

MORE RIPPING YARNS

... or alternately

**A tale of the Minogue and other strange creatures
Memories from an age that never happened
'Will you grease the boiler mother while I shave the chicken's lip' – a Recital
'I'm going to bounce up and down on my spring' – Clodagh Rodgers
'This time next year we'll all be millionaires, Rodney' - Traditional**

The Plot so far ...

The following is just a dream though I remember it well. Long ago as a callow toddler I sat on my grandmother's knee as she reminisced about the good old days but with her husband eking out only the most meagre of incomes as an assistant wringer-out to a one-armed window cleaner times weren't that much better now.

We were all of similar ilk and the closeness of our kin was such that a man could introduce you to his wife, sister and cousin and they would all be the same woman. I was too young to understand even though I harboured a certain curiosity as to my webbed feet. And my inherent ability to play the banjo is a mystery that to this day remains unexplained though perhaps, like diarrhoea, it runs in the genes. *(Ed. Please confirm this sentence is permissible before the 9pm watershed, thanks.)*

Granny sucked longingly on a surrogate mouthful of fish tank gravel whilst bemoaning the impossible cost of pork scratchings as around us the decaying signs of Empire serenely corroded amongst the dignity that can only come from an aristocratic paucity. And she talked. Her vocabulary was as deficient as, like, whatever but she was not one to bite off the hand that laid the golden egg in her eagerness to bat off the same hymn sheet. *(Ed. You may want to check this one as well.)*

Anyway, one day as mother was getting the coal in, she related the tale of my late grandfather, an enigmatic forebear who was even now held in awe. Granddad, you see, was a part-time boat-handling competition judge. The fact that he was also a registered alcoholic produced some startling decisions.

'Osprey is the winner' he declared triumphantly as the boat in question slid majestically beneath the surface following its liaison with a cast beam protruding just below water level. Then there was the National Championships affair. Amidst roars of expletive-lain peroration seventeen times the challenger rammed the bankside on the reversing exercise and seventeen times he was declared the winner by my granddad.

It reached the stage where the punters didn't bet on the competitors but instead bet on the outcome to be pronounced by granddad. In the days before waterways became the haven of scrupulous fair play that they are now there were plenty of pugs that tried to muscle in on the act. My granddad was always amenable to pocketfuls of money shoved his way in brown envelopes and in different times may have made a singularly efficacious politician but on this occasion, the infamous All-England Boat Handling Championships of 1886, to no-one's surprise he had spent it all on booze just as the competition hit full flow. By the finale the nectar had kicked in as my granddad pulled the two contestants together for a tense tête-à-tête. *'Either of you boys want a sweetie'* he said, producing a bag from his pocket and flailing helplessly with laughter.

That did it. The Championship was thrown into chaos. Tempers flared and the participants slugged it out in the time-honoured manner of fisticuffs on the quayside. A left, a right; the crowd oohed and aahed. Another flurry, a stray blow to the jaw and my granddad toppled like a speared pig, hitting his head on the stone jetty.

'Ah the pity of it all' bemoaned my grandmother as she tenderly lifted the remains of the cash from his shirt pocket whilst mentally reviewing her insurance policies. 'Alcoholic Poisoning' was the Coroner's decision. Which to this day rates as the strangest decision to any boat handling competition.

GF

With acknowledgements to *Hannigan's Dad* by Terence Alan 'Spike' Milligan KBE (1918 - 2002)