

## A BIT OF BREAD AND JAM

It was one o'clock on Saturday afternoon. I was with the other boys from my street. We were going to the river. We were going fishing. Suddenly the woman in the last house of the street opened the door. She called out to us. Her name was Mrs Hoskey.

'Will one of you boys do some shopping for me?' asked Mrs Hoskey.

None of us answered. We all knew her. She often sent boys to do shopping, and she always promised ten pence. But she never paid the money.

Mrs Hoskey called after us again.

'Don't go,' said Felix Strongfellow. 'She'll send you to the butcher's shop, then to the sweet shop and then to the paper shop. When you've done all that, she'll give you a little bit of bread and jam – a jam sandwich.'

Felix was our gang leader. He was over fifteen years old and he was already working in a factory.

'Why don't you send your husband to the shops?' shouted Felix. He pointed to Mr Hoskey who was working in the garden.

'Mr Hoskey's busy,' she said.

Then she looked at me. 'Billy, you'll help me, won't you?'

Mrs Hoskey was a big, fat woman with red hair. We were all frightened of her. She brought bad luck. I was going fishing and I didn't want any bad luck. So I went over to Mrs Hoskey.



'Billy, you'll help me, won't you?'



'Don't be stupid,' said Felix. 'She won't pay you anything.'

The gang went off and left me.

Felix was right. Mrs Hoskey sent me to the butcher's, the sweet shop and the paper shop. Then I went to the chemist's. She didn't pay me any money. She just gave me a jam sandwich.

'Take this,' she said to me. 'Mr Hoskey has just made the bread.'

'You can't give that to the boy,' shouted Mr Hoskey. 'The bread isn't cooked properly. It'll taste horrible.'

But Mrs Hoskey didn't listen to her husband. She told him to keep quiet.

Little Mr Hoskey looked worried and unhappy.

'But the bread isn't cooked,' he said again.

Then he looked at me. I thought he was going to cry. 'Don't eat it!' he said. 'Please don't eat it!'

Mrs Hoskey shouted at her husband and I went off with my jam sandwich.

I took a bite of the jam sandwich. It tasted horrible. I dropped the mouthful of horrible jam sandwich and pushed the rest of the sandwich into my pocket. Then I ran to find my friends.

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The river bank was very muddy. Lots of people were fishing there. Everyone was trying hard to catch a fish. There was a lot of noise and people were shouting and laughing. Every few seconds, someone caught a stickleback.

I ran up the bank and dug a hole in the grass. I was looking



for some bait. I was lucky and found a worm. Soon, the worm was at the end of my line in the water. And in a few moments I had caught a fish.

'I've caught one,' I shouted to Felix.

'I've caught seven,' Felix replied.

There were two more fish at the end of his lines, but he let them get away. He was not happy.

'What's the matter?' I asked Felix.

'It's too easy to catch fish here,' he replied. 'Everybody



here is catching fish. Even the girls are catching fish!

'What do you want to do, Felix?' asked Sammy Feathers.

'I want to do something difficult,' said Felix. 'I want to catch a carp! Carp are much more difficult fish to catch than sticklebacks.'

'But where can we catch carp?' I asked Felix.

'At the mill where I work,' said Felix.

'At Pratt and Dyson's mill,' laughed Sammy. 'That will be impossible.'

'Why? Will the watchman stop us?' I asked.

'No, it's the carp. They're very well fed and they don't eat fishing bait. Nobody ever catches carp at that mill.'

'I know,' said Felix. 'I work there. Come on everybody. We're going to Pratt and Dyson's mill.'

We all followed Felix to the big high fence at the back of the mill. I found a small hole in the fence and looked through.

'We can't go in,' I said. 'There's a man fishing there.'

Felix pushed me out of the way. Then he looked through the hole.

'You're right,' he said. 'That's Mr Pratt. He's our managing director. Help me climb to the top of the fence. I'm going to speak to Mr Pratt. I'm sure that we can go in.'

We lifted Felix up, and soon his head was over the top of the fence.

'Hello Mr Pratt,' Felix shouted. 'I work in the mill. Can my friends and I come fishing with you?'

'Yes,' said Mr Pratt. 'But you won't catch any carp. I've been here since early morning and I haven't caught anything.'



'Hello Mr Pratt,' Felix shouted. 'I work in the mill. Can my friends and I come fishing with you?'



'OK, lads,' said Felix. 'Mr Pratt says we can go in.'

Felix crept through the fence and we followed him.

For a minute, none of us spoke. It was beautifully quiet there. The water was pale green. Everything was clean. The fat, lazy carp were swimming deep down in the water. Some of the carp were red and gold.

We got our lines ready.

'But what about the bait?' asked Sammy Feathers.

'Worms are no good,' said Felix. 'We need some bread.'

'I'm going home now, lads,' said Mr Pratt. 'You can have my bread.'

We all ran to get a piece of the bread. I was last. All the bread had gone.

'What about me?' I said.

'Be quiet,' whispered Felix. Then he turned to Mr Pratt.

'I hope you're not going because we've come.'

'Ten hours and not one fish,' said Mr Pratt. 'That's enough for me.'

He put away his fishing lines and watched us. Very soon all my friends were fishing. But I had no bait. I was very angry and sat in a corner.

Then, suddenly, I felt the rest of the jam sandwich in my pocket. I turned away from the others and took it out. I put the sandwich into my handkerchief. I put water on the sandwich and made it soft. Then I rolled it into a ball. Now I had some bait.

I sat down by the water and took a small piece of my bait. I put it on my hook. Soon my hook and bait were in the water.

Suddenly the line was pulled under the water.

What's happened? I thought.

I pulled on my line. There was something at the other end.

It was a lovely, fat carp. I looked at it in surprise.

'Quick!' shouted Felix. 'Fill a tin with water!'

Felix took the fish off the hook and put it in the tin.

I took another piece of my bait while everybody was looking at the fish. Soon the bait was in the water.

'Another fish!' shouted Felix a minute later.

I pulled in the line and we all saw the carp on the bank.

'Take it off the hook, Felix,' I said.

He quickly did this and put the second carp in the tin.

Mr Hoskey's bread is worth a lot of money, I thought. But I didn't tell anyone the secret of my bait.

Soon, all my friends came to my part of the bank. But they didn't catch anything. I moved to a different part of the bank.

Mr Pratt, the managing director, looked very sad. He's a kind man, I thought. So, I gave him some of my bait. Five minutes later, he had caught two fish. And I was catching another fish every two minutes.

But then the watchman arrived. His job was to keep boys out of the mill.

'Good afternoon, Mr Pratt,' he said. 'You're the boss here during the week, but I'm the boss at the weekend. Take the boys away, please.'

I was happy to get away. I had already caught enough fish.

'I'll give you all one fish.' I said. 'And I'll have two.'

I gave everyone a fish, but I still didn't tell anyone the secret of the bait.

Soon we were back in our street.

'What's happening?' said Felix. 'Why is everyone



running about?’

I looked down the street. There was an ambulance outside my door. At that moment, Felix’s mother saw me and shouted: ‘He’s here! He’s here!’

My mother ran to me. There was a policeman with her.

‘Are you all right, love?’ she asked. Then she put her arms around me.

I pushed her away and said: ‘Of course I’m all right. Let go!’

‘He’ll be all right, Ma,’ the policeman said to my mother. Then he turned to me. ‘Did Mrs Hoskey give you a jam sandwich at half past one today?’

‘Yes, she did,’ I replied.

‘How do you feel?’ the policeman asked.

‘Very well,’ I answered. ‘What’s the matter?’

The policeman patted me on the head. ‘Come on lad,’ he said. ‘Get in the ambulance.’

‘What for?’ I asked. ‘Can I change my clothes?’

‘There’s no time,’ said the policeman. ‘Keep calm, Ma,’ he said to my mother. Then he helped her into the ambulance too.

Outside the ambulance, Felix was talking to his mother.

‘What’s happened?’ asked Felix.

‘Mr Hoskey hit his wife on the head with a hammer,’ his mother replied.

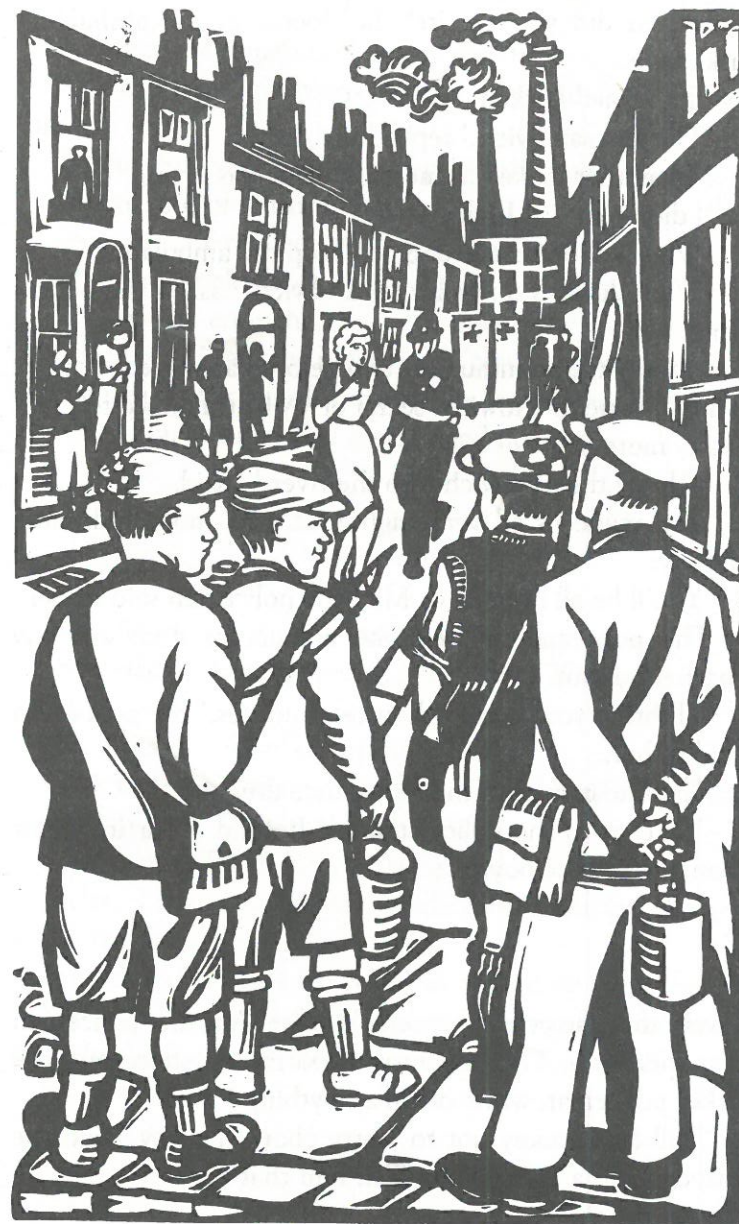
‘At last!’ shouted Felix.

‘But he didn’t kill her,’ said Felix’s mother.

‘What a pity!’ said Felix.

‘Then Mr Hoskey went to the police. He wanted to escape from her,’ Felix’s mother told him.

At that moment, the driver shut the ambulance door. I didn’t hear any more. The ambulance drove away.



*There was an ambulance outside my door.*

'When did you eat it?' the doctor in the ambulance asked me.

'Eat what?' I asked.

'The jam sandwich,' replied the doctor.

My mother looked at me sadly. She was crying.

'I didn't eat it,' I said.

'What!' shouted the doctor. 'Stop the ambulance.'

'What did you do with the sandwich?' asked the policeman.

I thought for a minute or two before I answered. I didn't want anyone to know the secret of my bait. I hoped to catch many more fish.

'I threw the sandwich into the river,' I said.

'You made us all very frightened,' my mother shouted angrily.

'You'll be all right now, Ma,' the policeman said to her.

The policeman opened the ambulance door and my mother got out.

'I'll bring your son back in ten minutes,' the policeman said to her.

Then he turned to the ambulance driver.

'Take us to the police station,' he said. 'Our inspector wants to see the boy.'

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I went into the police inspector's office. Another policeman was there too. The inspector asked me questions and the other policeman wrote down everything I said.

'Tell Mr Hoskey not to worry about the boy,' said the inspector to a policeman. 'Tell him that the boy never ate the sandwich.'

Another policeman took me to the door.

'Why all these questions about a jam sandwich?' I asked him.

'There was poison in it,' whispered the policeman.

'What kind of poison?' I asked.

'Arsenic!' he replied. 'And arsenic kills you.'

It was a terrible shock to me. I almost fell over.

'There was enough arsenic in your sandwich to kill a hundred boys,' said the policeman. 'Most of the poison was in the jam, but some of it was in the bread, too. Don't tell anyone. You're lucky you aren't dead now.'

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I saw Felix on our street corner. He was very upset.

'Something has happened,' he said. 'Do you know what?'

'No,' I said. 'What's happened?'

'The fish!' said Felix. 'The fish! They're all swimming around in pain. They're dying!'

I felt better. The fish were dying, not me.

'Felix,' I said, and put my hand on his shoulder. 'Forget about the fish.'

Felix stared at me. I left him and walked up the street.

What will my mother and father do when I get home? I thought. Will they be pleased or will they be angry?

I didn't know, but I really didn't care!