river, but this year money seemed to flow like the ale in the taprooms of the inns which father sometimes visited when mother was busy at the landings. And money meant new things: new things to put the smile back in her mother's cheeks; new clothes for Grace to wear; new toys to play with.

One evening just after they had made the Christmas landing, and before the festival had really started, Father had gone off to conduct 'business'. He had hugged his wife, who looked decidedly uneasy at his going, and winked at Grace before swinging over the rail and off into

Rogues on the River

the river mist. He had rolled back very late, and Grace had heard her parents arguing. Mother had not wanted him to take this job. It had already brought them far from the rivers they knew. And he was drunk again. She knew a little extra money would be wasted on drink. It was then that Father played his trump card. Grace had heard her mother say, "How much?" in a tone of such utter disbelief that it must have been a tidy sum. The presents had been bought the very next day.

Grace could not help feeling that for all the apparent good fortune, things were just a little strained. Now that the holiday was over, there was an urgency and a disturbing amount of looking back, to where the rippling wake washed the hidden places on the bank as they curved each bend. Father was obviously uneasy. Instead of hailing passing craft as he had always done, he seemed quite happy to slide by unnoticed. People on the bank disturbed him: he would force the old engine to give a little more to pass them quickly. Grace noticed a boy sailing a toy yacht from the opposite bank. She waved but the boy was too busy saving his boat from their unusual wake to wave back.

"What are we carrying this trip?" she had

Chapter 2

asked only to be told it was the "usual stuff". Usual stuff or not, something was different, and the difference had to be why they were here, miles away from the safe rivers further north on which she had grown up.

Then, one evening when they had moored up between locks, three men came to the barge. Grace and her mother were left inside while her father dealt with them. There was a deal of rummaging about up at the front of the boat, yet when they had gone nothing much had changed, a canvas was tied differently, but the cargo was still there to be delivered. Father's mood, however, was lighter, and the three of them began to enjoy the journey once more.

Grace lay in her snug little bunk listening to her parents talking. She felt that there was still something bothering her mother: her voice had become husky as if she were starting a cold, and she sounded worried. "Are we going up the Grand Union, or is there still bomb damage there?"

"No, we're sticking to the Thames," her father's voice was determined. "The canals are all repaired, but I don't want to go through any more locks than we have to. There would be too many people watching us there."

Rogues on the River

"Oh Jack, you know I don't like the wide river. It frightens me when we pitch and roll on the tidal surges."

"Don't worry, dear," her father's voice was reassuring. "We shouldn't have to go too far down, and it will be much quicker. Then we can turn round and hurry home."

Grace pulled the covers up over her ears. She hoped her mother was not going down with a cold. The last time she caught one she developed asthma and had to spend a couple of days in hospital. That would be horrible in this strange place, so far from home.

When they arrived at the city Grace was awe-struck. The river was filled with more ships than she had ever seen, boats of all sizes and descriptions: great smoking steamers, high-sailed Thames barges and water taxis, and the shore ablaze with light: light from tall streetlamps along the promenades; lights from the windows of a million buildings and lights marching across the river on grand bridges. They felt a bit lost amongst these new surroundings, and so berthed beside some low, wooden sheds to decide what was best to be done.

"Do you want to come with me, Gracie? I've

Chapter 2

got to find the man to take the load, and then we can head for home. I'll never find it from the river. We will have to go up into the city and ask there." Grace went with him. She had heard stories of London from friends back home. Stories to keep you awake at night: of streets so packed that you could be crushed to death just trying to cross the road; of air filled with yellow smog so thick that it would choke you; of boats turning over on the flow under London Bridge. The streets were busy, the air was thick with the smell of fish, and the river was big, but beyond that, London was just a vast and amazing city.

She followed her father out into the bustle where he made enquiries from a few passers-by, but they were unable to help him. He asked a kindly, old gentleman for the whereabouts of Ryman and Son, Grimm's Wharf, and was directed instead to the railway station.

"You'll find a street map of the City with every little road marked on it. Is this your first time in London, little lady?" She smiled at him, but was beginning to feel tired with all this walking about.

The station was not as she had imagined. It was more like a palace than a place for catching trains. She had never been on a train and didn't

Rogues on the River

think she'd like it if she did. But here was a whole new world of sounds and smells, wide stairways, luggage stacks, kiosks and vending-machines selling just about everything. 'Who needs a city when you have a station?' she thought.

They found the map: a huge electrically lit affair of wheels and cogs that sent the whole of London spinning at her command. Jack spun the index to 'G' and found Grimm's Wharf. Reluctantly Grace followed her father away from the glitter and the mesmerizing clunks, whistles and tantalizing smells of the station, to leave the wide streets, and head down narrow alleyways that lacked the sun and smelt stale.

Ryman and Son they eventually found behind a large, green gate. The steep pathway led down to the wharf, between two large buildings set into the slope. While Jack went up to the office, Grace wandered through the littered yard and down to the river. A couple of boats were tied up at the edge of the wharf. One looked quite big and was obviously ocean-going. The river was deep and sluggish, smelling of more than fish. Strange objects floated by, but you could only see the top of them and so it was hard to make out what they were. There was a

Chapter 2

green slime over the edges of things and Grace did not like it at all. She wandered back to the steps that led up to the office where she could hear her father in conversation.

"No!" she heard him say. "I won't do it again. I said just the once. That was our bargain."

"You can't stop now!" the voice coaxed. "There are people who would not like you to stop now."

Grace did not like the voice. It was not rich like her father's but thin and reedy, and its friendly tone masked a menace that frightened her.

Jack was decidedly unhappy as they hurried back to the barge.

"Let's get this lot unloaded and then go home," he said to Martha as they stepped on board. Martha looked at her daughter quizzically, but Grace merely shrugged her shoulders.

The yard was not too far down river and before long they had tied up behind the big ship. Three men were waiting for them and as soon as the covers were off they set to unloading the cargo. Father went back up to the office and Grace followed, kicking a Woodbine packet idly

Rogues on the River

but working her way towards the office steps in the hope of being able to hear what was going on.

"Going back empty, then?" the reedy voice was saying. "Lovely wife, and is that little girl your daughter? A lucky man like you should be looking after his family, not putting them at unnecessary risk." Father's deep voice erupted but the door of the office was opening and Grace had to move away.

"What are we taking on, then?" Grace's mother asked as Jack climbed back onto the counter.

"Gracie, untie forward," her father called.

"We're not running empty?"

"Go inside, Martha, I must talk to you. Gracie! Stay up the front and sort the covers out."

Grace did as she was told, but could see her father working the tiller and talking to her mother who would be just inside the doorway of the little cabin. The sounds of the motor drowned all the words, but the barge, empty as it was, swung wildly on the current and Grace could feel her father's anger through the way the boat swayed and pitched. They headed back upriver.

Chapter 2

That night, as they lay up between locks, she heard a little of what had happened.

"Gracie," her father started as they began their tea. "I have done some work for some rather nasty people. I fear they have turned out to be real rogues. I'm not working for them anymore, but they could make life difficult for us. I'm going to try to negotiate a cargo as we head back, but I don't hold out a lot of hope that we will get one, it being winter time and all. I want you and your mother to stay close to the boat at all times until we are safely home."

"Do you hear what your father says, Gracie?" Her mother was looking pale and drawn. This trip had taken its toll on her health and feelings, and she would not be happy until they were back on the old canals. Grace promised, as all children promise, without realizing what it is was she was promising, or what it is that makes adults act so strangely.

The cabin was small, yet the world inside was huge. Grace felt safe in her little wooden world. She had lived her life there and her dreams were woven in the fabric of the curtains and tablecloth. The table, spread as it was with tea things, could not be more normal. The kettle, singing quietly now that its job was done, sat on

Rogues on the River

the cast iron cooker that warmed their home. A settee that became a bed and two little bunks made up the rest of the cabin. The lower bunk was covered by a lace curtain, and was used as a storage space for blankets, towels and boxes of clothing. But it was beautiful. Martha had made lace covers for the shelves and Jack had painted plant pots with river scenes. There was red velvet wherever red velvet could be, and tassels and glass. Grace promised, but she was too comfortable to be worried about the other world outside that was always changing.

The barge edged its way upstream, and with every mile the thoughts of Grimm's Wharf faded from their minds. But progress was slow with the river running fast in winter flood. Sometimes branches and other pieces of debris would float past, warning them to take care lest they foul up on something bigger. Passing Sonning, Jack decided to lay up for the rest of the day. Reading was not too far away now and once past there the river traffic would thin. The way to Oxford would be easier.

Grace and Martha headed for the shops while Jack went to see if he could find a cargo to run to Oxford. These little towns along the Thames were quaint, wealthy places with houses

hiding behind trees and hedges and with winding, gravel pathways. The shops stood back from the road to serve a rural population with everything it wanted. Grace wanted everything. Martha found her to be an aggravation when shopping these days. When she was younger she was content to walk wide-eyed, satisfied with the excitement of a world outside the river; now as the country got back on its feet again, after the madness that was the war, more things were available, things for children, and Grace was hungry for it all.

"You wait outside this time, Gracie."

Grace was happy to do so. The greengrocer's was relatively boring, but just down the road was the newsagent, and his window was filled with lovely things left over from Christmas: toys, crayons, colouring books, puzzles, comics and sweets. She wandered down the street looking at other shops on the way.

She passed a window with a pretty green dress displayed on a dummy without a head. By standing on tiptoe she could just make her reflection fit, the shoulders neatly slipping over hers, the legs nearly lined up with hers, but best of all, where the head should be, hers smiled back at her through the glass. What a pleasant

Rogues on the River

country scene it was to be sure: the little girl who was her, standing beside a white fence watching all the people as they passed by. How pretty she felt. She wanted everyone to see her, but the people just walked on past.

She looked through the scene to the other side of the street. Two men were watching her. They were talking casually by the post-office, but they were definitely watching her, probably thinking how pretty she looked. She turned to her admiring public, and they swiftly looked away. She went on to the newsagents. She felt a movement by her shoulder. One of the admirers was standing next to her also looking at the colouring books and sweets.

"Gracie!" her mother's voice called from the doorway of the greengrocers. "Come on. We're going this way."

The man moved to let her pass but she felt him watching her as her mother led the way back to the river.

"Mum, those men were watching me."

"Oh, I don't expect they were really, dear," but she walked a little faster and looked back occasionally toward the town. They crossed a stile and followed the little path that led to the river. As they turned onto the towpath, the two

men crossed the stile.

That night, a note was pinned to the side of the boat. Grace didn't know what was in it, but Jack was up early and impatient to be off.

They slid easily through Reading, and then moored up for the night just outside Mapledurham. It was a pretty spot, with the water meadow to one side and the occasional summer houses on stilts, which dared to come a little closer to the river, while on the opposite bank the houses of the very wealthy rose above their lawns and ornamental gardens.

Jack came hurrying in. "I don't know what this means, Martha," he said, glancing quickly at Grace as she sat colouring at the table. The glance was a little too quick, she thought. "There's a notice pinned on the lock gate asking for information about a boat that for all the world, could be this one. It doesn't actually say 'Daisy May', but I don't like it."

"Who wants to know?" Martha asked.

"I'm not sure. I can't see Ryman advertising himself, and anyway those men yesterday must have been from him, so he knows where we are. It could have been...." Jack's voice tailed off to just mouthing the words at Martha. But Grace did not need to see his face. She knew that he

Rogues on the River

was afraid, not just of the people he had been working for, but also of the police. Whatever this latest trip had been, it had not been like any others, and she knew that he was doing something that could get him into serious trouble.

"What are we going to do, then?" Martha was asking.

"The only thing we can do now is hide up somewhere. If we turn back through Reading we can slip up the Kennet. No one will expect us to do that. We'll wait up there for a while, and then try the run home."

