



VARUNA

A Thames Barge that was Home

Caroline Havord

"expected a nice book and found a treasure" - Amazon

I hope this account of four years of my life will prove the answer to many adults and youngsters who invite me to tell them a story about ‘something a bit different, but something that really happened’.

Different in the sense that they want to know about something unusual that happened to somebody ordinary, and unusual this episode certainly proved to be, in that our home was not only a lifestyle, but a love affair with a barge which became part of us.

This, then, is a tribute to her,
a posthumous award to *VARUNA*
for giving me so much pleasure,
and a yarn to tell.

Caroline Havord
Manningtree



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“Brave enough to live the dream
but alas, a nightmare ending. Riveting.”
-- *Tim, Essex*

“Great read. Left me wanting more.”
-- *Gordon, Colchester*

“Very enjoyable read. ... Recommend!”
-- *Paul, East Anglia*

“Very well written memoir about life, love, family and a lovely barge. Triumph over disaster and recovery. What a surprise reading having expected a nice book and found a treasure.”
-- *Michael Railey (Amazon purchase)*

Cover: VARUNA & ETHEL ADA on Manningtree Beach

To my children
and also to the gallant crews of
The Royal National Lifeboat Institution
throughout the British Isles.

*My acknowledgements to
Miss Gwen Moffat the authoress,
for her encouragement during the writing of
this book.*

*Also to John Mellor,
author of **Sailing Can Be Simple**,
for his help.*

Introduction

From time to time people have asked me why I did not write *VARUNA*'s story immediately after the disaster, when events would have been 'sensational news'; indeed many offers were extended to me at the time to do just that. No doubt from the commercial point of view that would have been the sensible thing to do. I, however, feel that a story of days gone by is more captivating, mainly because one can permit oneself the treat of reminiscing.

There are some sailing barges left, of course. They can be seen on the Essex and Suffolk coasts, and at Maldon Quay in Essex and elsewhere. The Blackwater Barge Match is still held annually and it is an exciting event for barge enthusiasts. Yet I wanted to write about *VARUNA* in retrospect, perhaps to indulge a sentimental memory.

Sadly the days are gone when old Essex barge skippers retired from the trading days would sit awhile on Manningtree Quay telling me stories and names of old barges, their prowess, and their sometimes quite thrilling experiences delivering cargoes, often in harsh weather, to London docks or other ports of call. Barges have not been trading for some years, and seem to have become less popular nowadays as family homes.

It would seem that barge skippers are a dying breed,

since those I have known are well into their seventies or already dead. Thus, with fewer people living aboard, there will shortly be none of us left who intimately knew these magnificent, friendly craft. Surely then, it is worth setting pen to paper, for the sake of posterity, to bring alive the tail end of a way of life which was quite usual in East Anglia not so very long ago.

My reason for reminiscence was not, I assure you, to write the most riveting rescue story of this decade, though readers will be mindful of our narrow squeak. No, I would like to feel that the people who read about *VARUNA* and our family life aboard are in their imagination sitting next to me on Manningtree beach on a hazy afternoon, looking up at the cotton wool clouds scudding overhead, a sea-gull perhaps dipping a wing towards them, as I have often sat listening to the old barge skippers, sometimes exaggerating, occasionally over-dramatising, but always entertaining.

I hope this account of four years of my life will prove the answer to the adults and youngsters who invite me to tell them a story about 'something a bit different, but something that really happened'. Different, they mean, in the sense that they want to know about something unusual that happened to somebody ordinary, and unusual this episode certainly proved to be, in that our home was not only a lifestyle but a love affair with a barge which became part of us. This, then, is a tribute to her, a posthumous award to *VARUNA* for giving me so much pleasure, and a yarn to tell.

Chapter 1

At the time of my second betrothal I was living in a two-up, two-down ‘Coronation Street’ type of residence, but it had two saving graces. The first, it was practically on Putney Heath. The second, it had a front garden of some considerable footage. My house marked the terminal of the Number 30 bus route. The bus stop was right outside my front gate, and these stately vehicles would shed their load, turn round, and wait in a row again for the ‘off’. The drivers and conductors would alight to stretch their legs and, leaning heavily on my garden fence, eat sandwiches liberally sprinkled with tomato ketchup, then throw bottle and paper bag straight over into my precious bed of Super Star roses. My front yard, therefore, was a slum; by no stretch of the imagination the bijou residence which each cottage has now become, changing hands, I believe, for sums of money well over the £200,000 mark.

That was in 1966, and I had acquired my little patch by means of a heavy mortgage, which I had secured by being most untruthful with the mortgage company concerned; they did not consider ‘femmes soles’, as I was then classified, to be a favourable proposition.

However, there I resided with my daughter Michèle, then aged thirteen, my Jack Russell terrier Kiki, my two very aristocratic Abyssinian cats Tessa and Tana who, though I am devoted to cats kept purely as pets, were there for the purpose of breeding many lucrative Abyssinian kittens.

I was a great believer in moneymaking hobbies and sidelines. And to this day am dedicated to making 'a bit on the side'. This of course was the aim in my cat breeding activities, and I kept these two exquisite, serene felines in the lap of luxury, enjoying their company as they did mine I fancy, with great plans for their futures, both at the cat shows and as breeders. Alas, I was soon to discover that the breeding of pedigree cats is a highly scientific venture requiring much skill and knowledge, not to mention luck. The two preceding items I had not yet aspired to, and the latter I am not well endowed with. In fact these two rare ladies did exceedingly well at the show benches, but in the other matter they were disinclined to accept their chosen studs (at five guineas a shout), and showed a marked preference for the Putney alley cat brigade. On the rare occasion they deemed a chosen stud tolerable they were not prolific breeders, producing one or perhaps two at the most, delicate looking, delicious kittens. When however they were able to escape to next door's ginger tom, they presented me with armfuls of lusty babies, none of whom I had the heart to destroy. This project was not a success.

We lived a life of humdrum tranquillity, my daughter and I. Her elder sister was in France finishing her education and looking for a husband, which she found with some alacrity, and Michèle went to her convent school every day, reaffirming the old saying that 'one's school days are the happiest days of one's life'; a theory which from my own experience was totally erroneous. When she came home in the evenings she would study, or with feverish energy dance or listen to her record player, for those were the days of Beatlemania.

I went off to Fleet Street each morning, where I worked for an American overlord, the owner of an Art and Literary Agency, which in top gear American style he operated in

punctilious fashion. His writers wrote, with speed and imagination, many of the feature articles which appeared in the daily press and weekly women's magazines. He represented a team of artists and writers whose work it was my job to sell to the English Press. This I did, spasmodically, exceedingly well. Since I worked on a commission basis I had to.

My American boss was the most tolerant of men. I appeared at my office desk at least an hour and a half later than the rest of the staff, and a good three hours after him. I do not know how he put up with me, or even how he was able to be civil to me. My explanation that the first two hours in English offices were taken up with drinking coffee and discussions on the previous night's telly must have appeased him, though I wasn't sure this was either just or true as I have never arrived at curtain-up time at any office, English or otherwise. Anyway, I got him the sales he needed and the commission I needed, all concertinaed into a very short working day. I think he thought of me as some sort of Celtic eccentric, or 'screwball' as he so neatly put it. He used to say that I lacked ambition, and had I not I would have gone far, supposedly up the journalistic ladder. I appreciated my American employer.

One of my less stingy clients, in the daily rounds to the great publishing houses of Fleet Street, was an Art Editor of a woman's magazine. He was, in my estimation, one of the 'greats' in the art editing arena. He knew more about the ins and outs of his profession than anyone else I met at the time. He seemed a perfectionist in all his undertakings, and he understood design. I had a great regard for his ability. He, fortunately, purchased a lot of our artists' illustrations to accompany the fiction stories in his weekly magazine. He would buy my wares as if I were selling candyfloss at a fair. This did my ego a power of good as it confirmed my belief

that I handled the best artists in the business. It also improved my bank balance. After knowing him in the business sense for five years, he did me the honour of asking me to become his wife, which is how I found myself engaged to be married at the age of thirty-six. The career which might have gone far, had I been both punctual and ambitious, was about to come to an abrupt halt.

I contemplated marriage for the second time for the usual, and most old-fashioned reason - I was in love. I did not love my intended, nor he me, but we were 'in love' with each other; we were romantic in the most unromantic circumstances - we both needed a change. We had, it seemed, both done the same thing day after day, and competed in the same rat-race non-stop for many a year, and it looked as if we would continue to do so if we didn't do something about it. We decided, for starters, to get married.

We knew little or nothing about each other, but there didn't seem much to find out. The domestic situation was known already for it had been lightly mentioned over cups of coffee, at the same time as I displayed my bundle of art illustrations.

"How's her ladyship?" I would enquire.

"Very well. How's your fella?" he would reply.

We would fill in on a few details from the previous week then continue to talk 'shop'.

It did occur to me, however, that in anticipating the wedded state it might have been more prudent to discover our mutual expectations. I knew mine.

I would keep the little house neat and clean, decorated tastefully but unostentatiously, perhaps getting the builders in to do what I couldn't handle myself. I would occupy myself about the house, wafting in an elegant day-gown, gently Hoovering and dusting. No heavy work of course. I would shop thriftily for the groceries, filling my basket with exotic, appetising goodies, for I had been taught that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach. Having disposed of my man to his chosen career from nine to five I would relax, but be waiting for him, geisha fashion, at the end of the day, with a smile on my face, a tray of gentle but reviving drinks at the ready, along with his slippers and a fine-smelling dinner effortlessly prepared.

In return for this the mortgage repayments would be made regularly, not to mention the gas and electricity bills. And finally, my house would have all mod cons.

This arrangement might have seemed slightly mercenary, but I excused myself on the grounds that we got along very well together, and I had enormous respect for him.

Now for his expectations. Had we only discussed the matter, it would have come to light that he anticipated a lady - half gypsy, half duchess - consumed with a spirit of adventure and able to make ends meet financially; not be seasick and be able to produce a stew with dumplings at five minutes notice. A lady who would assure him that any possible issue of the marriage would not be allowed to become policemen.

Alas, none of these expectations ever cropped up in conversation so we neither of us knew what we were in for, and the question I often pondered was: had we known, would we have acted other than we did, and not have been so hasty in relinquishing our respective Fleet Street desks?

I do not want to give the impression that there was nothing interesting to discover about each other. We conversed incessantly about this and that. Certain basic information we obviously disclosed, and we exchanged our ideas about some of our hopes for the future. One of these was our mutual intention to return home one day.

We were both Welsh, and this, though not of obvious significance, was our closest link, as we were both aiming to get back to the land of our fathers. We neither of us had been reared in that glorious country, and our backgrounds were very different, but we were both from Glamorgan. My family had lived for generations in the South. He had been born in the Rhondda Valley mining villages. He had been left in a brown carrier-bag on the doorstep of the local maternity home. It was, I was assured, a Fortnum and Mason carrier-bag, but that I think was to add panache to the story. Two kind people had subsequently adopted him, rearing him as their own. When he was two they had moved to Essex, where he lived until he left home. Thus it was that we both presupposed that we would return to the valleys one day.

With this mutual destination determined, if rather vaguely, we had at least one thing in common, so with patriotic fervour, and some haste, we set our wedding date for Saint David's Day and filled the house with daffodils. As usual I was too late or we were held up, I forget which, and we were married on the 4th day of March, by which time the daffodils had faded.

It struck me at the time as excellent value. Seven and sixpence to get wed. We had assembled ourselves in a cheerful little room, with a carpet (apple green coloured), armchairs, and a gay bunch of flowers in a fine porcelain vase on the wide oak desk.

“Repeat after me,” the registrar had requested civilly. “I, Bryn William, take Caroline Anne to be my lawful wedded wife ...”

My attention wandered to the door, for unfortunately, on entering the office from the street I had spotted the very recent ex-girlfriend of my intended. If looks could kill hers almost did and I quaked, wondering if I should politely offer her the option of taking my place. I decided against this in view of the fact that my mother was close on my heels, along with some Fleet Street dignitaries, and it would have confused everyone somewhat. Might this lady leap through the door behind me with a gun, or a knife perhaps? My mind boggled; she might even mistake my daughter for me, for she had somehow got herself placed the other side of the groom.

I completely missed the gist of the marriage thing, coming out of my reverie abruptly as I realised that all eyes were upon me. I was being asked quite sharply: “Well, do you?”

“Do I what?” I enquired.

“Take this man to be your lawful wedded husband?”

“Oh yes indeed,” I said, rather too enthusiastically.

“Then would you kindly repeat after me ...”

We went through it again, I listening very carefully; but on hearing a door bang my mouth went dry, and the name of my spouse eluded me.

“You may keep the certificate,” said the long suffering official witheringly. He handed me a neat piece of paper. I think he thought I might like to refer to it.

Well, with a shiny new ring on my finger and a green chit in my pocket we were wed, and we proceeded down the steps, stately as you like, to take tea on Derry and Toms' roof garden. No sign of my competitor; indeed I never saw her again.

We honeymooned in the usual way, but lingered a week longer than we had planned because my new husband had, surprisingly, decided to terminate his Art-Directorship on the magazine. Accordingly we dispensed with Bryn's capital quite recklessly, and unashamedly since it was the first holiday either of us had enjoyed for years.

* * *

Chapter 2

Michèle was waiting in the familiar little house on our return from the honeymoon, pleased to have me back, and wary of Bryn. I don't think she quite knew what to make of this new step-father of hers. As step-fathers went he wasn't a bad acquisition. He was young for a father, since he was eight years my junior, or so he insisted. I had always thought this rather doubtful because of the carrier bag business, and because his hair was greying and I thought I looked younger than him. Be that as it may, he was very 'with it' from a young girl's point of view.

Bryn was tall, with jet black curly hair greying at the forelock. He had a black beard and piercing black eyes - striking rather than handsome. Too tall for a Latin or a Celt, he didn't look my idea of a typical Welshman on account of his size. He was formidable and had charisma, but above all he had the gift of the gab. He was silent in the company of someone he disliked; on the other hand, if he felt at his ease he was extremely verbose. He was an extremist, disliking mediocrity in people and achievement. The greatest transgression in his opinion was to be a 'grey' person. Fine if one was good, better if one was bad, but to be in-between was a sin. People seemed to like him immensely, or detest him.

From Michèle's angle he was quite satisfactory, for he 'cut a dash'. At thirteen it seemed important that the immediate family did not show one up by being old fashioned, and in

this area Bryn was ideal; when she introduced him to her young friends they would exclaim how unusual he was. This added to her prestige with her contemporaries enormously.

He talked with a teenager not at her, and was a general fount of knowledge on subjects that appealed to her, such as the 'pop' music scene, current teen-age periodicals, and what Gene Pitney might prefer for breakfast, to mention but a few. He managed not to get in her way when she was heading for the bathroom to wash her hair or her smalls, a practically non-stop occupation in female adolescence. He could also take up or let down, at five minutes notice, the hem of a new dress, stitching it neatly all the way round. He was indeed a fortunate addition to the family.

It was at this time that Michèle became 'Droopy'. It was Bryn who bestowed this misnomer. She was beautiful, with a lithe figure. She had long fair hair and smoky blue eyes, with a peaches and cream complexion. She certainly had that quality in her looks that made people turn when she entered a room, and stare with admiration. She was spasmodically a lovely girl but, because of her age, dreary at times. She had a way of being very animated, lots of fun, a ball of fire, or alternatively, miserable, sullen and moody. Like one of my dazzling roses in the front yard, she was either in full bloom and a pleasure to behold, or sadly wilting and in need of a jolly good watering. The name suited her admirably, the emphasis being on the first syllable.

It stuck with her until she was quite grown-up, to be lispd on the tongues of hitherto unthought-of siblings who couldn't quite roll the 'r' and endearingly called her 'Boop'.

It became apparent before long that, although an addition had

not been scheduled, we were to increase the number of our family. I had, after one month at home, put on a tiresome amount of weight. Hughes the Health, as we called our amiable family doctor, was consulted and he confirmed my suspicions, although I knew without him telling me that the bathroom scales didn't lie and it was not from over-eating. This news was received with much jubilation.

“It will be convenient if it is a boy,” said Droopy rather ambiguously, and we all became feverish with excitement about this possible forthcoming event, so much so that one would have imagined it was imperative to beget a male child in order to continue a dynasty.

It became equally apparent that our living quarters were soon to become extremely cramped. ‘Two-up and Two-down’ was beginning to bring out the worst in our personalities. Bryn was working at home illustrating book covers and fiction stories. He was doing quite well, considering that it was an overcrowded market. An artist needed space to work and spread the tools of his trade. Drawing boards, reference books, paints, brushes and camera equipment had to be situated somewhere. He had been banished to the potting shed where he valiantly fought the elements. If it was hot the sun poured through the windows where my geraniums and tomatoes had hitherto enjoyed full sun and ripened accordingly. Bryn's paints and inks melted and faded and so did he. On the other hand, if it rained, it being an old it'sy bitsy shed, his drawings and work all ready to go to the press would be awash and water stained.

Added to this, Droopy's teenage hordes would descend on the premises to listen to records and drink anything that anybody had been foolish enough to leave out on the side-board. Kiki dog weaved in and out of numerous feet, squealing if she didn't remove herself quickly enough. The

cats were also breeding.

Bryn called an accommodation conference. An idea had come to him, which had been on his mind for some time. I reckoned that it had been formulating for some years, but at that stage we were all ears, about to be co-operative and helpful in the extreme if he could think of a reasonable solution.

“It is perfectly obvious that the very thing we as a family require is a larger house,” he said with some conviction.

We awaited his pearls of wisdom, for we knew by his tone that he was about to make a speech, and if the issue was unpalatable he would be long-winded.

“We need an immense Victorian, rambling three or four storey job, which could be divided between us for our varying needs. The top or attic could become an atelier; below this the nurseries and bedrooms, the ground level for living and entertaining and the basement for Droopy and the younger generation, where she can hold court in a more or less discotheque atmosphere day and night. Such a house would be ideal, but let’s face it would cost a vast amount of cash and we only have available the proceeds from the possible sale of our little abode. After paying back the mortgage the amount in hand will be a sick little sum indeed.”

I felt he was hatching something questionable.

“A family-sized house of some respectability is out of the question. But there are other possibilities,” he continued.

Our minds boggled. What could he mean?

“What sort of things? You mean a windmill?” asked Droopy innocently.

I knew she would think of that. There was one on Wimbledon Common. We always coveted it, but I thought round rooms would have been difficult to furnish.

“When I was a lad,” Bryn said, choosing his words carefully so that we would have ample time to formulate this image in our minds, “my father would take me, as a great treat, to Maldon in Essex, to sit on the quay and watch the barges sail up to the wharf, unload their cargoes, and make ready for their return journeys back up to London. Many a yarn my father exchanged with those old barge skippers and I would listen fascinated, not daring to utter. My father was a strict man for a boy keeping his place. You know those old barge skippers put to sea with just a lad to help them? The pair of them would hoist and lower those great heavy red sails and think nothing of it. What a sight they were, gliding up the River Blackwater on an evening tide.”

So that was it - a vessel. A spritsail barge. No more needed to be said. Droopy and I knew exactly what large thing he had in mind and we looked at each other with alarm.

“I don’t think I would like that. Not living on one,” I said fatuously.

“I don’t see why you wouldn’t,” said Bryn. “Not so very long ago, when barges were still trading, the skippers lived aboard with their wives and children. It was cramped mind you, two or three kids and the missus all sleeping and cooking in the Master’s cabin. But they managed. Nowadays, with barges out of trade, people can use the holds as living quarters as well and they are vast. Living on a barge is a way of life. In Holland, where barges are still trading, it’s quite usual for families to live aboard.”

“Are there any barges left in trade round the English coast?” I asked, trying to take an interest.

“Just the *CAMBRIA* and she might be done with it by now.”

“What’s happened to all the others? Now that they are no longer working?”

“Some are used as charter barges, taking out parties of holidaymakers, day trippers and suchlike. Others have been bought by families who use them for weekend homes or live aboard permanently. Most of the barges have engines now, making them a lot easier for people who favour manoeuvrability. There’s quite a community of barge folk living at Maldon. Tell you what, we’ll fix up to go on a trip with one of the charter barges. That way you’ll both see what it’s like.”

To my way of thinking boats were for transportation, along with trains, planes and cars. Perhaps I had no poetry in me, but it seemed that if you wanted to get somewhere you put yourself on one of the many conveyances available, and eventually you were conveyed. To voluntarily place oneself in such a vehicle, with nowhere particular to go, seemed the height of stupidity. I could never see the point of just going for a drive in a motor car for the sake of the spin. As for a racing vehicle, that was totally beyond my comprehension. I had heard of people living in disused railway carriages, and had seen the houseboats moored along the embankment at Chelsea, but I had always considered that the occupants must have been suckers for punishment. The tinker’s caravan in Ireland held a certain fascination for me. Tinkers live ‘aboard’ and go nowhere special. I had done a little tinkering in the Emerald Isle; it was delightful, but there again I had always had a destination. Anyway, a horse-

drawn caravan is one of the safer modes of transport; easy to halt the combination with a 'Woah'.

I think my misgivings must have been founded on fear. I was not an adventuress. Had I been some years younger, my reaction would undoubtedly have been the same as Droopy's: What a splendid scheme. Whoopee. When do we start?

Though I am gifted with the ability to adapt readily to any situation, I am a born pessimist, and I find the cons invariably outweigh the pros. Without looking at a proposition from every view-point, I tend to see all the disadvantages of a scheme before any of the obvious advantages hit me. Thus the discussion on the delights of living afloat - the independence, the feeling of freedom that would assail me, not to mention the ease with which I could escape my creditors by simply hauling up anchor and moving on - did not have the effect that it was supposed to have. At any rate I have never classified myself as a spoiler of the fun, so with little enthusiasm, but a modicum of curiosity, I agreed that the very thing we should do was take ourselves off for a week-end in one of these irresistible craft.

Before I had time to ponder further on the subject the trip was all arranged. It was a cold, for the time of the year, Friday at the end of April, and a heavy drizzle had set in for the day. Not the weather, I speculated, for my initiation into the wondrous world of sailing and messing about in boats. I was soon to learn that unseasonable weather has nothing to do with the proposed enjoyment of a day out sailing. Which way the wind was blowing, and how keenly, had a lot to do with it. We had been whisked down to Maldon at a very early hour to start the day - the precise hour, I had

discovered, that my morning sickness, which heralded the beginning of every day, had set in. Normally the morning queasies made me grin and bear it in a martyr-like way, for I had been told by an old crone years ago that the morning malaise signified that a baby would be born with masses of curly hair. I think she was right because the girls' heads had looked like radishes when they had come into the world. I had been ashamed of how unpicturesque they had looked as they were popped into their allotted cots at the hospital. This particular morning the thought of my downy-headed foetus did nothing for me, and I presented myself on Maldon Quay enveloped in a rare old gloom.

My first impression of the barges was of their enormous proportions, and solidarity; more still of their magnificence. There were, I recall, ten berthed alongside the quay, and they were beautiful in contour. They were swaying proudly, for the tide was in. We were to go aboard the *KITTY* for she was a charter barge, but only a few of us were going out on her as the season had not actually started. It was raining hard by now and, trying to look nonchalant, I manipulated myself across the gangplank from quay-side to deck. The skipper knew Bryn, and we exchanged cursory greetings. We all went below and were given a mug of something hot by a large jolly woman, who apparently was to accompany us to do the cooking. The men disappeared, as did Droopy, and I gathered that everyone had departed in search of a useful task, for the getting under way procedure was the one time there was plenty to occupy everybody.

I surveyed my surroundings, then felt pregnantly poorly for the rest of the day, and indeed for the rest of the outing. Thus I rarely surfaced from the saloon, not even to put my head out of the hatch, although I wanted to badly, to see the Essex landscape which I had heard had a unique charm. I also hated not being in on things.

There was constant activity on deck. By now we were well under way. Although I had never before suffered from seasickness I had to suppress a constant urge to heave up. I realised after a while what the trouble was, and of course the dilemma was impossible to rectify for there was nothing to combat it. This was the smell which is peculiar to barges alone - an aroma of creosote, mixed with a hint of rope and a soupçon of tar, along with whatever happens to be in the bilges at the time. No other craft has quite the same effect on my nostrils, or indeed on my constitution. Liners smell of fresh paint, the cross-channel ferries of stale beer, the fishing smacks obviously of fish, and expensive yachts of plastic - all quite tolerable odours in their own way. Even now, years later, when I ruminate on river life and the barges I can close my eyes and the vision of a barge is always linked to that incomparable redolence.

Thus it was that I felt thoroughly out of sorts for the entire duration of the trip. However, I did not waste my few days aboard. I discovered from my newfound, robust cooking friend a great deal about what went on below. Things had special names. Sitting-rooms were saloons; kitchens were galleys; beds were bunks. The loo was the heads. I did not proceed to the front or the back of the vessel, I went forward or aft. The sides of the thing were starboard, which was the right side as I looked forward, and port - the left side. The engine, if there was one, was situated aft, or in the stern, along with the Master's cabin. The fo'c's'le was forward, and was a small cabin in which the crew would sleep.

There were names for objects with which she felt I should become acquainted. I went up or down the hatch, not the stairs. The ceilings were the deck-heads. The floors were the ceilings. Partitions were bulkheads, and oh, a hundred other things. I became on that short voyage a fount of

nautical knowledge. I had acquired a lot of suitable jargon and I discovered, by examining the interior, how elegantly the craftsmen of seventy odd years ago had fashioned their wood, for the feel and line of the great pieces of timber were museum pieces in themselves.

Bryn and Droopy were having themselves a super time on deck, only descending to eat mountainous portions of Toad-in-the-hole, or jump into their sleeping bags where they slept soundly, still in their sweaters and jeans, ready to leap on deck again in case they should miss any important developments.

Two things became apparent to me as we twisted hither and thither through the rivers and estuaries along the East coast. Firstly, Bryn had done a considerable amount of sailing and barging before. He was not a novice, and from the little I saw on the third day, when I finally felt well enough to partially emerge from my cocoon below, he appeared to handle the various jobs given to him by the skipper with dexterity - an indication that he knew what he was about. Secondly, it was obvious that he so thoroughly enjoyed what he was doing that he aimed to do a lot more. Droopy was also in her element. The fact that everyone was having a ball had not escaped me, and my family seemed totally engrossed in a melée of ropes, sails and the like.

By now we were returning. Maldon was in sight. The rain had finally ceased and given way to the unsure sun, and I saw for the first time the endless mudflats and marshes that stretch beyond the banks of the Blackwater River. The gulls were circling round us screeching and cursing; and the red sails hung like a theatre backcloth above my head, the rays of the sun playing hide and seek amongst them. The occupants of barges alongside the quay had spotted us, and were waving and shouting a welcome. The teeming activity was

resumed in earnest as we hove to, ready to tuck ourselves snugly back into the berth, a manoeuvre requiring some precision.

As I slid myself over the precarious plank and got ashore I sensed that it would be quite useless to put up the slightest opposition to the ultimate conclusion of this trip. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that it wouldn't be long before we would be back, with bags and baggage, to slide up and over the plank into a barge of our own.

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