

Jake's Amazing River Adventure.

“Whatever you do, don't go too near the water”, said Jake's mother in her anxious voice.

“Why?” Jake demanded, knowing the answer but, like any ten year old, determined to ask anyway.

“Because”, said his mother, “You might fall in and drown”.

“But you know I can swim”, answered Jake, watching his mother's expression change. She knew what was coming next.

“Daddy taught me and Gramps helped”. Daddy was someone they didn't talk about much any more, not since he'd walked out of the house on the day of the argument. The terrible argument.

“Oh”, said his mother. “But that was in an indoor pool where there are no currents and nasty things that could grab you under the water”.

Jake was about to tell her that he had swum across the river and back with Gramps, but then remembered that it was their special secret, sworn over a cup of hot chocolate and a digestive biscuit.

Jake was tall for his age, fair-haired, with an impish grin and a laugh to match. He was standing with his mother in the garden of his grandparents' house close by the River Thames near Bourne End in Buckinghamshire. It was not one of the newer properties - “Lego houses”, Gramps called them - but a warm and inviting Edwardian red brick villa with tall chimneys reaching up to the sky and, Jake liked to think, a happy smiley face on the side overlooking the river. Jake loved the house, which was just as well as he often spent his weekends and half term holidays there while his mother was away on business or meeting friends.

Since the terrible argument, Jake only saw his father occasionally. Although this made Jake sad, he still liked to boast about his father being a British Airways' captain and flying off to fascinating places that even the geography master had never heard of. His father often sent him postcards and sometimes e-mails. Jake liked the postcards best because of their colourful stamps and wonderful pictures. He looked at them again and again, thinking of his dad, missing his laughter.

But then he had Gramps and Nana, who loved him and talked to him and played with him and, best of all, read books to him - and expected him to read books by himself when they were tired and dozed off by the radio. Yes, the radio. Amazingly, and his school friends didn't believe him, there was no television in the house and only a very old and dusty computer that seldom got turned on.

“What do you do in the evenings?” Jake’s friends asked in astonishment. “Read”, he replied. “Boring”, they chorused. Jake didn’t care. When Gramps or Nana sat reading to him, or he read to himself, he entered happily into the wonderful, sometimes mysterious and occasionally frightening world of books. Best of all were books about the river. He loved the ridiculous antics of the *Three Men in a Boat* but his absolute, positively all time favourite was *The Wind in the Willows*.

At first Jake had found it difficult to accept that a water rat, a mole, a badger and a toad could possibly all be friends. Or that they could dress in proper human clothes, well old-fashioned clothes with waistcoats and stuff. Or that a toad could live in a manor house and have lots of money and drive fast cars. Or why, in a world where animals dressed and talked like humans, the horse which pulled Toad’s canary-coloured cart still behaved like a horse. Or how it was that a toad could fit into a human washerwoman’s clothes. But then Gramps had pointed out that if Jake could believe the amazing things that happened in the computer games and video toys he had at home, then it was surely all right to believe. . . . in, well, just about anything your imagination could imagine.

They often talked about these important matters when they were out in Gramps’s boat, the *Albatross*, which was usually moored alongside a small jetty at the end of the garden. The *Albatross* was a cabin cruiser, a marvellous thing of varnished wood and polished brass with a badly behaved engine that Gramps sometimes said unkind things to when it wouldn’t start. Jake loved the woody smell of the *Albatross* and the way in which, when its engine eventually did get going, the whole boat seemed to come alive, vibrating and chortling to itself as if impatient to get out onto the river. Gramps said the *Albatross* was a real boat and real boats were not at all like what he called the “floating gin-palaces” that often, quite often actually, seemed to get in his way and annoy him when they were cruising on the river.

“You see, Jake”, said Gramps, “for those sort of people boating is mostly about showing-off, sitting up on top of a great big lump of plastic and chrome with a glass in your hand, hogging all the space in the locks, going too fast and making a general nuisance of yourself”.

“And you’re not like that are you, Gramps?” said Jake, grinning up at him as the *Albatross* potted through the beautiful Cliveden reach towards Maidenhead. Just ahead of them a flock of Canada geese honked indignantly before taking off in a wild flapping of wings. In the shallows a tall heron stood silent and motionless, eyes searching the water for fish.

“Cheeky young imp”, chuckled Gramps, ruffling Jake’s hair. “No m’boy, for me it’s almost a spiritual thing, being out on the river”. He paused. “D’you

know what I mean by spiritual?”

Jake sucked in his lower lip, which meant he was thinking hard, “Yep, I believe so. You mean to do with, you know, God and things”.

“Yes, that’s about it”, said Gramps. “To do with God and especially things, things inside you it’s sometimes difficult to understand. You see, when I go out on the river it’s not to impress anyone. . .”

Jake filled the gap, “Like the people in the floating gin-palaces try to?”

Gramps looked pleased, “That’s it precisely. When I go out on the river it’s for the pleasure of

Jake finished the sentence for him, “. . . simply messing about in boats!”

When Gramps burst out laughing, it occurred to Jake that if the four main characters in *The Wind in the Willows* took on human form, then kind, helpful Gramps would be Ratty. What’s more, and difficult though it was to believe, Gramps had three old university friends who could, if you half shut your eyes and didn’t think too hard about it, actually *be* Mole, Badger and Toad.

Badger was Gramps’s friend Ted Arbuthnot, a huge man with a booming voice and a very slow of way of speaking who often annoyed Jake by calling him Jacob and then asking if he’d done his homework. Mole was the warm-hearted Ernest Pilkington, a tiny man with bottle-thick glasses and a ready smile who usually volunteered to make the tea if they were out on the river together. Ernest never, ever asked Jake about his homework.

Then there was George Harper-Jones, bald, chubby and always turning up at the house in a taxi, either because he’d crashed his latest car or because the police had taken his driving licence away again. George was very rich, lived in an enormous house and, according to Gramps, had been married more times than the Sultan of somewhere or other that Jake couldn’t pronounce. George owned a floating gin palace, a sleek cruiser that spent more time in the boatyard being mended than afloat because he frequently bumped into other boats, usually when chattering on his mobile phone.

Gramps said that people like George should never be allowed out on the river as they were a menace to everyone and everything. George and Gramps disagreed about this, often, sometimes using words that Jake had never heard before and which Nana told him were best forgotten. George was Toad, unquestionably.

Then came the glorious summer’s day when “the boys”, as Gramps called them, decided they would take the *Albatross* up to Henley “to see a bit of the regatta”. Which bit was not explained. Jake was to be cabin boy and general dogsbody, which usually meant doing most of the hard work at locks, pulling

ropes round bollards and casting off.

A cabin boy, thought Jake happily, just like Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island*. Not that Gramps was at all like the cunning Long John Silver. Even so, Jake had once drawn a picture of Gramps in a pirate hat with a parrot on his shoulder just to see what it looked like. He gave it to Nana, who chuckled, said it was a very good likeness indeed and stuck it up on the fridge.

Before they cast off, George appeared sweating heavily under the weight of several boxes for loading on board. "Essential supplies", he explained, stopping to mop his face with a coloured handkerchief and then getting extremely angry with a fly that settled on the end of his nose. The supplies, Jake noted with interest, consisted mainly of bottles labelled 'gin' or 'tonic', although he was pleased to see some lemonade as well.

"Does this mean the *Albatross* is now a floating gin palace, Gramps?", he asked.

His grandfather snorted, "It most certainly does not. If George can't manage for a few hours without gin then that's up to him. I personally, as master and commander of this noble craft" - he patted the woodwork affectionately - "will do no such thing."

A crash below in the galley area was followed by Ted's angry voice shouting, "For pity's sake, George, you've plonked one of those darned boxes of yours right on top of the sandwiches Ernest has just made! You really are the most clumsy oaf imaginable".

"Sorry", mumbled George, though he didn't sound very sorry.

"Here they go again", said Gramps, grinning at Jake. "Time to be on our way. Stand by to cast off, Mr. Mate".

"I thought I was the cabin boy", reminded Jake.

"Cabin boy and first mate", corrected Gramps.

"Do I get paid double?"

"An extra glass of lemonade to be sure, Mr. Mate".

"Aye, aye, sir".

"And Jake, make sure you keep your lifejacket on at all times. I noticed that you hadn't got it properly done up a moment ago".

"Must I?". Then Jake saw the look on his grandfather's face. "All right, Gramps".

Watched by Nana on the bank, Jake undid the mooring ropes, cast them on deck and then jumped back on board".

"Bye, Nana!"

"Bye, darling. Look after Gramps for me and make sure he wears his rowing

blazer when you get to Henley”.
“I will”.

As Nana stood there waving, the *Albatross* eased gently out onto the glistening surface of the river, its motor growling a contented farewell. The moment lasted only until George demanded in a cross voice, “Now where did I put those glasses, you fellows? You haven’t hidden them again have you, Ernest? I really must have a drink or I shall simply die of thirst.” Next came a loud crack as George hit his head on something hard, followed by several of those words Nana had told Jake never to repeat.

Peace reigned below for about half an hour as the *Albatross* cruised serenely towards Marlow. Gramps steered with Jake’s help, while they both kept an eye out for kingfishers, their favourite bird. Noisy laughter and the clink of glasses below told them that George was busy sharing his essential supplies with Ted and Ernest. They had also started to munch their way into the sandwiches that Ernest had been busy preparing since he first came aboard. George always insisted on smoked salmon sandwiches - “only the finest from Fortnum’s, old boy” - while the others had paste, cucumber, cheese and, Jake’s special favourite, scrambled eggs. Ernest brought a plate of these tasty delicacies up to the *Albatross*’s small bridge, where he peered briefly at the magnificent scenery and sighed, “Oh my, there’s nothing quite like it”. After another heartfelt sigh he went below again.

“Funny, old Ernest”, said Gramps thoughtfully. “Never happier than on the river, just like the rest of us really I suppose”.

Jake said nothing. Because he hoped one day to be allowed to steer the *Albatross* on his own, he was carefully watching Gramps guide the cruiser towards Marlow Lock. It occurred to Jake that as he liked being afloat so much that perhaps he might, just might, one day join the navy. But then an airliner passed high overhead and he thought of how his father had said that flying was the only thing.

Their approach to the lock brought Ted, Ernest and George up on deck in a noisy tangle of arms, legs, peculiar straw hats and half-eaten sandwiches. On the way, George tripped, spilled his drink down his trousers, swore, saw Jake watching him and grinned, “Clumsy oaf, ain’t I, young un?”. Then, as he looked around him, “Good old Marlow. Love the place. Love the jolly old bridge. Do you know, Jake, a friend of mine once flew a Tiger Moth biplane under that bridge”.

“Wow!” said Jake, not noticing Gramps starting to shift uneasily beside him.

“What happened to him?”

“Nothing really, apart from a jolly good telling-off from the Chief Flying

Instructor, of course”, said George, laughing so much that he spilt even more drink down his trousers. He nudged Gramps, “Did it, James?”

Jake’s mouth dropped open. James was Gramps’s real name, the one Nana used when she was cross with him.

“You, Gramps? Was it you? Did *you* fly a Tiger Moth under Marlow Bridge?”

Gramps cleared his throat, “Uhum, yes, well”, he said, very aware of George grinning delightedly nearby. “I was much younger then of course. Learned to fly with the university air squadron. I’d only just met Nana and she said that if I ever did it again she wouldn’t have anything more to do with me. So I didn’t - fly under Marlow Bridge again, that is”.

“Oh”, said Jake, disappointed. He felt a hand squeeze his shoulder. Then came a chuckle.

“So I flew under Henley Bridge instead”.

“Brilliant! And Nana never found out ?” Another squeeze.

“She never found out. Our secret eh?” Gramps became suddenly busy with the boat’s wheel and engine controls. “Now, Mr. Mate, time for you to see us through the lock”.

Spotting the lock-keeper waving them forward, Gramps shouted, “Morning Fred, great day for it eh?”.

“Perfect”, agreed Fred cheerfully, “just perfect. Now close up a bit on that blue cruiser, if you please”.

Through the bustle and confusion of Marlow Lock they went, past the surging weir and the nearby *Compleat Angler* hotel, where George pleaded unsuccessfully for them to stop by for what he called “a quick one”. Then under Marlow Bridge itself.

“Not much room between the water and the bridge, Gramps”, said Jake studying the gap carefully.

“Not much”, agreed Gramps in the voice he used when he didn’t want to talk about something any more.

It happened just after they passed lovely old Bisham Abbey. The unfortunate accident. Jake was sitting on the left side with his feet dangling over the edge of the boat, watching two sailing dinghies tacking back and forth across the river, when George suddenly decided to squeeze past him. The gap simply wasn’t big enough. Before he knew it, Jake had lost his grip, slipped into the river and swallowed what seemed like half a gallon of Thames water.

“Man overboard!”, shouted George. “Don’t panic!” That was the last thing Jake heard before he banged his head hard on a large branch that just happened to be floating past.

When Jake came round, he couldn’t believe his eyes. He was not, as he should

have been, aboard the *Albatross* or stretched out half-drowned on the riverbank with people bending anxiously over him. He was in a strange bedroom, lying on a strange bed with a red and blue patchwork quilt. But as Jake rubbed his eyes in disbelief, an inner voice told him exactly where he was - in the familiar bijou riverside residence he loved so much to read about. Jake smiled.

“He’s awake!”, shouted Mole excitedly. “The human boy’s awake”.

Suddenly they were all there, Mole, Badger, Ratty and of course, bobbing about in the rear, Toad. They were just as he had imagined them. “I know who you are”, said Jake, his smile widening.

“And we know who we are”, replied Badger. “What we don’t know is who *you* are, my young friend”. He was peering at Jake through a pair of tiny spectacles perched on the end of his long snout. “Or whence you came. Perhaps you would care to enlighten us. Ratty and Mole fished you from the river a while ago and we’ve been waiting for you to come round ever since”.

“My name’s Jake and I fell in the river”, said Jake. “Toad pushed me”.

“I say, I most certainly did not!”, protested Toad.

“Sorry, I meant George. It’s just that the two of you are so alike”.

“This George of yours is a toad?” asked Badger, glowering at Toad.

“Not one on my side of the house, he ain’t!” objected Toad, before Jake could reply. “We’re from a respectable branch of the family. Don’t go around pushing people into the river. Well, not that often anyway and usually only by accident”.

Ratty spoke for the first time, “You seem to have a funny idea of respectability, Toad”. He turned to Jake, “Now carry on telling us what happened, old chap, in your own time”.

Jake looked carefully at Ratty - or was it Gramps? There was something very familiar about Ratty’s eyes and his way of speaking. “Well, I was sitting on the side of the boat, my granddad’s boat, when Toad, George I mean, came past and accidentally pushed me into the river”.

Toad interrupted again, “Silly boyish amusement, boating, if you ask me. Motor cars are the only thing for a gentleman. Poop-poop!”. He began turning an imaginary steering-wheel and making loud engine noises.

“Quiet, Toad!!” said Badger and Ratty together.

Jake continued, “And then I think I hit my head on a log which knocked me out and, well, here I am. Although I’m not sure *exactly* where I am”.

Ratty smiled down on him. “Don’t worry about that just now, Jake. You must rest while we make some enquiries of our local police constable. Your grandfather must be very worried about you and has no doubt reported you missing to the proper authorities. When you wake up again we’ll all sit down

to some tea and crumpets by the fire”.

“OK”, said Jake, although he really didn’t feel tired. Quite soon though the downy softness of the pillow and the sound of the water lapping against the riverbank lulled him into a gentle slumber.

“I wonder what young Jake meant by ‘OK’ ”, said Ratty to Badger as they sat outside the cottage in their favourite deckchairs. Toad was asleep under a shady willow tree nearby, snoring like a badly-tuned outboard motor. Mole had gone off in search of the village constable.

“Don’t know”, replied Badger. “Some foolish new fangled expression human children use these days. I think I overheard some of the younger weasels and stoats use it in the Wild Wood recently”.

“They would. It’s certainly not an expression my mother would have let me use”, said Ratty, sticking his hands deep into his pockets.

“Nor mine”, agreed Badger. “Still times change”.

“Yes”, said Ratty, “though not always for the better, Badger old chap. Now, I wonder what Jake’s poor grandfather is doing at the moment. He must be worried sick, poor human”.

When Jake awoke an hour or so later it was to the shrill whistling of the kettle in the kitchen and the mouth-watering smell of crumpets being toasted on the fire. He suddenly felt very hungry. Then Ratty called out from the living room, “Come through Jake and join us. Help yourself to tea and as many crumpets as you can eat, with lots of home-made jam”.

For perhaps ten minutes, watched by his new friends, Jake sat by the crackling fire eating and drinking until he was close to bursting”.

“Wow!”, he said at last. “That was great”.

“Good”, said Ratty, “Very good”.

“I’ll say!” agreed Toad, patting his stomach and burping. “Oops! Sorry”.

“Manners, Toad”, said Badger, though in a gentler voice this time. “Now Jake, we have to have a serious talk with you about what’s going to happen next”.

“Oh”, said Jake, his smile fading.

Ratty walked over to place a paw gently on Jake’s shoulder. “Nothing to worry about, youngster”, he said. “It’s just that Mole couldn’t find the constable to check if you’d been reported missing. So we’ve decided to take you across the river ourselves and then walk together to the nearest police station. It shouldn’t take long”.

“Oh”, repeated Jake. “But can’t I just stay here with you - for a while anyway?”

“No”, said Ratty firmly. “Much as we’d like to have you, we must get news of where you are to your grandfather immediately”.

“And”, said Badger, “I expect you have some homework to do”.

“Hang homework!”, said Toad. “Never did any when I was at school and it never did me any harm”.

Badger glared at him, “That Toad, is a matter of opinion”. He stood up. “Now come along everyone, the sooner we’re across the river the better.

Five minutes later, they were all crammed aboard Ratty’s tiny rowing skiff, zigzagging towards the jetty on the opposite bank. Toad had jumped in first and grabbed the oars. He was splashing away wildly, soaking everyone and making such a terrible mess of things that Ratty soon lost patience with him.

“Move over, Toad!” he ordered.

“Shan’t!”, replied Toad, pulling a horrid face and sticking out his tongue.

“Shan’t, shan’t, shan’t!”

“Do as you are told!” thundered Badger.

Reluctantly Toad obeyed. But when he and Ratty tried to change places the skiff wobbled so alarmingly that Jake thought it was about to capsize.

Intending to steady things he stood up and braced his legs in the way Gramps had shown him. Unfortunately he failed to notice the low branch overhanging the river directly in front of him - until, with a hollow thud, it cracked hard against his head. Stunned, Jake fell backwards into the river. “Man overboard!” shouted Toad, almost falling in himself. “Don’t panic, you fellows, don’t panic!” That was the last thing Jake remembered.

“There you are, old chap”, said Gramps’s relieved voice.

“Ratty?” said Jake, blinking his eyes. His head ached terribly. Then he noticed the worried faces gathered round his bed, “Toad, Mole, Badger?”

“Poor boy’s delirious”, said George in what for him was a hushed voice. “All the water he’s swallowed must have gone to his head”.

“Rubbish!” boomed Ted. “He’s just a bit confused”.

Gramps sat down on the bed beside Jake and put an arm round his shoulders.

“You’re in hospital, Jake. You fell into the river and cracked your head on a floating log. Ernest and I pulled you out. Nana and Mummy are on their way here and we’ve all been very worried about you”.

“Have I been unconscious?”

“Yes”, said Gramps, “For a couple of hours”.

“And I’ve been here, in this bed, all the time?”

“Yes”.

“And no one else has been here?”

“No one except the doctor and nurses”.

“Then I must have been dreaming”. Jake sounded disappointed.

“Oh course you were, old chap”, said Gramps, patting his shoulder and smiling, “And I rather think I know what you were dreaming about”.

