

CHAPTER 6

Mystery Sailor

Three quarters of an hour later the five were sitting on the rocks at the margin of their little beach eating a well earned dinner.

“The tide is still going out,” said Liz.

“What time is low water, Tom?” asked Mark.

“About ten by my reckoning,” said Tom. “I’m reckoning on a one and a half hour delay on the Fort Denison time. The same as at Karuah.”

“Fort Denison on Sydney Harbour?” asked Bill.

“Yes. That’s where the tides on the east coast are measured from,” said Tom.

“I say. It’s a good thing we are not getting spring tides,” said Mark, “or the boats would be well afloat at high tide.”

“The sea would be lapping around the tents,” said Tom.

“What? Tonight?” asked Liz.

“No. Silly,” said her brother. “At spring tides, when ‘the highs’ are over six foot. Generally around Christmas time.”

“Oh. Thank goodness,” said Liz. “I didn’t want to be woken up in the middle of the night to find the sea coming through the tent door.” They all laughed.

“What about the tides for the next part of the trip?” asked Mark.

“High will be about four thirty tomorrow morning,” said Tom. “We’ll catch the ebb to get across to Fame Cove and then through the narrows around Boondaba Island. Where’s the map, Cate?”

“*The chart*, Tom, *the chart*,” she said as she retrieved it from the grass near the tents. “Sailors don’t use maps.”

“Sorry, the chart,” said Tom. She handed it to him and the others gathered around him as he opened it.

“It’s about three miles to Fame Cove.

“Fame Cove is lovely,” said Cate. “Mummy and Daddy took us there in *Antico*.

“But won’t we have the ebb against us when we try heading up the schooner channel?” asked Mark.

“We’ll have to delay our approach to the Schooner Channel until slack water and the tide starts to make.

“And catch the first of the tide up the channel.”

“That’s it. It will be a matter of timing. We will want to be at the mouth of the channel as the flood begins.”

“Mark, you’ve been reading Maurice Griffiths,” said Cate.

“Who?” said Mark.

“Maurice Griffiths. English cruising sailor,” said Cate. “*The First of the Tide* is the title of one of his best cruising books. Daddy gave it to us to read when he heard we wanted to go cruising.”

“No. Never heard of him,” said Mark.

““There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,”” said Liz.

“Pardon?” said Cate.

“Shakespeare,” said Liz, “*Julius Caesar*, Act Four. *There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.*”

“Hear that, Tom? We mustn’t miss that tide.”

The light was fading now that the sun had set.

“Time to do some washing up,” said Liz.

“And get the tents ready for the night,” said Cate.

“Find your torches now,” said Tom. “You won’t be able to find them in the dark.” They cleaned up the cooking utensils and set them to dry on the grassy verge.

“Let’s go down to the point and look at the lights,” said Mark.

“Has everyone got their torches?” asked Cate.

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Roger.”

“I hope Bill has got his,” said Cate.

“Where has he gone?”

“Fishing. He’s around on the point.”

“Watch your footing everyone,” said Tom as he led off. They made their way carefully over the rocks between the patches of weed. The

rocks were still wet from the previous high tide. They found Bill on the western side of the point, hopefully holding his rod with the line out in the sea. As they opened the point they found that the breeze was still blowing from the east but less strongly than it had been earlier.

“Any luck?” asked Tom as they came up.

“No. Nothing,” said Bill. He reeled in his line and then dismantled his rod. “I’ll try again tomorrow.”

“There’s a flashing light,” said Liz.

“Where?” asked Tom.

“Oh, it’s stopped. It was over there,” said Liz indicating the shore away to the north of them. There was a pause and the light flashed again three times.

“Three one second flashes,” said Mark. “We’ll measure the occult next time around.”

“The what-was-that?” asked Liz.

“The occult. When the light is hidden.”

The three flashes occurred again and Mark counted until they resumed. “Eight seconds!”

“It must be somewhere off North Arm Cove,” said Tom.

“There’s that boat we saw earlier,” said Cate pointing to the right. They turned to follow her arm. Faintly through the gloom down the east coast of the island they could see the sailing boat that had followed them down from Karuah. It was heading slowly in the dying breeze south west towards the southern end of the island.

“What are you doing, Bill?” asked Cate. The others turned to see that Bill had come up to them and was flashing his torch towards the boat.

“I’m just saying ‘Hello’ in Morse,” said Bill.

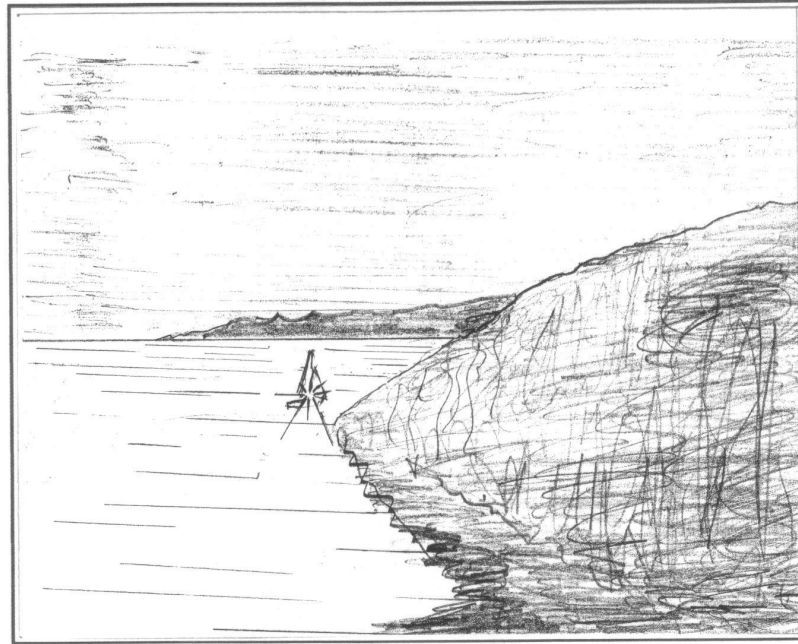
“You are wasting your time,” said Mark. “There’s hardly anyone who knows it any more. I wonder where he is heading, Tom? It’s very late. He should almost have navigation lights showing.”

“He must have been down to Soldier’s Point,” said Tom. “But I’m dashed if I know where he can be going at this time of evening. There are no anchorages in the direction he is going.”

“Look. There is a red and a green showing around the narrows,” said Cate looking eastwards. “But the red is to the left and the green to the right.”

“That will be the port and starboard markers, one each side of Boodaba Island,” said Mark.

“I’ve said ‘Hello’ again but I can’t get any response,” said Bill. The boat was approaching the far end of the island and would soon be lost to view.



“He’s got a torch though,” said Cate. “I can see it shining in the boat. He *is* signalling. Look!” A series of flashes, long and short, was clearly being directed towards them.

“V,” said Mark, “Did you get the first one?”

“E,” said Tom. “No, did anyone else?”

“Pause,” said Mark. “New word. First word something V E.”

“A,” said Cate and Tom together.

“T,” all but Liz said in unison.

“G,” said Bill.

“No, Q,” said Mark. “Then U. He’s going pretty fast.”

“E,” they pronounced again in unison.
“A T Q U E,” said Cate spelling it out.
“Atque?” said Liz. She pronounced it ‘atkway’. “It’s Latin.”
“Latin?” the disbelief was apparent in the voices of the others.”
“New word. Quiet!” called Mark. “V.”
“I know what’s coming,” said Liz, the excitement clear in her voice.
“A,” the others recited as the light continued to flash.
“L,” they said.
“E,” said Liz before the letter was flashed.
“That’s right,” said Tom.
“Nothing more,” said Bill as the light ceased to flash. “So what’s the message?” he asked.
“Ave atque vale,” said Liz
“Hail and farewell!” said Mark.
“Why. So it is,” said Tom. The boat disappeared from sight beyond the southern end of the island.
“Amazing,” said Mark. “A latin scholar *and* an expert in Morse. You could tell he was no beginner from the speed at which he was sending.”
“And he came from Karuah,” said Tom half to himself.

“Come on. We’d better be getting back to the tents,” said Cate. “It’s nearly time for bed.” They had to be really careful now as they worked their way back along the rocky shore with only their torches to light them. As they went the four elder children discussed amongst them the remarkable signal they had just received.

“I’m glad you were there Mark,” said Cate. “I would never have got the whole message. Would you have, Tom?” she asked her brother.

“No. He was too fast for me to read easily,” said Tom.

“I used to practise with Simmonds, a kid at school,” said Mark. “We would get on opposite sides of the quadrangle and pass messages to each other.”

“I won’t need any rocking when I get into my bunk,” said Liz yawning suddenly. That started the others yawning too.

“Me neither,” said Cate.

It took them about ten minutes to pick their way back to the little cove. It was quite dark. The air on the lee side of the island was still

now and they could hear the faint wash as an occasional small wave hit the shore.

“Clean your teeth, young Bill,” said Cate. “Then we’ll say prayers and bed.”

“Let’s say them round the fire now then we can all go off to bed.” The five stood around the remnants of the fire and said an act of sorrow for their sins and failings of the day, then the *Now I lay me down to rest* and a decade of the Rosary in thanksgiving for what Liz remarked quietly had been a splendid day and for a safe crossing of Port Stephens on the morrow. Tom and Mark then checked the boats were secure and that the fire was not going to flare up.

The noises of human activity became less and less as they made themselves comfortable in their sleeping bags in the tents and settled down for the night. There was no sound from the waterside now. It was windless and the water was still. The receding tide had taken the water’s edge away from the campsite. There were little noises in the bush behind them and of the sound as of some tiny animal creeping through the grass. There was the sound of wings flying past low over the tents. Then some sort of bird that, as Bill said later, seemed to buzz through the air like a buzz bomb. About twenty minutes after they had all called ‘Goodnight’ there came a loud call from a tree up on the ridge of the island behind them—*KWOK KWOK*.

“For heaven’s sake, Tom, what was that?” called Cate from the other tent. There was no response. “Tom?”

“It was a bird,” he replied. “I’m thinking.” Tom was mentally going through his taped list of bird calls and classifying, trying to isolate the call. It was a bird that perched in trees, called at night, it was loud, and distinctive, with a descending double note. He knew he had heard the call before among his tapes. It was simply a matter of remembering which. Soon after there was the sound of wings again. It was a big bird. Then more wings, a second one obviously, then maybe a third. Then, by the water’s edge some distance away, the call came again. A single call this time, not so loud—*KWOK*.

“Nankeen Night Heron!” called Tom triumphantly at last. “Probably a party of them. They perch in trees and feed at night. They’ll be working the shore now the tide is out.”

“You’ve relieved my mind,” said Cate.

“Nothing to worry about. Sleep tight.”

“Liz is asleep. It will be some time before I drop off, I think. What about Bill?”

“He’s asleep too. So is Mark. Goodnight, part two.”

“God bless!”

From the distance there came the call of a wader. Apart from the occasional sound of the Night Herons’ wings the night was silent. The two of them were soon asleep.

Tom woke much later to a sound that was different—that of waves hitting the shore. He crawled from his sleeping bag and looked out of the tent flap.

“What’s up?” asked Mark sleepily from his bag.

“Wind change,” said Tom. “I’ll just check the boats.”

“I’ll give you a hand.”

Mark followed Tom out of the tent.

Tom’s torch was shining down on the sand and Mark picked his way down to where he was standing by the boats.

“Not as bad as it sounds,” said Tom. “The tide is on the make.”

“Westerly has come in, eh?” said Mark. “Five knots or so.”

“The boats are well secure. Nothing to worry about.” They made their way back to the tents.

“What’s the problem?” Cate’s voice came from the other tent.

“Nothing wrong. Just a change in wind direction,” said Tom.



“The boats are okay,” said Mark. They returned to their tents and were soon asleep once more.