

Rogues on the River

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For Ione and Ivo

and

*Thanks to Louise
for finding the rogues*

Chapter 1

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

The afternoon was wearing on and the light was fading. Reflections from inside the fire-lit room were beginning to compete with the grey street outside. Sitting in the front garden of the house opposite he could see his mother with the darning mushroom in her hand and her box of threads open on her lap; he could see their old piano jutting out of the brick wall

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beside her; he could see the small boy who was himself looking in at him from just outside, curiously dry in the pouring rain.

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

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

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

The light changed the room again, dulling the fire and making it like any ordinary afternoon. But this was not an ordinary afternoon. Tonight was the night

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of the Christmas tree; this was the night that would see his father stagger home with the biggest tree he could get; this was the night when David would be allowed to stay up late to help with the decorations.

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

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

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

David's father loved Christmas as much as David did, and though working long, hard hours now that British industry was recovering from the privations of the last few years, he was full of energy and excitement, like a small boy on this special night. He had climbed into the loft and handed down the cardboard box of decorations they had packed so lovingly last January when the old tree came down. Next he handed down the pretty box with the cellophane front, through which the tree lights could be clearly seen, rigidly clasped in their cardboard slots, waiting for the surge of electricity that would make them live again.

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

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be careful.

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

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

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

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tinsel and the coloured balls, lit by a white light bulb deliberately placed to show her beauty, and the tree was complete.

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

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

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

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

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The afternoon of the Sunday following Christmas was filled with a watery sun, and after a good deal of pestering, David's father agreed to take him to the

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river to sail his new boat. David always enjoyed the walk beside the allotments and the railway line. There were two low bridges beneath the converging tracks that crossed the road, creating a short tunnel with a deep recess where the bridges met. It was here, that the tramp slept in a hovel of cardboard boxes and sacks. His makeshift home filled the dark corner, safely tucked away from the wind and the rain. David had never seen a tramp there, but sometimes when he passed he could sense the heap move as if something were inside, something very like the bearded man he thought, and would hurry on. This afternoon however, with his father by his side, he was brave enough to linger just in case he might snatch a glance at whoever might be living there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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