

1947 - Flood

'Ferryman!'

Sam wasn't of a mind to rush and answer the knock at the door. He didn't really take to his customers summoning him like this. When he was ready he opened the door and felt the full force of the gale blow in. The wind was enough to snatch the door from him but he held on tight. He could see a tall form in front of him.

'Who the effing 'ell is calling round at this time of night?' he asked.

'That's no way to speak to a servant of the Crown,' came the reply. Sam now saw that the height of the fellow was due to him wearing a policeman's helmet. Although Sam knew most of the Bobbies around here this wasn't some-one he'd come across before.

'I need you to row me across the causeway,' announced the visitor.

'On a night like this? You must be joking.'

Rain was lashing down. So heavy that, as it came down, it completely missed the guttering and streamed straight to the ground. It hadn't stopped raining for days and now there was just mud and puddles outside the door. Something loose was banging in the fierce wind.

'I need you to take me across the causeway,' repeated the policeman, 'as there's a criminal we need to question residing in a house on the other side. I need to apprehend him.'

'You have no bleeding idea how dangerous it will be out there tonight,' replied Sam. 'The water's over six foot deep and the flow on that flood in this gale will carry us down to Denver.'

'All the same ... you can say what you like,' replied the constable, 'but you're going to take me over.'

Taking a moment to find his waterproofs Sam pulled on a large cape, hat, waders and gauntlets. Then he led the policeman round to the mooring. His wooden boat was straining at the mooring rope, pulling away with every gust of wind. Sam drew the boat towards him, the rope would be wet so he kept the gauntlets on, he would remove them as soon as he started rowing. He pulled the boat alongside the small quayside and signalled to his customer to climb on board. The boat was bobbing around like a lost moorhen and the policeman wasn't that nimble as he climbed down into the boat. He slipped a little as he tried to find the seat and for a moment sat down in the bilge. He'd get a wet arse thought Sam, smiling.

Sam pulled the gauntlets off and chucked them over on the bank. He wouldn't need them now as he'd want to keep a hold of the oars, with the rain and river water he couldn't afford to slip his grip. He had the rope looped around a post as he sorted himself out and prepared for the journey. It would be nearly a mile across the flood and would take a good half hour. He pulled the boat around a little, using the rope, then he let one end go as he swung the front of the boat quickly round. The current caught and swept the boat along with it for a moment while Sam grabbed the loose rope. He neatly rolled it up and placed it tidily away. After that he dug the oar deep into the water and took control. His plan was to row into the flood, heading up stream. Then he would let the current carry them most of the way across

as he pulled more on the right oar to keep the boat from floating too far down stream and away from the jetty on the other side.

The policeman was keeping surprisingly quiet after all the fuss he'd been making on dry land. Sam thought he was probably surprised to find himself so low down in this little boat. Mostly people did find that they were a lot nearer to the water than they'd expected when they made the crossing.

It was a good job that there was a moon tonight. Sam was well used to the route but even so when things were in full flood it was easy for branches and even trees to suddenly come sweeping down. Add to that, you had to avoid the bushes and trees that grew along here when there wasn't a flood and all in all it was a bit perilous.

'Reckon I'll stop over at the George tonight,' Sam said. He was trying to start a conversation so that it could help take his mind off the rowing. He was used to the work, but tonight it was hard as he had to pull against the flood. Underneath his oilskin cape he was sweating, he'd soon be as wet inside as out. His companion didn't comment. He looked well frit.

It was a dangerous night to be out but Sam had been rowing across these waters since he was twelve so he didn't really have any fear for this work. He'd have rather been at home in front of the fire but he was a ferryman like his father before him and his father before that. Just dig in deep and you'll soon be across. Sometimes you could row over and the oars would gently splash as they entered the water and you were almost sculling, but tonight it needed some effort. It wasn't possible to hear the oars, the gale was blowing and the howling of the wind covered any other noise.

As they approached the jetty he could see the properties that stood on the road alongside. A police car, lit up by the interior light, was parked outside one of the houses.

'Is that where you were expecting to find your felon?' asked Sam.

A couple of men in police uniform were leading another man out from the front door of the house.

'Looks like you've missed them,' continued Sam. 'You should have gone with your mates and driven round the right side of the water, you'd have been in time then.' He pulled the boat close to the jetty, there were some steps and the policeman climbed out. 'If I were you I'd grab that spare seat in the car and save myself from crossing back over. Your car will be safe in the village until tomorrow and you can come and fetch it then.'

Still without saying anything to Sam the police officer headed over to the car. He opened the back door and got in just before the vehicle moved off.

Whether to stay at the pub or not. The outside light was on but there didn't seem to be much activity. Not surprising really if the coppers had been round. Most of the drinking crew were probably holed up in there with the lights out. A drip of water ran down the back of his neck. Sam shivered and drew his shoulders up tighter round his ears. Best head back really. He could get his wet stuff off at home. If he stayed here the night he'd only have wet things to put back on tomorrow. He gave the boat a shove away from the jetty and then thought of the best way to get back.

He didn't have much time to think. Although there had been a steady flow on the water as he'd travelled across it hadn't been that difficult to manage but now it was as if a mighty plug had been pulled out of a giant bath. The water was forcing itself all around him. Swirling and pulling, the water started to carry the boat along. Whatever Sam did to try and control it the water just seemed to push the boat on more wildly. The boat was bucking over the water like a wild thing. It would have been easier with another body on board to keep the vessel lower in the water but with just one the little boat was left to skip and lift helplessly. Sam did the only thing he knew to do. He dug the oar down deep into the water and tried to bring the boat round, but in doing that the worst possible thing happened and the oar slipped away from his grasp. Sam tried helplessly to catch the oar just as it went loose but too late, and in an instant the oar disappeared out of his hand and into the deep water. All that was left now was for the boat to spin around like a dog endlessly chasing its tail.

Betty hadn't expected Sam to be back from the crossing. He would often stay over at the pub on the other side after a late night. So she just got on with the jobs around the house and waited for him to return. Through the window she could see the little'un from the Flag running across to her. He often came with telephone messages. Customers would ring ahead to let them know that they needed a ferry when the road across the wash was flooded. She was surprised when she saw his dad coming after him too. Especially when his dad reached across and caught him

with the flat of his hand, making him stop. Well that was a surprise, the land lord would have usually been too busy in the pub. Then Betty saw his wife, the landlady, chasing after him; apron and skirt flying as she ran along the top of the bank. The wife stopped quickly as she ran alongside her youngest, she too gave him a little slap with her hand and then carried on chasing after her husband. When she saw Betty she cried out with an awful wail and pulled her apron over her head and stepped in behind her husband. Betty knew there was something terribly wrong.

The landlord of the Flag told Betty that the ferryboat had been found in the reeds not far from the George and Dragon. There was no sign of Sam. Shortly after Sam had left the police officer at the jetty there had been a surge and the banks of the Ouse Washes had breached. The landlord held Betty by the wrists, he told her how sorry he was to bring this news. He looked into her eyes and then held her hand, she could be sure they'd do everything they could to help out.

Silence. Just the lapping of the water. And the call of birds. The wind had gone. Sam opened his eyes and found that he was face down on the side of the bank. His body was in the water but his head was resting on rough tufts of grass. His mouth tasted as if it was full of mud. Christ, it was full of mud, but only for a while. With a retch that seemed to pull down to his boots his stomach cleared the mud and water that had lain in his stomach. The watery mud and grass slime was coughed up. For a moment he felt exhausted, not really any the better for ridding himself of the slub

and weeds he'd swallowed when fighting to swim out across the flood. That was last night and it was daylight now.

He was cold. Bitterly cold, he could hardly feel his legs or hands. He summoned his legs to push him up and out of the water. Somewhere, miles away, his legs responded. It was a feeble movement but it did move him forward. He suddenly felt an overwhelming love for his legs. He'd always been too busy to think about himself. Working, even when he was at school and since he'd taken over the business he hadn't really thought much about himself. He had to do; that was all. Now he wanted to save himself, realizing just how much he loved himself and life with it. His hands scrabbled to grasp at clumps of grass as his legs kicked. Joyful love. He was moving up the bank, out of the water and up to the summit.

Once he was on the top of the bank he allowed himself time to look around. The wash behind him was strangely empty. Instead of the water churning and pulling around, there was vegetation. It was slick and muddy from where, only a day before, it had been under water but now the water had gone. Sam looked out across to the farmland. The water that should have been in the wash lay glinting and shimmering, covering the black land. The water stretched for miles, across the flat fields to the horizon. Roofs of houses and barns poked out from the water, only the upper windows could be seen. Beneath the water the doors to the houses, and the lower windows, were hidden. There were no residents. A tarmac road ran along the side of the bank. It was higher than the land below it. A distance away, a few miles, there were trucks moving. The brown camouflaged vehicles he remembered from the war. The Army must have been out to take all the people away to safety.

There was a house a short distance from Sam. It stood a little higher than other buildings he could see so the water only came half way up the front door. After struggling out of his heavy oilskin cape he hung it on a gatepost. Heaven only knew how he'd been able to stay afloat with that on him. The boots were gone, along with his socks, he walked bare foot across the road and into the farmyard. The door to the house resisted at first as he tried to open it, then the water that had backed up behind it found a way to escape and came pouring out past him. The water level must have fallen, leaving the water higher in the building. Once the two different depths stabilised he was able to open the door and wade into the front room.

In the kitchen he opened one of the two internal doors. It led into the pantry. Here he found a bottle of milk. He drank from that and then went to try the second door. As he'd expected it led to a staircase. He climbed up the steep stairway which led directly into one bedroom. There was another door which led to a larger room with a larger bed made up with blankets and a flower embroidered eiderdown. Sam took off his remaining wet clothes, pulled back the sheets and with no more thought climbed in and fell asleep.

When he woke he knew that he must get home. With no-one near him, and no vehicles, he was going to have to walk. He found a suit in the wardrobe that fitted well enough, and a pair of boots. When he went downstairs he checked the larder again. There was no more milk but there were two bottles of beer. There might be a lot of water around but he didn't fancy drinking it. He opened one of the beers and took a large gulp from it, and then he took a handful of bread and a large slice of cheese. Forcing this into his mouth he took the second bottle of beer and walked

from the farmhouse. He carried the boots as he waded across the yard and up to the road. There he put on the boots, slipped under the wire fence that separated the road from the bank and walked up to the top of the slope. Now he could see the road and the washes. On both sides the water shone in the sunlight. Over the fields that stretched away on the left the water was grey, choppy with the currents that ebbed and flowed under the surface. On the wash side the rivulets of water were still and black. There was no water of any depth across the washes. Once he got home there'd be no work rowing the ferry across. As he watched, a flock of plovers with their flashing pied plumage flew across heading for the sea of water that now covered the fenland fields. They joined the ducks and geese already settled there. His second line of income, wildfowling, wasn't going to be very lucrative either. No more cycling to the station with bags of plovers, ducks and geese for sale to London restaurants. Not for now anyway. He looked along the tarmac road and thought; if anything, or anyone, comes along I'll see them. In the meantime, with no sign of a lift and despite the badly fitting shoes, he needed to walk home, quick sharp.

Betty was sitting outside the door to her cottage. It was approaching twenty-four hours since Sam had left to row the policeman across the causeway. She was savouring the unexpected late afternoon sunshine, trying to keep her mind calm. She could see a figure walking towards her along the bank. As the man drew near she recognised him as the policeman who had instructed Sam to row him across the flood.

'Good evening madam.'

Betty wasn't inclined to reply, she nodded her head towards the police officer.

.....

'I've come to update you on the search for your husband.'

The police officer explained that the search parties were still looking for Sam. Be assured they would continue to look for him. Betty wondered how they would find him if he'd been swept to sea, past Denver and Kings Lynn and out into the Wash.

'We might have to inform the coroner.'

The words froze Betty's heart. She looked at the police officer whose mouth continued moving, explaining the intricacies of the procedures. She didn't care about time lapse, or square miles searched, she wanted Sam back. After the police officer had left her eldest came to put an arm round her.

'Don't worry Mam,' he said. 'I'll keep the ferry going for you.'

Betty could see the care in her boy's eyes. She knew he would do it too, but she wanted him to stay on at school, not be working to help the family out. At least for now he wouldn't have to, as the causeway was open, what with the flood water spilling out onto the farm land. With tears in her eyes she pulled her cardigan around her shoulders. It was getting cold and she needed to be getting in, it was already three o'clock and the winter afternoon was turning to evening. She looked over to the cottage where her parents-in-law now lived, since moving from the ferry cottage. She could see her mother-in-law outside, taking in the last of the daylight. Further along she could see the bridge that left the village and marked the start of the causeway. In the darkening light of the evening she could see someone walking across the bridge. Now that the causeway was open there would be men walking across to the Flag for a drink. Then the figure turned down by the bank towards the cottage. He was walking slowly, painfully. A tired man, exhausted. Betty looked

again and recognised her husband. She gave a loud shout and started running along the bank to him. Her eldest son swept past her, arms outstretched, shouting to his Daddy. Across the river she could see her mother-in-law similarly running and her father-in-law hobbling behind her, shouting too. Sam held his arms out to them as they ran to greet him. It might be cruel that the ferry and the wildfowling money would be lost, but he had his family. And for now that was all the riches he needed.

Word Count 3287

