



A Lighterman's Tale

By Mike Fox

It was my fate to be a lighterman, as it is the fate of most every son of a lighterman. The old men say the rhythms of the tide – swell to the west, ebb to the east – are born with you, as the blood flows in your veins. In truth we are creatures of the water, and find our peace there, cruel though it can be.

Now, I suppose, I am one of those old men: a 'Freeman of the River Thames', the master of forty miles of tideway. I've known that stretch of water through long hours of day and night, in all seasons and every mood of weather. I have been pilot to both barge and cargo, with only twenty five feet of cheap Swedish deal and the will of the tide to steer by. Yet my work has been my consolation and freedom, and a rare kind of freedom it has been.

But at the time I will speak of that freedom had still to be won. I was bound in the servitude of an apprenticeship, though I had gained my license and could take a barge out on my own. Those early days, before I gained full instinct, could be hazardous, especially when the river was crowded with other vessels. One false manoeuvre or error of judgement and your guvnor could put you out on your neck, providing you survived to give him opportunity.

Because the Thames is a fine lady, and strong enough to carry all the freight of London. But she has her moods and she has her feelings. To keep her favour you

must learn these and obey them. Fanciful though it sounds, I believe this understanding prepared me, as best anything could, for what I will now describe.

It was a fair morning in early May, and I was dropping down the river on the tide. The whistle came not from the water but far to my left, from the bank. It was *our* whistle, the whistle of our company: taken in another century from the song of a thrush. I looked towards it expecting to see a workmate, and there she stood, a girl as beautiful as I could ever imagine, with two fingers stuck in her mouth and bent almost double to prise the noise from her lungs.

All I could think to do was reply in kind, as no voice would carry across that stretch of water. So I pressed my lips wide in similar fashion and blew as hard as I could, which almost cost me the grip of my oar. In all it must have been an ungainly gesture, and I could see her wiping tears of laughter from her eyes as the tide bore me away.

To this day I do not know how this small circumstance became common knowledge, except to say there is little privacy on a commercial river. I will also never know if my guvnor caught word and, for his own reasons, took the action he did.

‘I want you to walk yourself up to Clerkenwell and collect six pair of strap hinges from Eagan’s,’ he said, the following morning as I entered his office to learn my duties for the day. ‘I ordered them last week so they know what to give you, and all you have to do is sign the firm’s account.’ He said this barely looking up at me.

‘I’ll go straight away, Guvnor,’ I said, careful of my delight. A three mile stroll on a warm spring day was not the worst thing he could have asked me to do.

So I stepped away northward with a light heart. Eagan’s Ironmongery was a magical place, with drawers from floor to ceiling holding every type of device and contraption you could dream of, and tradesmen from all around the city made their way there.

When I arrived, as I foresaw, there was a queue. What I did not foresee was the vision stood facing that queue from behind the counter. Because it was the girl from the riverbank, in a brown warehouse coat with the sleeves rolled up, serving the rough men with a smile and full confidence in herself.

The queue lent me time to gaze at her, and my eyes could go nowhere else. Her hair, full of curls, shone like the sun on fresh copper, and she looked slender and neat, even in that brown coat. Perhaps five minutes passed until I stood before her.

‘How may I help you sir?’ she said, as she had to each man before me. And yet there was a tease in her smile that I believe none of them had witnessed.

‘I’ve come for six pair of strap hinges for Slater’s,’ I said. ‘My guvnor says he ordered them and asks they be added to his account.’

‘I have them here and ready,’ she said, reaching under the counter, which took me back for a moment. She wrapped them in thick brown paper and tied them neatly with string, all the while with an air about her I have no words for. Then, placing carbon paper between the pages, she filled out the invoice book in a careful hand.

‘Could I have your signature here, sir,’ she said, holding my eye again.

‘You were whistling to me on the river,’ I found myself blurting out.

‘I might have been,’ she said, as if using me for her amusement.

‘But my company’s whistle’s a secret.’

‘Not to me it isn’t,’ she said, tilting her chin forward, so that I noticed it had a dimple.

Now as a bound apprentice I was allowed neither marriage nor fornication, though the latter would have been very hard to come by anyway, especially as most of my strength was saved for the river. But a chance like this I knew might never fall my way again.

‘Would you walk out with me on Sunday afternoon?’ I said, risking the jeers of the men queuing behind me. ‘We could go by Spitalfields for pie and mash.’

‘You must ask permission of my uncle.’ She spent a moment clearing the invoice book away. ‘But if he agrees I’ve no objection.’

‘And where would I find him?’ I asked.

‘If you stand aside while I serve these last three gentlemen I’ll go and fetch him.’ She smiled at me amusedly then gave her attention to the next customer.

Now I knew my guvnor would have a lively sense of how long an errand like this should take, but that was a risk I was willing to run. So I stood aside, clutching the parcel and wondering quite what turn the day had taken.

When the customers had been served she left the counter and passed through the open door in the corner, and I could hear her running up uncarpeted stairs, then after a moment a heavier tread coming down again. A thick set man with receding hair and a brush of a moustache appeared through the door and placed his hands on the counter. The girl, his niece, stood behind him with her arms folded, observing us lightly.

‘I understand you’re Joe Cropper’s youngest boy?’ he said.

‘I am sir,’ I said, wondering how he knew this. He took a moment to run his eye over me.

‘Your father and his forebears have been Thames lightermen for as long as anyone in this city can remember, and, if I’m fair, you look as steady as any of them I’ve come across.’

‘Thank you sir,’ I said, ‘I intend to follow in their path to the best of my ability.’

‘Now our Queenie tells me you hope to walk out with her,’ he continued, and I blessed him, as I realised I hadn’t thought to ask her name.

‘Yes sir, that would be my hope,’ I said, standing as straight as I could.

‘Well so would many others, I can assure you, but you seem a polite young man and your family stand you in good stead. I expect I shall see your father in the Red Lion before the week’s end, and if he raises no objection, neither shall I. You may call for Queenie on Sunday at twelve midday, providing you get the go ahead from your old man.’

‘Thank you sir,’ I said again, and lifting my cap to them both I left the shop to make my way back. I walked away on feet like feathers, and upon reaching the yard passed the hinges to my guvnor, who made no comment other than to bid me steer some pig iron down to Limehouse.

I needn’t tell you that for the next few days I waited on my father with the greatest attention at every moment we were at home together. He was with a different firm at that time and some weeks, if our hours dictated, we might barely see each other at all. But that week he seemed to be home whenever I was, and I watched him like a dog observes meat on a bone.

Finally, on Friday, when overtime brought us fish and chips, he raised the matter. We were sat at the table with my mother and both brothers.

‘John Eagan has spoken to me about his niece,’ he said, chewing unhurriedly. ‘It seems for reasons only she can know she’s set her cap at you.’

My brothers hooted in derision and I did my best to kick their shins.

‘Shut your cakehole, both of you,’ my mother came in. ‘Queenie Eagan is a most respectable girl and it seems she’s seen some merit in our Tom.’

Everybody appeared to be in on the matter except me.

‘What do you know of her?’ I asked. ‘I’ve only met her the once – to talk to anyhow.’

‘She was born just after you were,’ my mother said, ‘but her mother died giving birth to her and her father drowned shortly thereafter, poor girl.’

‘Was her dad a lighterman?’ my brother Harry asked.

‘Yes he was,’ said my father, ‘and a good one too. But when they pulled him from the water down by Wapping they found a flask of whisky almost empty in his pocket. The coroner said the loss of his wife must have unhinged him, as he’d always been known as a sober man.’

‘Then what happened to Queenie,’ I said, ‘and why haven’t I come across her before?’

‘She was passed round her uncles south of the river,’ Mum continued, ‘but she did so well at school that John Eagan wanted her in his shop. She’s been there for a good six months now.’

Before I could put all this together in my mind Dad came in again.

‘Now listen,’ he said, ‘John Eagan likes the look of you, and you won’t get a better chance than this in your life, so I’ll not stand in your way. But don’t forget that an apprentice is judged by his conduct on land as well as on water. Woe betide you if you play fast and loose with that girl.’

‘I’ve no intention of playing fast and loose,’ I said, wondering if any romance had ever started in this fashion.

‘Well I’m glad to hear it,’ Dad said. ‘Just make sure you don’t.’

So, as a result of this conversation, it’s fair to say that when I knocked at the side door of Eagan’s at twelve sharp on Sunday I was even more nervous than I might otherwise have been. My mother had ironed my shirt and trousers, and I’d rubbed fresh dubbin into my boots.

After only a few seconds Queenie appeared at the door, smiling and cheery, and stepped out to join me in the street. I must confess the look of her almost took my breath from me. She wore a dark green dress like a tunic, stopping just below her knee, with a grey cardigan to cover her shoulders. Her hair was tied with a black ribbon so that the thick copper ringlets I remembered hung loosely down her back.

‘Hello Queenie,’ I said. ‘I’m very pleased we have the chance to get to know each other.’ I’d practised this in front of the mirror at home, but it still came out ridiculous.

‘Uncle doesn’t want me back ‘til four,’ she said, as natural as could be, ‘so we could have our dinner like you said then walk by the river, providing you haven’t seen enough of it.’

I had the feeling, as before, that I was causing her some sort of amusement, but if so I was glad. I couldn’t help wondering how an orphan girl could have so much joy in her.

‘How did you come to be on the river?’ she asked as we began to walk side by side. ‘Not every boy follows his father these days.’

‘My teacher said it was all I was fit for,’ I told her, hoping, I must be honest, that she would exclaim otherwise.

Instead she said, ‘That’s not a nice thing to hear,’ and took my arm, making me feel a foot taller.

And that was the start of it. From then on we walked out every Sunday, and any other time I could contrive. There was never really any question, I think. We both knew that whatever days life should give us thereafter would be spent together.

But I had four years and three months still to serve in my apprenticeship, and young flesh is rarely patient. There was no private place we could go to, only shop doorways on damp or windy nights to express our passion. We were seen doing just that and reported, by whom I do not know, and I was called to explain myself before the beadle at Waterman’s Hall. When you’re courting it can seem that all the eyes of London are upon you.

On the appointed day my father came with me. He wore his suit and a dark tie and, apart from a ten minute grilling which will stay with me to my grave, said nothing else to me beforehand. The Hall was not such a grand building really, but as we walked through the passage to the beadle’s office, passing the old prints of sailing ships and river scenes, I felt the weight of all that history bearing down on me. I remembered my father’s warning and feared my days on the river might be coming to a premature end. Worse still I feared bringing disgrace upon Queenie, so I was willing to take whatever blame was coming. But as we stood before the semi-circle of dignitaries; master lightermen, wharfingers, and puffed-up company men, Dad set about making a case for me, and I saw a side to him I’d never glimpsed before.

I should explain that these men setting out to judge me were of two distinct categories: those who had spent their life on the river and gained mastery through the

experience, and those who had taken themselves into offices and never been seen afloat. As Dad began speaking on my behalf it was clear he held the respect of both.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said once the charge was laid out, ‘I understand why my son is here, and what you may have heard about him. I myself have warned him of the dangers of courtship for a young man bound in apprenticeship. But I would ask you to consider two things. Queenie Eagan is the child of seven generations of lightermen. As well, it’s the way of nature that a girl who lost her father early in life should seek fresh comfort in a steady man, which is what I believe my boy will become. Now I’ve questioned him closely, and I can assure you that, despite what you may have heard, there has been no true impropriety. They are just two young people tied fast in love.’

The beadle nodded judiciously. ‘Then are you asking us to dismiss the charge that he was behaving improperly in a public place, in such a way as to discredit our trade?’ he said.

‘No sir, I’m asking you and the panel to consider the matter in a different light. Anyone can see that Queenie Eagan and my son are on the path to matrimony, and that they are aching for each other. I’m asking for dispensation for my son to marry before the term of his apprenticeship ends. What could benefit our proud trade more than the union of two of the oldest families it contains?’

The panel looked at one another and muttered in low tones, then the beadle cleared his throat and said in his pompous voice, ‘We now request that you retire to the hallway while we consider the points you’ve raised.’

Dad and I went out and sat side by side on an oak pew in that dark and formal corridor. We said nothing, but his words rang in my head and I thought of him with new pride. After several minutes we were called back in. The beadle looked at us gravely, stroking his gold chain.

‘You’ve spoken well on your son’s behalf, Joe,’ he said, ‘and our opinion is that you’ve made a fair case. We too believe it would be serve no purpose for your Tom to be lost to our trade. We agree as well that poor Queenie Eagan deserves our compassion, and that the union of your family and hers can only be a good thing. Because of this we are willing see the matter brought before us in that light, and grant permission for the two of them to marry before Tom’s apprenticeship runs its course. In fact in view of events, we suggest sooner rather than later.’

He brought down his gavel and we were dismissed.

So there it was – the miracle of my life. Within two months we were married on a late autumn day at St Georges in the East, and Queenie and I moved in to the tiny attic room, cleared and scrubbed for us by my mother.

Of course there was no honeymoon, but on our wedding night our longing was released, and I touched her as tenderly as my sore and calloused hands allowed. No words can describe what passed between us then, except to say her flesh was as tender as mine was rough, and as she held me to her breast I felt all the ache of labour drawn from my body.

It was strange at first to have her in the house each day, and my brothers found new manners when she joined us at the table. But she was an easy girl to be with and her good spirits cheered everyone. She continued to serve in her uncle's shop and we began saving for the time we could move out to somewhere of our own.

With this in mind I set myself to work with new strength and seriousness. By now I was agile, and had learned to tread the slithering gunwales with toes turned in, taking pigeon steps for balance. This is how you can tell a lighterman on dry land, because the habit never leaves us. As well I was developing a sense of the water, and could steer confidently through a road of barges and estimate the drop of the tide wherever I was called upon to moor.

But one morning, before even the winter had set in, Queenie woke in discomfort and without her usual spark. When my mother put toast before her as we sat down for breakfast she rose hurriedly from her chair and made straight for the outside privy, returning some minutes later ashen and tearful.

'Take yourself back to bed, my girl,' Mother said, 'and I'll heat you up a brick to ease your tummy. We'll send word to your uncle that you won't be in today.'

When Queenie had left us mother said, 'There's cause for joy for us now, though I doubt she'll be feeling very joyful for the next few weeks.'

I went to work that morning with the blessing of new life before me and the step of a father-to-be.

The sickness ran its course and by the turn of the year Queenie began to blossom, with a bloom on her skin and a mystery about her that even my brothers beheld in wonder. I felt I had all that any man could wish for, and no task the river threw at me seemed too great. In fact I was often sent out when the weather conditions and value of cargo would normally point my guvnor towards an older man.

It was on such a day, with Queenie due at any time, that I took a half-load of grass seed on the short run from Wapping to Rotherhithe. Fog had come down, but I had learned to use my ears as eyes, and let the water hone my senses. And perhaps because of this, on a day like any other, I began to feel unease. I could put no reason to it, nor could I let myself be distracted, but despite the cocoon of mist and the river being quiet and gentle, something told me all was not well.

And so it proved. When I reached the dock I was waved past the queue of craft waiting to unload, and men on the quayside shouted for my mooring rope.

‘You get yourself home, boy, quick as you can. Your mother’s sent for you.’ The speaker was a man known to me only by sight.

‘What is it?’ I said. ‘Why am I wanted?’ It was the sort of question you ask when you fear you know the answer.

‘You just get there as quick as you can,’ he replied. ‘Take a bus, don’t walk it.’

It was not within my power to wait for a bus, so I ran the two miles home. When I arrived I found only my mother; my father and brothers being out at work.

‘What’s happened?’ I said, ‘why have you sent for me?’

My mother folded me in her arms, like she hadn’t done for years.

‘Your Queenie’s dead,’ she said in her gentlest voice. ‘The baby came and there was nothing they could do.’

I felt all strength leave my body. ‘Didn’t anybody help her?’ I said.

‘Of course they did, dearie,’ mother said. ‘The doctor came and the midwife’s still up there now, and they managed to save the baby. You’re the father of a son.’

‘Let me see them,’ I said. I was choking with tears.

‘The midwife doesn’t want you up there, Tom,’ mother said. ‘She said not to let you. They’ll bring the baby to us when they’re ready to.’

I sat down while she boiled the kettle.

‘Hot sweet tea,’ she said, placing a mug beside me. Before I could even think of bringing it to my lips the midwife came down the stairs and I found myself on my feet. She looked at me steadily.

‘She’s gone, dear,’ she said. ‘There was nothing we could do but save the baby.’

‘But wasn’t she in pain?’ I said. ‘Surely she called for me earlier?’

‘There’s nothing more you need to know, my child,’ she said. ‘If I told you anything else it wouldn’t help you.’

So there I found myself, with no answer to the questions of life and separate in my spirit to all around me. When I held my son I felt the pulse of his mother in his tiny body and knew that one way or another I would carry on. That evening, my father nodded to the others to leave us, and stood behind where I sat with his hand on my shoulder.

‘Get back to your work as soon as you can, boy,’ he said. ‘No tide loses all its salt, however far it’s come from the sea. A lighterman will always find comfort amongst his own,’

So I walked down to the river in the late evening and sat on a bench there in the quietest spot I could find. I looked out onto the Thames and saw my son as a man upon it, perhaps finding a mother in the swell and dip of the tide, as have many others. I watched the water flowing swiftly on the ebb as the river ran on past the docks, twisting and widening in the dusk towards the estuary beyond, where, like yesterday and tomorrow, it would yield its dark mouth to the sea.