

## DEATH WATCH

CONDAMINE, 7<sup>th</sup> February, 1927

- You don't know much about handling river drownings, do yer lad?
- I'd know more if you stopped asking so many bloody questions and told me what to do.
- Mind yer tongue. You don't even know what you don't know yet. This here's serious work and I need you to be doing it properly. So when I ask a question, I want an answer, and if I say do something, you bloody do it no questions asked. You hear? I'll have no cock ups on my watch.
- I didn't ask for this job, you know.
- And I didn' ask for you. I'm short is all and you're the filler.
- Oh thanks very much, Old Man. How to make the new chum welcome.
- Is that what happened to yer? They get sick of yer lip down there, did they, and they sent you up early?
- Listen first chance I get, I'm gone. Then you can find someone else to pick at.
- There's no jumping this ship, laddie. You're stuck 'ere 'til the end of the shift. Then we'll see.
- You mean I have a choice?
- Not you - me. But you never know, you might want to stay on fer a bit.
- Stay on? Why? This so bloody boring. Is this all you do – drift about and wait for something to happen one day? If I could sleep I'd have started snoring the moment I set foot on this tub.
- Hold yer tongue and pay attention to somethin' but yerself fer a change.
- What? Pay attention to what?
- The view fer instance.
- The Condamine's in flood. So what? I've seen it before.
- Not from up here you haven'.
- So?
- Have to be prepared.
- For what? Don't you ever get bored?
- Mind yer tongue. I've a notion you'll not be bored for too much longer.
- Why?
- Look down there.

On the bank of a flooding river a busy collection of people are gathered around a large, iron, rowing boat, about twelve feet long and unpainted. The river water is muddy brown and frothing at the banks. Detritus is ripping down its centre. Treetops well out in the torrent reveal the river's usual width. A

gravelled bush road runs through a village of straight, wide streets and wooden buildings perched above the river to disappear into the torrent and reappear 180 yards away on the other bank. Somewhere under the water is the bridge.

- I'll take us down a bit. What do you see?

A man in shirt-sleeves and a well-built boy are fitting the oars. Three women – one big and bossy, one wearing a broad-brimmed hat and the third small and dumpy – watch while a busy collection of children are skidding about. An older girl, bright-eyed and long-plaited, stands between two of the women, twitching with excitement.

- Are they mad?
- What – do – you – see?
- Some idiots are going boating in a flood.
- And what's our job?
- Find, collect and guide. And not lose any. You never did -
- And to do that, you have to be able to read what's going on and what's likely to happen. So look at 'em. Do you see any differences among 'em?

On the bank, the man and three boys have pushed the boat down a log slip to the edge of the water. There the man is holding it steady while into the boat step the hatted woman and the dumpy woman, the twitchy girl and two other, slightly shorter girls. Bossy woman passes across two toddlers, one to each of the other women. Pointing to places in the boat, the man waits until all the boys are in, then he takes his place at the oars and pushes gently off. The biggest boy has the tiller and is listening intently to whatever the man is telling him.

- They're all different colours.
- Of course they are. What else?
- Some are brighter than others? It's hard to tell now they're all so close together.
- Yeah. See how the shine of the woman on the bank is not so bright as some of the ones in the boat? The brighter ones are our marks.
- Bloody hell. Do they know?
- Usually not.

Bossy woman waves but all aboard are too excited to notice. Turning the boat neatly upstream, keeping close to the bank where the current is least and the water is relatively free of dangerous debris, the man rows strongly. He handles the boat deftly despite its load in the whirling currents.

- This will get tricky, lad. There are eleven souls in that boat. If someone goes too far under the water we lose sight of 'em, body and soul. Once they die, they'll be rising up towards us, so

long as we're close enough to see 'em. That's the tricky bit. A river like this can sweep 'em a long way while they're drowning. If it was just one person, we could go down and follow 'em close. But with so many ...

- Bloody hell.
- Try to figure the flow of the water while we wait.
- So we can guess where they might be taken once they go under?
- Once we're started, I need your eyes peeled for spotting. I get us to 'em, you get 'em aboard. You got that?
- Yes, I've got it.
- Righto. Now we watch.

The boat is now 100 yards upstream, around a sharpish bend. The two middle-sized boys have squirmed their way to the bow to act as lookouts. From the lee of a very large river gum, the man edges the boat out into the river and turns its nose downstream. He lifts the oars out of the water as the current takes them. The weight of the boat makes it sluggish but it picks up speed slowly. As it rounds the bend, the current swings them further out. The boys at the front are bubbling excitedly. Everyone is animated.

- This'll go bad, eh?
- Yeah.

A gust of wind flicks the lady's hat into the water. Dumpy woman grabs for it and misses. The boat leans. The boys stretch over, the gunwale dips suddenly under the water and the boat lurches, turning broadside on to the current. The man tries desperately to turn the boat's bow downstream.

- This is it, lad. Pay attention now.

The boat crashes into a tree. There is panic in the boat which suddenly turns turtle and disappears.

- I count five in the water. How many can you see?
- Six – seven – eight, sir.
- Damnation. Three missing.
- Will the children be first?
- Babies, yes, but those ridiculous dresses these women wear are death traps in water. Stupid – stupid – stupid.
- So, women and children first then. How long?
- Not long now they'll be flying up like corks out of bottles.

Two of the children grab at tree trunks, but their arms are too short and the current plucks them away. The older boy dogpaddles vainly in their direction. The two bob briefly before disappearing and the

boy grabs at a branch stretched low above the water and hangs on, staring at the spot where the children sank. The man bursts through the water's surface where the boat sank. He looks wildly about, then swims – long, fast strokes with the current – towards the nearest bobbing head, then to another. Behind him, one of the boys bobs up. With both children in one arm, he struggles across the current to catch a forking tree and, by luck or miracle, they stick there. The splashing, bobbing boy is being swept past not twenty feet from the man who is wedged into the fork by the current and the pair he has saved. The splashing boy is suddenly pulled under. The man's eyes and mouth are frozen, rounded in horror. The boy does not reappear.

- Poor bugger.
- He's not our worry. Keep your eyes peeled. There are still two that haven't come up yet.
- Over there. Look. Two of them.
- Good lad.
- Hurry. They're coming straight up.
- Must be little ones – they don't muck about usually. Righto, easy does it, lad ...
- Hey, little fella. Welcome aboard. You're safe now.
- Where's Mummy?
- She'll be along soon. And who's this?
- Billy. My big brother.
- G'day, Billy. Steady up. Easy does it.
- I can get in meself, mate. Hey, what's Bobby doin' 'ere?
- Billy, where's Mummy?
- I dunno. Cor blimey, mate – another boat – who are you? I'm Billy Kocho. We were on a boat ... down there ... and then ... Hey, where did you come from? Where are we?
- Nothing to fuss about, Billy. You had a bit of a swim but you're safe now. Just sit tight there with your little brother, eh?
- The job, lad, mind the job.
- Keep your hair on - I see her. Moving pretty slowly, isn't she? Come on, my lovely, come on. Keep coming.
- She's a ditherer. I'll lay you odds she had a child or two in that boat. We'll come back for her. There's our next mark.
- Hey, that's my cousin, Patsy. She's going home tomorrow so we took her out for a row.  
PATSY! OI, PATSY!
- Don't yell, Billy. She can't hear you.
- What if I wave?
- Come on, Patsy. Here you are. Welcome aboard.
- What's happened? Where am I? Why is the river down there?

- You've died, darling.
- Died? Oh. Who are you then?
- Just a bit busy right now, Miss Patsy. Keep your cousins company, eh?
- That was scary, weren' it, Patsy? But I'm not scared now. Even if we are so high up. Don' fall out, Bobby, You scared, Bobby?
- Uh unh.
- Nor should you be. You're dead. Stop your teasing, Billy. You're dead too.
- I reckon he's a angel.

From the murk of the river below more light-bubbled souls of the newly dead are rising, each with its own hue, each at a different pace, each marking its body in the water.

- It's all right now, missus. Just hop aboard.
- Who are you? And what are you doing with the children?
- Er ... they're drowned, missus, and ah ... so are you.
- Drowned? I can't be drowned! I've got three kids to take care of and Fred'll starve if –
- Missus? Sorry, missus, but there's no time for this. You're here. That's the end of it. Now hop aboard.
- Well, you can say what you want but I'm not getting in there with you and I'm not staying up here one more minute.
- Sir?
- Here, lad, you take the watch. Now, Madam –
- Don't you Madam me, old man. I didn't come down in the last shower.
- Sir, two more on the move.
- Keep 'em in sight, lad. Madam, we haven't the time for this. If you don't come aboard, you're likely to be lost for all time. You'll be stuck here. Your children will grow up and move away and Fred'll wave at you on his way past, but you'll be stuck. We can't just pick you up the next run, you know.
- But it's not fair. It's Jane should be here, not me. There's none of mine in that boat. She's safe and sound on the bank down there just because she was too fat to fit –
- Madam? We haven't got all night.
- Come on, Aunty Annie, it's not so bad.
- Patsy's right, Madam.
- Well, I suppose someone has to take care of you.
- Thank you, Madam. Mind your step.
- Sir?

- On my way, lad. We'll pick up the closest first. Ready?
- Hello. Who have we got here?
- My name's Ronnie Liddle. Where's my Dad?
- He's in that tree, Ronnie! Look! He's a hero –
- Shoosh, Billy. That's quite enough of that.
- Aw, Aunty -
- Grab a seat over there with Billy, Ronnie. You can keep an eye on your Dad from there. And you must be someone's Mum, eh? Here you go, missus. Easy does it. Yes, it's a bit of a shock, I know.
- So many of us? Billy? Bobby? Come to Mother, boys.
- Oh Susie, how will they ever get on without us?
- Where's Evelyn? Where's Vernie?
- They might be in those trees. Let's take a turn back up and see who's there.
- Oh, thank God, there's Evelyn. EVELYN, HANG ONTO MR LIDDLE TIGHT AS YOU CAN!
- Missus, they can't ...
- SNAKE! THERE'S A SNAKE!
- Where?
- In the tree – just below Vernon's feet. VERNON! CLIMB, VERNON! SNAKE!
- Oh please, missus, stop shouting. It hurts my head. He CAN'T HEAR YOU. RIGHT?
- Steady up, lad. There's one more out there somewhere. Let's pull up for a little looksee, shall we?
- WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WE CAN'T LEAVE THEM THERE LIKE THAT! ANYTHING COULD HAPPEN. YOU'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING!
- STOP SHOUTIN', MISSUS! I know this is a shock and there's lots of you aboard right now, but, you're dead. Right? Being dead is a shock at first but you get used to it. There's no going back. Once you're here, that's it. You can't talk to 'em or help 'em or warn 'em or anything. And I can't neither, nor the lad. So stop yellin' – please – and let us get on.
- Come and sit down here with us, Aunty. We can keep an eye on Vernie and Evelyn from here. They'll be fine.
- But, Patsy, the snake ...
- They'll be fine.
- It's just not fair.
- Where's Edna? Has anyone seen Edna?

The dim outline of the river contracts slowly; the four lonely souls in the river's darkness seem suspended in the darkness by the swarming lights on either bank. Away in the distance through the unrelieved, scrubby night is another group of people moving slowly in two vehicles, the brigalows black in their headlamps.

- See anything, lad?
- No. Nothing. What's happened to her?
- Quietly now. I'll drift us down the river a while.
- What happens if we don't find her, sir?
- Sometimes there's a soul slips off but it's never happened on my watch and it's not going to happen tonight.
- Hey, Mister, isn't too dark to keep looking? Edna's prob'ly hiding somewhere. Can't we come back in the morning?
- We work better in the dark, Billy.
- Mister? Are you a angel?
- Do I look like an angel?
- No, you've got boots on. Angels don't wear boots. Do they?
- I might if I was a particular kind of angel.
- Are you a angel of death? Our Gran says when someone's dying, the Angel of Death comes and puts a shadow on them and some people can feel it and then they know they're going to die.
- Did you feel us, Ronnie?
- No.
- Well, there you go then.
- Our Gran says the dead float around above the living peoples' heads, and they listen to what the people say, and that's why you mustn't speak ill of the dead.
- Why? What'd she think the dead could do?
- They can haunt people.
- Hey, mister, can we haunt someone?
- Yeah, what about Sniffy Smithy? He give you six cuts last week, the old codger.
- There'll be no haunting from any of you lot. You're staying put until I set you on your way. Now be quiet.
- Mister? Can we be yer lookouts, like in a pirate ship?
- So long as you sit still.
- Grumpy, in'he?
- Worse'n old Sniffy.

The blank darkness of the river and its banks is unrelieved now. The two vehicles, one towing a boat, have long since passed them on a gravelled road heading for the village, the swarming lights and the four stranded in the trees. People are easy to see in the darkness but the darkness on, in and by the river below is total.

- Sir, I think there's someone over there.

A dim light is hovering close to a pile of rubbish pushed up against a tree.

- HANG ON, EDNA! WE'RE COMING!
- Ronnie! Don't yell! How many times –
- But that's my sister, Aunty. We've got to save her.
- She'll be fine now we've found her, Ronnie. Bring her in gentle, lad.
- Oh, Edna, darling. Come to your aunt for a cuddle.
- I was so scared, Aunty. It was all dark and so wet. And I was all alone when I died.
- I missed you, Edna.
- Oh, Ronnie ... Where's Dad? And Colin?
- Dad's a hero. He saved Colin and Evelyn. He pulled 'em out of the water and he climbed up a tree with 'em ...
- Yeah, and Vernie fought off this huge black snake –
- He did not.
- Righto, everyone, settle down. I think we're all aboard now.
- Mister, could we go back and see if they've been rescued yet? The ones in the trees?
- Aw come on, Edna, it's dark and we've been up here for hours now. You've only been here five minutes. I want to go.
- Pull yer head in, Billy. Don't yer want to see how Evelyn and Vernie are getting on?
- Why? Won't make no difference to 'em, will it?
- Mister?
- One last look. You never know.

The rescue scene visible from quite a distance. From both banks the headlamps of cars are shining at the trees where four figures still huddle. Men in the boat off the trailer collect the two little ones, then the man, and finally Vernon, all the while lamps playing into the water upstream of the boat, searching for oncoming debris. Steadily, the boat makes its way across to the bank on the village side. The lights on the other bank flash on and off.

- Thank God for that much.



- Better be careful of your language now, Susie.
- Thank you, Mister.
- All part of the service, Miss Patsy. Well, lad, hat do you think?
- I reckon we're right to go, sir. Everyone's accounted for.
- So they are. You know, you did well for yer first outing.
- Thanks very much.
- You've a gentle way with souls, and a sharp eye and a quick arm.
- Does that mean I get to stay on?
- You never know – you might end up in yer own boat some day.
- Not likely.
- Hey, Mister, can we go yet?