

The Third Man.

Graham strolled down from the school, past the working-boats moored along the Grand Union Canal. He waved away the offer of an impromptu game of cricket with the local boys on the common, next to the castle. He was no longer one of them. Yesterday he would have gladly joined their test match but today, he had crossed the Rubicon.

He slipped through the door of the Boatman public house, whose landlord growled a burr of a welcome. Two grizzled bargees sat plotting. Their clandestine language of the cut as thick as the pipe smoke that floated in layers; before clinging to every furnishing in the bar.

Graham stammered out, 'An IPA please.'

Obviously his first ever pint had to be a Greene King.

Graham held up the glass into the shaft of light that pierced a loophole and cut the bar in half. The amber liquid - so much brighter and clearer than the pub's nicotine-stained oak-panelling. He imbibed and immediately gaged on the twisted and bitter, cloying sweetness. The Pilgrim and First Gold hops should have made such a crisp and refreshing drink but to Graham it was repellent. He forced down another mouthful, now a man, he had to act manful.

Graham fidgeted with his glass, arm casually propping up the bar. What to do next? His first beer ever and not a triumph. What was the etiquette? Put it down and leave, or ask for another?

'Son, are you sure you're eighteen?' Quizzed the landlord.

Graham smiled sure of one thing.

'Yes Sir, eighteen today.'

'Well then, many happy returns.' With that the landlord wrestled the glass from Graham and filled it up with two well practiced pulls on the pump and a tiny squeeze to head up the pint.

'On the house.'

Graham completely taken aback stuttered. Caught for words, he was waved away by the landlord who let out a chuckle that emanated from deep behind his mutton chop whiskers.

Graham tucked himself away in a snug and stared at dewfall coating the glass.

What was beer all about?

He eavesdropped the bargee's conversation. Snippets angled his intrigue. A cargo, an opportunity, an assignation and something that sounded downright iffy if not the wrong side of illicit.

Without noticing, his second beer slipped down a treat. Maybe it was the alcohol kicking in, maybe it was his taste buds adjusting. But for Graham if the first beer was disgusting, the second was the first step on a journey where each and every subsequent beer was enjoyed with an enthusiasm that never failed.

The bargees settled with the landlord, came to some furtive agreement and left to their machinations.

Graham's imagination went into overdrive. For him Oxford beckoned, then perhaps afterwards, the role a news-paper reporter. He was always plotting intrigues. The bargees – perhaps spies, playing Russian roulette on their narrowboat? Maybe running a drug's scam?

'Two grizzled bargees,' as a title?

No; not enough intrigue.

He would have to include the landlord as The Third Man.