

19

The Sea, the Sea, the Sea!

Zach opened his mouth and began singing the same old rousing song again.

At Playarel in Brittany, down by the Breton Sea,

If a man would go a fishing,

Then let him come with me ee

For the fish lie out in the distance there

Deep in the Breton Sea ee ee

Deep in the Breton Sea.

He had sung it so many times that Tom and Will knew it almost by heart.

‘And green is the boat,’ they sang.

And red is the sail,

That leans to the sunlit breeze

And music sings at a rippling keel

What can a man more please.

It is sweet to go to the fishing grounds

In the soft green Breton Sea.

It was August. The sun shone in a clear uncluttered azure sky and Zach, Tom and Will sat on the rough plank seat of the cart while Tom held the reins. They were into the third day of their travels on the road. The coolness of the early morning had worn off and another blisteringly hot day had begun. Zach and Will peeled their shirts off and threw them together with their socks and sandals into the back of the cart. He and Zach sat barefooted, their braces dangling at their sides and their lean sunburnt legs swinging gently and rhythmically from side to side as the cart jogged onwards.

‘Shouldn’t be far now,’ murmured Tom as he shook the reins.

He left Dobbs and the cart at a farm. In exchange for her help in harvesting, the farmer would take care of her. They unloaded the cart where Sammy, two bicycles and several panniers lay heaped together. Tom and Zach wheeled the bicycles out on to the road while Will carried the panniers.

Zach had painted his machine. Its frame was now a pillar-box red and the mudguards were yellow. He hung two of the panniers on to a small frame which was attached to the back wheel. Tom’s bicycle was black in colour but it was just as conspicuous as Zach’s for it was a tandem. Will couldn’t ride a bicycle, so being a second rider was the next best thing.

A wicker basket was strapped to the front handlebars. Tom checked the tyres and, like Zach, tied the panniers securely on to the back wheel. He climbed on to the tandem and held it steady while Will planted Sammy in the basket and then hauled himself on to the back seat. Zach was already astride his bike, his foot resting on a pedal.

‘Let’s go!’ cried Tom, and he gave the tandem a sharp push forward.

‘Wizzo!’ yelled Zach.

They cycled steadily and rhythmically on, past fields of fresh swaying corn and lush green trees. Cream and amber butterflies flew intermittently from behind the hedgerows and strange, exotic smells hit their noses. They wheeled the bicycles up a very steep hill and stood at the top breathless at the climb. There at last, vast and calm below them, lay the sea.

Flinging their bicycles into the hedgerows they leapt and pranced about waving their arms in the air and yelling at the tops of their voices, and when suddenly Will and Zach realized that Tom was dancing too, they clutched their stomachs and laughed hysterically till the tears rolled down their cheeks.

After recovering, they gulped down some overheated lemonade and clambered back on to their bicycles and eased them gently down the hill, half mesmerized by the immense expanse of blue that sparkled below them. Sammy continued to lie slumped and boiling under an old piece of tarpaulin that was fixed over the basket. As soon as he felt a flicker of breeze he hung his head over the edge, his tongue dangling in anticipation of a cool and shady spot.

Although there were no signposts to welcome them, Tom felt sure the fishing village they rode into was the place. It was called Salmouth. They weren't the only holidaymakers but, as the roads to Salmouth were very narrow, most of the people who ventured there were cyclists like themselves or rambles. Tom walked from cottage door to cottage door asking if anyone would take them, including a dog, for bed, breakfast and an evening meal for a fortnight. After several refusals they chanced upon a middle-aged widow called Mrs Clarence. She was delighted to have them stay with her. Her four sons had been called up and she lived alone with a dog called Rumble. Unlike Sammy, Rumble was ancient and spent his days lying lazily cushioned in layers of his own wrinkled fat.

Tom and Zach wheeled the bicycle and tandem along a tiny stone pathway at the side of Mrs Clarence's cottage, towards her neat and well-stocked garden. Will untied the panniers and together they carried them in.

'You jest go for a walk,' announced Mrs Clarence cheerfully. 'It'll give me a chance to sort your rooms out.'

They happily agreed to this suggestion and strolled leisurely down the tiny main street in the direction of a small harbour. Two tiny cobbled alleyways sloped gently down towards it. At the corner of one stood an old weather-beaten pub called the 'Captain Morgan'. A wind-battered sign with a picture of some old sea-dog on it hung outside.

'By George, I say,' whispered Zach, clutching Will's arm in excitement, 'I wonder if there are any smugglers or pirates round here.'

Tom and Sammy had carried on down the lane and were standing at a tiny landing dock. Will and Zach joined them.

They passed a fishmonger's where clusters of crawling crabs and lobsters, inert cockles and shellfish were placed in the front window on display. A heavy odour of fresh fish emanated from the doorway.

A few yards down was a shop filled with what Zach called 'Sea-things', from fishing tackle and compasses to long johns and thick navy-oiled jerseys. Zach stared wistfully through the glass and sighed.

'Oh to be a pirate!' and he began to murmur something about 'Drake being in his hammock' and 'Captain art thou sleepin' thar below.'

Will was drawn like a magnet towards the small dock. He stood on the ancient wooden jetty and gazed in wonder at the sea. The waves lapped gently against the timbers below him. He had imagined that the sea would terrify and engulf him but instead he felt surprisingly calm. It seemed as if his mind had suddenly opened and all his worries, painful memories and fears were flooding to the surface and drifting away. Sammy barked at the seagulls that caw-cawed and swooped above his head but Will was quite deaf to his yelps.

Around the jetty itself were groups of men in fishing boats; long high-masted wooden vessels with wet nets hanging over their sides. Left of the jetty, a mile away, lay a sheltered bay. A handful of small anchored sailing boats bobbed on the surface. Will plunged his hands into his pockets. He felt overwhelmingly happy at the thought of spending a fortnight in Salmouth. Fourteen whole days. He could sit by the quay and sketch to his heart's content and there was so much to see, new shapes to draw, new colours to store into his memory. There were some things, though, that he could never capture, things like smells and feelings and sensations of touch. They were 'now' things to enjoy only for a moment.

'Are you coming, Will?' yelled Zach.

He turned quickly.

'We'se gooin' further along towards that long V,' said Tom pointing to the estuary. 'You want to stay here or come along?'

'I'm coming,' he replied, walking towards them.

They turned up a second alleyway and pressed their noses against the dirty glass of an old second-hand bookshop. It was a treasure house for all three of them. If it hadn't been for Sammy tugging at Tom's corduroys they might have disappeared into the shop and stayed there for the remainder of the afternoon.

'That's a rainy-day shop,' commented Tom.

Across the alleyway was a shop called 'The Bucket and Spade'. Colourful tin buckets and large wooden spades, rubber balls and brown rubber swimming tyres, cricket bats and woollen swimsuits were out on display in front of it. A chubby three-year-old girl was standing outside it. She stumbled up the sloping alleyway after her brother who was wearing a sailor suit. Will, Zach and Tom strode past them and turned a corner which led them back to the main street. They walked by a row of crooked whitewashed cottages, a small grocery store, a Boot's Library, a baker's, a wool shop and a cobbler's with a toy mender sign in the window.

The nearest beach was a mixture of sand and pebbles. They sat on it and gazed out at the bay.

Three or four families and a few couples were sitting on deckchairs or swimming in the sea. Tom had previously read in the newspapers that most of the beaches in England were heavily populated. Salmouth, to his delight, was relatively quiet.

By the time they returned to Mrs Clarence's, they were ravenous.

'I've took your bags to your rooms,' she said. 'I've put you two boys together in the back room and Mr Oakley,' she added, 'you're in the front bedroom next to mine.'

Tom thanked her and they all sat down to a meal of fried mackerel, freshly picked broad beans, potatoes in their jackets, and slices of fried courgettes. Tom offered Mrs Clarence his ration of sugar and butter and anything else she might need.

Zach had eaten fish many times. He had spent several summers by the sea when his parents were doing summer seasons but it was the first time he had ever had a companion of his own age to share those summer joys. Most of the time he used to wander alone, chatting to people, but his odd appearance and forthright ways seemed to annoy them and they tended to ignore him. With Will, he felt that he could do and be anything and anybody and Will would still like him.

Will was eating fish for the first time. Mrs Clarence showed him how to gently make an incision, fold the fleshy parts to either side and carefully pull out, intact, the long skeleton.

Mrs Clarence's cottage made a great impression on her three guests for she not only had a separate kitchen and dining-cum-sitting-room but she also had a bathroom. It was upstairs at the top of a narrow crooked stairway. It astounded Will that anyone should have a special room for having a bath in. It also had running hot and cold water that came out of two taps and she had a toilet with a chain that you pulled, to flush it. It was all very different from the tiny lean-to shed that stood outside Tom's back door. The toilet inside there was a plank with a hole in it which was balanced above a deep earthen pit.

After the fish meal, they had baked apple with honey poured over it. Mrs Clarence had been talking so much that she had forgotten that they were in the oven and they had burst into oddly-shaped foaming heaps. She apologized profusely but Tom, Will and Zach said that they preferred them exploded.

During the meal Tom observed Zach and Will. Will's skin which had gone through various stages of pink on the journey was now approaching a bronze hue. A profusion of freckles now covered his entire face.

'I say,' exclaimed Zach, also noticing the new phenomenon, 'you've got hundreds of freckles.'

'Have I?' remarked Will in surprise.

'Yes. They must have been lurking under your skin for years and years and years.'

Will glanced down at his arms. His shirt-sleeves were rolled up to above his elbows.

'I've got lots on me arms too,' he commented. 'How strange.'

Zach licked his mouth.

'My mouth tastes salty, does yours?'

Will licked his lips and nodded.

'Mine too,' added Tom.

'I'm going to re-name this village Salt-on-the-mouth,' said Zach, sitting back and looking very pleased with himself.

'I like that,' said Will smiling.

The sea air caused Zach and Will to feel sleepy and, as they were excited about sharing a room, they went to bed quite willingly, leaving Tom and Mrs Clarence to listen to 'Henry Hall's Guest Night' on the wireless. While she knitted and talked, Sammy tried vainly to stir some life into Rumble who now occupied the best position by the hearth.

Upstairs Zach and Will undressed and put their pyjama trousers on. Their beds stood on either side of a bay window which overlooked the sea. There were two window frames with thin strips of painted white wood which criss-crossed across the glass. Both windows had a latch that pushed them outwards. They were now flung open, for Mrs Clarence had said that as long as they kept the lights off, they needn't have the blacks up. Zach and Will leaned out and allowed the cool night air to brush their faces. A full harvest moon hung in a clear navy sky. Waves slapped against the shore below the tiny back garden.

Downstairs Tom sat reading, when he wasn't interrupted by Mrs Clarence. She was a shy woman and her shyness manifested itself in great bursts of incessant chatter. Tom felt sure that once she had got used to the three of them she would calm down.

Mrs Clarence didn't understand the relationship of the two boys to Tom. It was obvious to her that he and the fair one were related but the dark precocious one didn't look like either of them. She also wondered if Will was Tom's son or grandson. When she discovered that he was a widower it unnerved her a little. She thought him a very attractive man and to her dismay found herself talking and chattering like an adolescent schoolgirl. It was really quite embarrassing. They had just finished listening to the eight o'clock news bulletin when she put down her knitting.

'Is Zach a friend of your son's?' she asked.

Tom looked up from his book, surprised.

'My son?' he asked.

'Will. He's very like you. Has your ways.'

'Evacuee,' he began, but he didn't get any further. She took it that Zach was the only evacuee.

'How kind of you, Mr Oakley, to take an evacuee on holiday,' and she couldn't praise him enough.

The praise made Tom feel awkward so rather than mention that Will was also an evacuee, he said nothing, hoping that the matter would be dropped. He went up the stairway to Zach and Will's room and found them still leaning out of the window staring at the sea. He tucked them both into bed, ruffled their hair and closed the door behind them.

Zach lay on his back, his arms up-stretched above him, his head leaning on his hands.

'I say,' he said. 'Isn't this the most wondrous, scrumptious, exciting thing that's ever happened in the whole wide world.'

'Yeh,' agreed Will.

They lay in silence in the semi-darkness, the moon shining its beams across the whitewashed floorboards.

'Ent it a fine sound,' whispered Will, staring happily up at the ceiling.

'What?' asked Zach sleepily.

'The waves.'

Zach turned over and gave a grunt. Will was sitting cross-legged on the window-sill with a sketch pad on his knees. He glanced down at Zach's brown face and wiry black hair lying against the crisp white pillow case and returned to his drawing. Zach gave

another grunt, opened his eyes and looked over at Will's bed. Seeing the empty sheets, he rolled out of bed quickly and then caught sight of him on the window-sill.

'How long have you been up?'

Will shrugged.

'About an hour, I s'pose.'

'Why didn't you wake me?'

'Thought mebbe you wanted to lie in.'

Zach leaned on the window-sill next to Will's legs. A slight mist hung over the sea.

'I say, it's going to be a wizzo day. A real scorcher.'

He glanced at Will's drawing which consisted of two gulls hovering above a tranquil sea. Will sighed.

'I wish I could get the sun shinin' on the waves, sort of sparklin' like.' He leaned back against the wall. 'Oh, Will,' retorted Zach. 'It's smashing. If I drew that, it would be just one long wiggly line in the middle of the page, a couple of silly clouds above it and a few wavy lines below.'

Will gave a laugh.

Mrs Clarence knocked on their door.

'Breakfast in five minutes, boys,' she sang.

'Rightio,' yelled Zach.

Will climbed down and put his sketch-pad on the small white wooden table under the sill.

It was the beginning of another of Zach's 'glorious' days. Tom had also risen early and had already been out with Sammy for a walk along the beach.

The three of them all sat down to a generous breakfast and then set off immediately with a picnic lunch to the beach. They walked for a mile along the coast towards some cliffs and climbed up a rough pathway that had been hacked out of the grass and bracken. Once they reached the top they carried on walking until they came to a small opening in a clump of gorse. They scrambled down another rough pathway and came to a sheltered and sandy cove. The cliffs curved round on either side of them like the arms of an enormous armchair. Zach and Will peeled off their clothes down to their underpants while Sammy dug into the sand sending cascades of it into a pile behind him. Tom rolled his trouser-legs and shirt-sleeves up and put a four-knotted handkerchief on his head.

Zach and Will walked down towards the sea. Will stood at the edge while Zach splashed and yelled about the coolness of the water. He shrank back as an icy spray cascaded over him.

'Come on,' yelled Zach, who was treading water. 'There are warm bits if you keep moving about.'

Will nodded mournfully. He waded in as far as his ankles and allowed the water to swirl around his feet.

Tom sat on the shore and watched. Will turned and gave him a casual glance. He wanted Mister Tom to be near him and at the same time he didn't want to appear a coward. Tom wanted to help but didn't want to mollycoddle him. The glance from Will moved him into action.

'Come on, Samuel,' he said, eyeing the hot furry heap that was now sheltering in a hole.

'Come and have a bit of salt water, boy,' and with that he picked him up and carried him in his arms to the water's edge.

Once Will saw Sammy barking at the sea, chasing it and being caught by it, some of his fear disappeared for Sammy was very funny. Tom paddled in after him.

'Come on, Will,' he said encouragingly. 'Take some handfuls and splash some around you. You can get used to it then. I'll catch you if you fall.'

Will slowly walked in as far as his waist and with the help of Zach and Tom he was soon splashing around quite pleasurably. Tom hadn't swum for at least twenty years and then that was only in the river in Little Weirwold. By the time all three of them had sat down to their picnic lunch he had decided to buy three swimsuits. After they had eaten and had had a gentle snooze in a shady part of the cliffs they ventured into the sea again. Will learned to float quite quickly to the envy of Zach. Zach could do breast-stroke, crawl and back stroke but had never managed to float. The thought of lying still unnerved him. He always liked to be on the move. But for Will it felt wonderful to be still. First he would lie and screw his eyes up peeping through the lids at the dazzling bright sky above him and see how long he could count without sinking. By the end of the afternoon he began to forget and once he almost fell asleep.

The first and second day passed very swiftly and so too did the days that followed. Most of the time was spent in the sea, the three of them swimming in their new woolly swimsuits, or playing cricket on the beach, or building sandcastles and collecting shells.

One day they walked along the cliffs and round the bay to a mansion, another day Will spent down by the harbour sketching boats while Zach went off on a cycling trek and Tom took Mrs Clarence for a ride on the back of his tandem.

At the end of ten days Will had learnt to do the breast-stroke and Zach could count up to ten while floating.

During their stay, the news bulletins on the wireless had begun to grow ominous, so much so that one evening a worried Zach sneaked out of bed to listen to the eight o'clock news. Besides his mother being an ambulance driver his father was also with the Auxiliary Fire Service.

The locals in Salt-on-the-Mouth were convinced that the recent heavy bombing attacks on the large towns were a prelude to a large-scale invasion. Seventeen parachutes had been discovered in the Midlands, there had been raids on Southampton and the R.A.F. were bringing down an average of sixty planes a day besides carrying out heavy raids on Germany. Then came the stunning news of a bomb raid on Croydon in which three hundred factory workers were killed. Tom had been tempted to return immediately to Little Weirwold for he had felt, for some strange reason, that Zach and Will would be safer there. Mrs Clarence, however, was so insistent that they stay, that he had decided that they would stop the remaining three days as planned.

The weather continued to be almost tropically hot and they felt sorry for anyone who had to work in a city with no sea breezes to cool them. On their last Saturday as they cycled back from a day of swimming they were startled by the news headlines on a large placard leaning outside the newsagents. It read 'South West London Blitzed, Malden Badly Hit'. The shop was sold out of newspapers. With paper rationing, copies of newspapers were at a premium and the few that there were had automatically been

given to the locals. Luckily, Mrs Clarence had a copy and Zach pored anxiously over the contents. The newspapers reported that the sirens had not been sounded and this had resulted in many deaths.

'S'pose you'll be wanting to know how your parents are,' remarked Tom.

Zach nodded. He had written to them nearly every day so that they knew of his holiday address but he had had no word from them. Normally an absence of letters didn't worry him. His parents were often so tied up in the last minute chaos of technical and dress rehearsals that they had barely time to eat or sleep, let alone write a letter, but once a show was on, if he was living apart from them, he would usually receive a bumper bonus letter to make up for it. However, with the news of London being bombed, their silence caused him great anxiety.

'We'll find a telephone and contact the Littles,' suggested Tom. 'Happen they might'ur left a message, like.'

'Thanks awfully,' said Zach.

'You goin' to phone before or after supper?' added Mrs Clarence.

Zach looked visibly pale even under his almost black tan.

'Now,' said Tom.

The two of them left the cottage. Will remained to help lay the table and butter bread while listening to Children's Hour.

When they returned Zach was back to his happy self. His parents had left messages with the Littles to say that they were well and safe and that they were sorry they hadn't written but that casualties were so heavy that their time was filled giving help.

The following day was Sunday and was their last day in Salt-on-the-Mouth. Tom and Will went to the village church while Zach found a sheltered spot by the sea. Although it wasn't his Sabbath he gripped his little round cap into his heathery hair and swayed gently to and fro ekeing out the few Hebrew prayers that he remembered. It comforted him to sing the strange guttural sounds. It was like uttering a magical language that would make everything all right. His parents had taught him that whoever or whatever God was, he, she or it could probably understand silent thoughts but it made Zach feel better to voice his feelings aloud.

That day Mrs Clarence cooked them a special Sunday lunch. They had roast chicken, roast potatoes and vegetables followed by ice-cream. Mrs Clarence had made it herself with the help of a cool corner in the fishmonger's so that although the ice-cream tasted of vanilla, it smelt of mackerel.

In the afternoon Tom, Will and Zach took a last cycle round the village along the bumpy lanes that lay inland from the cliff tops. They wheeled the bicycle and tandem along the beach and, as dusk approached and a pink and orange haze stretched itself across the sky, they sat and watched the sun slowly disappear.

Mrs Clarence had a surprise gallon of local cider waiting for them on their return and, as it was a little cool that evening, she had lit a fire. They sat down by its comforting glow, to home-baked bread, cheese, onions and tankards of cider. The cider warmed their stomachs and transfused itself to their sunburnt skins. Will's mass of freckles now covered a bronze tan. Clumps of his fair hair had been bleached white by the sun. He felt relaxed and, at the same time, bubbling with energy. He wrapped his hands round his copper tankard and smiled, his teeth looking startlingly white against his tanned face. Zach was almost black and his hair, doubly curly. The experience of floating had had a

calming effect on him. He was less erratic and jumpy. He still played the fool but he had stopped trying so hard to be entertaining. For once he allowed himself to sit back and be entertained by the others.

Since leaving Weirwold Tom had decided not to shave. A curly two-week-old white beard now surrounded his chin. The sea air had frizzed small strands of the beard and his hair into tiny corkscrews that whirled outwards in wild disarray.

They all stared at each other in their apple-juiced haze as if they had only just noticed one another. Zach said that Tom looked like the son of Father Christmas, Will said that Zach resembled a golliwog and Tom said Will could have been a brown speckled egg with a white feather on top.

After supper Zach and Will took a stroll down to the tiny quay. It was a clear night and the sea was bathed in moonlight. They spoke in low voices. They were sorry to leave Salt-in-the-Mouth and yet at the same time they were looking forward to seeing George and the twins again. Will had three sketch-pads full of drawings from the holiday but he felt that he had only just begun. Zach had started yet another epic poem about a brutal band of smugglers, but he had talked so much about it that his energy for the topic was exhausted by the time he had written the third verse. They talked quietly about ideas for plays in the autumn term. Zach talked about his ambitions. He wanted to be a worldwide entertainer. Will's ambitions were a little more homebound. He just wanted to draw and be in the next autumn play. They gazed silently out at the sea and walked leisurely back to the cottage. Tom was sitting talking to Mrs Clarence by the fire and, after they had drunk some cocoa and chatted with them for a while, they drifted upstairs to bed.

The next morning they stood outside the cottage with their panniers strapped to their frames and said their last farewells. Mrs Clarence felt sad at their leaving. She had enjoyed their company.

As they pushed the bicycle and tandem forwards she watched them slowly ascend the hill till they finally disappeared over its brow.

The first day, after collecting Dobbs and the cart, was another fine one but on the Tuesday it rained and they had to sit in their sou'westers and gaberdine capes. They sheltered for a while underneath an archway of trees to have a picnic, for although they were on their way home, the return journey was still a part of their holiday. By Wednesday it looked as though autumn had begun. The fields, trees and flowers still appeared summery but a cold grey sky hung above them and a blustery wind hindered their progress.

By the time they had arrived in Little Weirwold and had watered and fed Dobbs it was nearly dusk. On the table in the living room of the cottage was an assortment of 'welcome home' goodies from the twins and George. Mrs Fletcher had delivered groceries and had left a large saucepan of vegetable soup on the well-stoked range.

The goodies consisted of flowers and a bowl of blackberries from the twins and a home-grown marrow and cabbage from George. There were also several 'Welcome Home' cards. Zach sat and had some bread and soup with them and then left for the Littles.

He wheeled his bicycle through Dobbs' field and along the tiny arched lane, and leaned it against the Littles' hedge. He was just struggling with the gate when an urgent voice came suddenly out of the darkness. He was so startled that he physically jumped.

'Sorry!' said the voice. 'I didn't mean to scare you, like.'

Zach peered over the hedge.

'Carrie!' he cried in amazement. 'What are you doing here?'

She helped him wrench open the gate and waited till he had wheeled his bicycle through.

'You look like a black man,' she remarked.

He grinned.

'Marvellous for *Othello*, eh?'

'What you on about?' she said, feeling quite exasperated, for she had been waiting for his arrival for a good three hours.

'The passionate Moor,' explained Zach. 'You know, Shakespeare.'

'Oh, Shakespeare!' groaned Carrie. 'You know, I ent read him yet.'

'Yet! You mean you might actually be tempted to?'

'Yes. Oh, Zach.' She clutched his arm and stared fearfully into his eyes.

'What?' he said. 'What's wrong?'

'I've passed the exam. I got a scholarship. I'm to be a high-school girl.'