



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:5:00

Janet and John go Cockling

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Janet and John's holiday week in the North East of England had gone relatively well as they awoke at 4.45am on day 4. The Sea View Guest House was comfortable though slightly sparse and the landlady, Mrs Colthorpe, had made them both especially welcome from the outset. It did seem strange to Janet that Mrs Colthorpe was casually dressed in her negligee for most of the day, but she was comforted when John explained that this was almost a religion in the North and that all of the lady owners slept in full make up and earrings in case of a fire alarm during the night. The same reason necessitated her leaving the bathroom door ajar in the mornings while bathing, explained John knowledgeably.

There was no silk in sight this morning though as Mrs Colthorpe loaded the hotel van with spades, rakes, planks of wood with long handles called Jumbos and things that looked like giant flour sieves, ready for the trip of the week. Janet and John appeared beside the van, very professionally welly booted and water-proof suited and overwhelmed at the prospect of their first ever go at 'cockling'.

'Come on jump in' shouted Mrs C, as she condescended to be called today, she slammed the rear doors shut and jumped up onto the driver's seat, simultaneously starting the engine and extending the seat belt to fasten it, while pulling John enthusiastically up onto the bench seat next to her. John chose to say nothing, as it would delay the departure if Mrs C got out again to collect and don the

undergarments that had most obviously been omitted, he pardoned himself and re-set his glasses for the journey ahead.

Janet slammed the door shut and gripped John's arm as they sped down the drive and onwards to the expansive sands of Morecombe bay.

'Yahoo!', cried Mrs C.

'Yahoo' said John. Janet squeezed John's arm a little harder and looked worryingly past the crack above the tax disc holder that was half-peeled off the windscreen.

The sun had not risen when they arrived in the car park, or at least if it had, the thick clouds were hiding its dawn, it was very dark, very cold and raining hard, sideways. Mrs C leapt from the van with a cry of 'come on come on the tide waits for no-one you know', and she tumbled the spades, rakes, planks of wood with long handles and things that looked like giant flour sieves into the wheel barrow she had previously and single-handedly, expertly and effortlessly muscled from the van. This was some strong woman, thought John, Janet thought so too.

In a whizz they were on the soft sand, John and Mrs C pulling the barrow and Janet pushing from the rear. Their hearts were pumping hard as the sand turned stiffer and the wheel barrow began to jump rhythmically over the furrows. Patches of water splashed up their wellies and Jane began to think that they would walk all the way to France, when Mrs C dropped her handle and raised her hand in disciplined instruction, announcing loudly 'we are here'.

Cockles live in the sand when the tide goes out and can be harvested in small amounts without a licence according to Mrs C, she knew the owner of the beds who allowed her to take as many as she wanted, under a special arrangement. Even in this, the murkiest of weather, she recognised where they were, so she equipped Janet and John quickly with the rakes and made ready for their first lesson.

The cold was setting into Jane more quickly than John and she struggled to hold onto the rake in the high wind and driving rain. John however was ready for the challenge and listened attentively.

Now take your Jumbo, said Mrs C, and thrust it into the sand like this.

‘My what?’ said John. Mrs C gestured to the plank with the long handle, so John took it and watched as Mrs C plunged hers into the sand.

‘Now you wiggle it about’ said Mrs C ‘and the little jiggers will pop up to the surface.’

Janet didn’t have a jumbo, so she knelt behind the barrow to shelter from the rain and wind and listened as far as she could for her name, should she be missed.

‘Now thrust it in!’ shouted Mrs C, by now panting from the exertions of the morning.

‘I can’t get it in!’ shouted John, Mrs C took John’s Jumbo and planted it firmly with a loud cry: ‘It’s in!’ Janet felt somehow uneasy and noticed that the water was lapping to her wellies.

‘Wiggle it around!’ shouted Mrs C, John obeyed and wiggled for all he was worth. The excitement was getting to Mrs C and the physical exertion with John’s Jumbo exposed the usually well-clad body parts, that were unusually today unclad, for Janet to see, as she rose from the shelter of the barrow.

John’s cry upon seeing the shelled creatures of: ‘God they’re huge!’ did nothing to calm Janet’s nerve as he and Mrs C fell to the watery sand. Janet reacted automatically and, it has to be said, violently.

The perfect pattern of holes in John’s buttocks were jointly a source of medical inquisitiveness and amusement later that day in the Blackpool infirmary.

‘He fell on a rake’, said Jane, avoiding eye contact with the prostrate John.

‘In the garden?’ asked the staff nurse.

‘No, not in the garden,’ said Janet.