

Title

Trustee from the Toolroom

**By
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About this eBook

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Trustee from the Toolroom

An engineer is a man who can do for five bob what any bloody fool can do for a quid.
Definition—origin unknown

1

West Ealing is a suburb to the west of London, and Keith Stewart lives there in the lower part of No. 56 Somerset Road. No. 56 is an unusual house and a peculiarly ugly one, a detached house standing in a row but in a fairly spacious garden, four storeys high if you include the basement, a tall, thin slip of a house. It was built in the spacious days of 1880 when West Ealing stood on the edge of the country farmlands and was a place to which Indian Civilians retired after their years of service, but it was built of a particularly ugly yellow brick, now toned to a drab grey, at a period when English suburban architecture was going through a bad patch. The years have not dealt kindly with West Ealing; the farms are now far away. Most of the big old houses have been split up into two or three flats, as Keith Stewart had converted No. 56.

He had bought it when he married Katie in the middle of the Second War. That was soon after he moved down from Glasgow to the London area to work as a toolroom fitter with Stone and Collinson Ltd., who made subcontract parts for aeroplanes at Perivale. It was, of course, the first house that Katie or Keith had ever owned, and they were very proud of it. They contemplated quite a family so that they would need quite a house, the upper rooms for nurseries and children's rooms and playrooms while the garden would be a nice place for the pram. When, after a few years, it became evident that that was not to be, they had separated the two top floors from the remainder of the house and let them off as what the agents called a maisonette, retaining the ground floor and the basement for themselves. On the ground floor they had a bedroom in the front, the living room and kitchen at the rear overlooking the

garden, and a bathroom at the side. In the basement they had adapted what had once been the scullery as a small spare bedroom; the whole of the rest had been taken by Keith as his own domain.

Here he made models, and here he wrote about them weekly for the *Miniature Mechanic*, a magazine with a considerable circulation in the lower ranks of industry and with a growing popularity amongst eccentric doctors, stockbrokers, and bank managers who just liked engineering but didn't know much about it. All his life he had made models, little steam engines, little petrol engines, little speedboats, little locomotives, little Diesels. He was a considerable horologist; in his time he had made many clocks with motions of antiquarian interest and had written full directions for constructing them, always in the *Miniature Mechanic*. He had made little beam engines which would have delighted James Watt and still delighted those who are fascinated by such things; he had made little jet engines which would have delighted Frank Whittle. He had made pumps and boilers and carillons that played a tune, all in the miniature scale. He was a quick worker and a ready writer upon technical matters and he delighted in making little things that worked. He had now so ordered his life that he need do nothing else.

All through the war he had written about his hobby after the long hours of overtime in the toolroom. The coming of peace had given him more leisure for his models and his articles about them, and two years later he had taken the great plunge of giving up his job in favour of his avocation. It had not benefitted him financially. He would have made more money in the toolroom progressing up from charge-hand to foreman; he would have made more money as an instructor in a technical college. He would not have made more happiness than he had now attained.

He was a very serious and well-informed student of engineering matters, though he would have been amazed to hear himself described in such terms. He read about techniques for pleasure. One morning in each week he would spend in the Ealing Public Library browsing through the technical magazines, slightly oppressed by a sense of guilt that he was not working. On Fridays he always went to London to deliver his weekly copy to the editor of the *Miniature Mechanic* and arrange about the blocks and, being in London, he would take time off and sneak away for three or four hours to the library of the Patent Office for a period of interest and pleasure before going home to catch up with his work. He worked normally till eleven or twelve each night.

He called the front basement room his clean workshop, and this was his machine shop. Here he had a six-inch Herbert lathe for heavy work, a three-and-a-half-inch Myford, and a Boley watchmaker's lathe. He had a Senior milling machine and a Boxford shaper, a large and a small drill press, and a vast array of tools ready to hand. A long bench ran across the window, a tubular light system ran across the ceiling, and a small camera and flashgun stood ready for use in a cupboard, for it was his habit to take photographs of interesting processes to illustrate his articles.

The other room, which once had been the kitchen of the house, was considerably larger. He called this his dirty workshop, but it was in this room that he had his desk and drawing board for it was usually free of oil. Here he did what small amount of carpentry and woodworking might be necessary for his models. Here he welded and brazed, here he tempered and hardened steel, here he did steam trials of his steam engines so that it had been necessary for him to fit an extractor fan into the window. It was in this room that he stood talking to his brother-in-law, Commander Dermott, the red leather jewel case in his hands.

The copper box that he had made stood on the bench before them, the rectangular sheet of copper that was to be the lid loose beside it. "I've left room for packing this asbestos card all round it," Keith said. "I'll braze it up with a small oxyacetylene flame, but I'm afraid it's going to get a bit hot inside. I'm afraid it may scorch the leather, even with the asbestos."

“I don’t think that matters,” said the naval officer. “It won’t set it on fire?”

Keith shook his head. “The top is a good fit, and I’ll clamp it down all round while I’m brazing. There won’t be enough oxygen inside to support combustion. I’m just worried about the look of it when you take it out. It could be a bit brown.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

Keith shook the case; it was fairly heavy, but nothing rattled. He glanced at his brother-in-law. “What’s it got in it?”

“All Jo’s jewels,” John Dermott told him. “You’re only allowed to take so much out of the country.”

“This is going somewhere in the yacht?”

The other nodded. “Somewhere where nobody’s going to find it.”

Keith said no more but took off his jacket and hung it on a hook at the back of the door. He put on a leather apron that covered his body from the neck down, and turned on the gas at the cylinders, picked up the torch, and went to work. He never questioned anything that his brother-in-law said or did; they came from different worlds. John had been a regular naval officer, and Keith was a modest little man.

His sister had done a good job for herself, he reflected as he brazed the seam, when she married John Dermott; it had turned out well in spite of the social disparity. Jo had been a pretty child with good Scots sense; she had been fond of dancing and at the age of twelve she had become one of the Tiller Girls. Her first part was one of nine Elves in the Magic Wood, in pantomime. She had stayed with the organization and had played in theatres and music halls all over the British Isles, with occasional runs in London. It had been partly upon her account that Keith had left Glasgow and come down to work in the south, to see more of his only sister. It had gone on till at the age of nineteen she had been in the Christmas pantomime at Portsmouth. She was playing a small speaking part by that time as the Widow Twankey’s maid, more noticeable than in the chorus. She had gone with a party of show girls and young naval officers to the Queen’s Hotel after the performance; she told Lieutenant Dermott that she was going to see the Victory next day. He took her there in pouring rain, which neither of them noticed. He followed her to London. Six weeks later, in the Palm House at Kew Gardens, he asked her to marry him, and she accepted. It wasn’t till nearly a month afterwards that she learned that she was marrying the nephew of Lord Dungannon.

Inevitably she had drifted somewhat apart from her brother Keith, the toolroom fitter in the factory at Perivale. She had the makings of a good actress in her; she was observant and could project herself into a part. It was no effort to her to take up the part of a young naval officer’s wife, abandoning her Renfrew antecedents; with the Tiller Girls she had learned to abandon or assume her Scots accent at will. She married Lieutenant Dermott in 1939 and almost immediately the war came, taking him away from her for the best part of five years. In those years she saw him only for brief spells of leave. They did not start a family during the war. She lived in a small flat over a shop at Cosham and worked as a woodworker with many other girls in a small dispersal aircraft factory at Havant. In the evenings she attempted to catch up on education to be on equal terms with other naval wives. She attended classes at the Polytechnic in French and history and geography and English Literature; the latter she found infinitely tedious, but struggled on with it.

John Dermott came back to her in 1946, a lieutenant-commander with greying hair and a face lined on the Murmansk convoy route; in 1947 their only child, Janice, was born. They bought a little house in Southsea and lived modestly, as naval officers do. They could have lived better for John Dermott had a private income of about a thousand a year, but already the shadow of an early retirement from the Navy lay upon him. He was a general duties officer, a salt horse, impatient with the rush of new techniques that were invading his service. Early retirement lay ahead of him as he passed out of the promotion zone. They saved their money

but for the extravagance of two years in Hong Kong for Joanna and the baby Janice when he was drafted to the China Station, and for the mild extravagance of duty-free gin in increasing quantities as John Dermott passed out of the zone. Early in 1957 the axe fell and John Dermott was retired from the service to which he had given his life; he was then forty-five, the same age as his brother-in-law, Keith.

Joanna sat talking to Katie while the two men worked in the basement room below. "It's terribly kind of you to offer to look after Janice," she said. "I do want you to know how we feel about that." She paused. "I wouldn't feel very comfortable about leaving her for all that time with the Dungannons."

Katie said anxiously, "I do hope she'll be happy, though. Ealing isn't very exciting, not after what she's been used to. Do you think she will? I mean, never having had any myself, one doesn't know ..."

She was a plump little woman in her early forties; she worked in the Household Linen department of Buckley's drapery shop, in Ealing Broadway. She had been in Household Linen as a girl, but in the war she had been directed to running an automatic lathe at Stone and Collinson, at Perivale. Here she had met Keith Stewart in 1941; they had married in 1942, and she had gone back to her automatic lathe after a week's honeymoon. They had no children. The purchase and conversion of the house had taken all their savings and left them with a heavy mortgage. She had tried it for a year after the war as a lady of leisure and had tired of it; when Keith gave up his job and took up free-lance writing and construction for the *Miniature Mechanic* Katie went back gladly to the Household Linen, a red-faced, dumpy little woman, well liked by the customers.

Joanna said, "I think she'll be very happy with you, very happy indeed. I wouldn't leave her if I thought she wouldn't. I think you'll spoil her, though."

"She's such a dear little thing," said Katie. "I was saying to Keith, perhaps we ought to have a kitten."

"You'll be landed with a cat for the rest of your lives," Joanna said practically. "She'll only be with you for about six months. I don't think it will be longer. Then you'll just have to take her to London Airport and put her on the aeroplane to us in Vancouver."

"Would that be somewhere in America?"

"In Canada," Jo said. "It's on the other side, on the Pacific coast. Everybody says it's a lovely place to live in, and John thinks he can get a job there. It's got quite a mild climate, but it rains a lot."

"My ..." The thought of the aeroplane was troubling to Katie. "I don't like the thought of her going all that way, all alone. Would she have to change, like at a station?"

Jo shook her head. "She goes right through in the same aeroplane, over the North Pole."

"Fancy ..." Katie said. "Is that the way you're going, in the yacht? All in among the ice?"

Jo shook her head. "You couldn't go that way in a boat." Katie was a dear and she was going to look after Janice for them while they travelled, but she had lived in Ealing all her life. "We're going to go southwards into the warm seas," she explained. "When we leave Hamble on Thursday week we go to Falmouth to clear Customs and to pick up anything that we've forgotten. Then John wants to make a passage straight for Las Palmas in the Canary Islands. From there to Barbados, and then to the Panama Canal. When we get into the Pacific, first of all we go to the Galapagos Islands, and then to Tahiti. We do want to see that, and it's not much out of the way. Then we go up to Honolulu and from there to Vancouver. It ought to take about five months. A bit less, if we're lucky with the winds."

The string of foreign names perplexed Katie; she did not know where any of them were, except the Panama Canal. The whole venture was entirely alien to her experience; she struggled to make sense of it "Will there be anyone to help you with the boat?" she asked. "With the sails, and that?"

Jo shook her head. “We won’t need anybody,” she said. “John and I can sail her by ourselves.”

Katie was perplexed. “But what happens at night, when you want to go to bed? I mean, do you anchor or something?” A sudden doubt assailed her. “You have got beds, haven’t you?”

“We’ve got very good beds,” said Jo. “I sleep marvellously on board. No, we couldn’t anchor. It’s too deep. Sometimes we can let her sail herself while we both sleep.” She tried to make the matter simple, but it was rather difficult. “She’ll do that with the wind forward of the beam, or running under the twin spinnakers. Otherwise we keep watch and watch—one up in the cockpit steering and the other one down below sleeping.” She smiled. “It’s quite all right. We’re very used to it.”

“You wouldn’t be sailing all the way, though, would you?” Katie asked. “Keith was saying you could go some of the way with the motor.”

Joanna shook her head. “We shall sail all the way,” she replied, “except perhaps just getting in and out of harbour. We have got a small motor, but we don’t use it at sea. It’s only a little one, and it’s dirty, and it makes a smell.” She paused, and then she said, “John’s such a seaman.”

Presently Katie reverted to her own problems. “It’s just the holidays,” she said thoughtfully. “School time—well, I’m back in the house by a quarter to six, always. School finishes at four so she’d be back here by a quarter past, but Keith is almost always here then, unless it’s a Friday. It’s really just the holidays.”

“The Christmas holidays,” Jo said. “We don’t sail till the first of August. I’m going to take her up to the Dungannons in Tyrone next week. I think school starts—Miss Pearson’s school, here—I think she said term starts on September the 15th. That means she’d be coming to you about the 13th, I suppose. I think you’ll have to meet her at Euston, but I’ll make sure that the Dungannons let you know.”

Katie nodded. “Keith would meet the train and bring her down here. He’d like doing that.”

“I think we’ll be sending for her about February,” said Jo. “We should be there by then, and if we haven’t got a house she can live on the boat with us. But anyway, I’ll be writing to you from each place. It’s just the Christmas holidays.”

Katie said, “Of course, Keith is in the house most of the time, down in the workshop. They’re not very long, the Christmas holidays.”

“I don’t want her to be a burden on you and Keith.”

“She won’t be that—honestly she won’t.” Katie paused. “I think it would be nice to have children’s parties, and crackers, and presents, and all that.”

Joanna eyed her uncertainly, wondering how far she meant it. “I’m sure Margaret would have her.”

“Do whatever you think would be the best for her,” said Katie. “But don’t do it for us. Keith’s always wanted to have kids about the place. I mean, with a great big garden, like we’ve got ...”

In the room below Keith turned off the gas at the two cylinders, hung the torch up on its hook, took the copper box to a sink in one corner of the room, and scrubbed the brazing with water and a wire brush. He dried it on a dirty towel, and examined the seam carefully, inch by inch. Then he handed it to his brother-in-law. “She’s tight now,” he said briefly.

John Dermott took it from him. “No chance of sea water getting into it? Corrosion?”

“Not in a hundred years.” He paused. “When you want to open it, just cut the top off with a hacksaw—round here.”

The naval officer hesitated. “I’m going to set it in concrete,” he said diffidently. Keith stared at him, surprised; he had thought the box was to go into the yacht. “Do you know how to mix it?”

“I know how to mix concrete,” the mechanic said. “You mix it in different proportions,

depending on what it's for—what it's got to hang on to. How much would you want?"

The naval officer hesitated, and then indicated the box upon the bench before them. "About as much as that, or a bit more."

Keith frowned; this was getting difficult. "I should grease it before setting it in concrete," he suggested, trying to be helpful without knowing the job. "Come out easier when you want it out."

"I see." The naval officer hesitated, irresolute; he had never had to do this sort of work before and he wanted a good job made of it. "You wouldn't like to come down to the boat and do it for me?"

"Down to Hamble?" John Dermott nodded. "When?"

"We're going down tomorrow, in the car. Would it take long?"

"If it's a straight job it might take about an hour," Keith said. "Then you ought to leave it for a while to set—two or three days. I could come tomorrow, but I'd have to be back tomorrow night." His eyes strayed to a corner. "I've got half a bag of cement there, but I'd have to slip up to the builder for some sand. Got some aggregate down there?"

"What's that?"

"Little clean stones—just a few pounds. Not salty—washed in fresh water."

"There's plenty on the beach. We could wash them under the hose, couldn't we?"

Keith nodded. "Doesn't matter if they're wet."

They left it so, and turned to go upstairs. The naval officer paused by the littered desk with the drawing board beside it. "This where you do your stuff?"

Keith nodded. "I used to do it up in the parlour, but it's better down here. You'd be surprised at the number of letters that there are—all over the auction. I save the foreign stamps and give them to the boy next door—Jamesie Morris, he collects them. Six or seven in a day, some days. You'd be surprised."

John Dermott opened his eyes. "How many letters do you have to write—say, in a week?"

"Twenty or twenty-five," the mechanic said. "It's letters all the time, and then there's the articles each week. I spend more time writing than I do working." He paused, and added a little resentfully, "It's fifteen bob a week for stamps—more, sometimes. Of course, one has to do it. Some of them send international reply coupons, though."

"Do a lot of them come from foreign countries, then?"

"About a third."

John Dermott went back to the bench and picked up the copper box. "I'll take this along with me," he said. He hesitated. "You'll keep this under your hat?" he enquired diffidently. "I mean, it's quite all right. They're just Jo's rings and bracelets and things—they're all her own property. But the regulations are so stupid about taking things like that out of England, and she'd be miserable without them. I mean, a woman sort of values her little bits and pieces when she's away in a strange country. And we may be away for years."

Keith said, "Oh, that's all right. I shan't talk about it." He paused, and then he asked, "You're going to live out there?"

"I think so—if we like it. Jo says she wants to live in Tahiti, but I don't go much on that, myself. It's French, and it's a very little place, you know. Still, she wants to see it. I think we'll probably end up in British Columbia—it's a grand country, that. I'd like to buy a house in Victoria, on Vancouver Island."

Keith nodded. He had only the vaguest idea where Vancouver Island was, but it was the sort of place that people like his brother-in-law who sailed about the world in little yachts would want to go to. "Suppose I tell Katie that I'm going down to rig up an electric light over the compass, so you can see it at night?" he suggested.

John Dermott smiled. "That's just the thing."

They went up the narrow wooden basement stairs to the main floor and Keith went to

wash the grime off his hands. When he rejoined them in the parlour his sister and her husband were standing, ready to leave, having pleaded a somewhat formalized dinner engagement to Katie. He did not press them to stay for tea, because he had learned long ago that they pursued different meal habits. Katie and Keith had their main meal in the middle of the day. Their evening meal was high tea at six o'clock when Katie got back from work, a meal of perhaps a kipper, bread and jam, and a piece of plum cake, washed down with tea. They knew that Jo and John ate differently at eight o'clock, favouring perhaps potted shrimps followed by soup, a grilled steak, and mushrooms on toast, the meal preceded by a couple of gins and followed by coffee. The couples got on well together, but they had long ago accepted differences springing from their ways of life.

Jo and John Dermott called for Keith at about nine o'clock next morning, driving their vintage sports Bentley open four-seater, nearly thirty years old and with many prosecutions for noise and speeding to its credit. They loved it very dearly. Katie had already left for work so she did not see the two small sacks that Keith put into the back compartment beside him, or she might have wondered why a small electric light required cement and sand. It was a warm summer morning in late July, and Keith enjoyed the drive through southern England. They got to Hamble on the creek that runs into the east side of Southampton Water, parked the car near the entrance to Luke's Yard, and carried the sacks out on to the long wooden walkways above the tidal mud, the yachts moored bows on in tiers. Presently they came to the Dermotts' ship, Shearwater IV.

Shearwater was a healthy-looking, modern Bermudian cutter about twenty-eight feet on the waterline and nine feet beam. On deck she was practical and well equipped for deep sea cruising, the dinghy stowed upside down over the cabin skylight between the mast and the aft hatch, the twin spinnaker booms in chocks beside it. She had roller reefing to the mainsail and a very short bowsprit no more than four feet long for the jibstay. Aft, she had a self-draining cockpit well protected by the vertical extensions of the cabin top, and a sail locker in her canoe stem. Below, she was conventional in her arrangement. A roomy forecastle served mainly as a sail store. Aft of that there was a washroom and toilet to starboard, a galley and pantry to port. Aft again came the saloon with the settees on each side and a table in the middle; a small chart table was arranged against the forward bulkhead. Aft again there were two quarter berths, the companion ladder leading up on deck, and a small petrol motor underneath this ladder, rather inaccessible. Shearwater was such a yacht as is to be found by the hundred cruising the south coast of England, though rather better equipped than most.

John Dermott led Keith down below. The linoleum on the deck of the galley and the washroom had been taken up, and the floor boards lifted. What was exposed to view was a smooth level floor of concrete into which the frames disappeared and in which the mast was stepped. About two feet behind the mast step was a fairly deep, rectangular recess in the concrete, large enough to hold the copper box that Dermott carried, and about two inches deeper.

"That's the place," he said. "That's where I want to put it."

Keith wrinkled his brows. "What's all this concrete doing here?"

"Internal ballast," said the naval officer. "They often do it like this. Pour it in when she's building, and bury pig iron or any old scrap iron in it. She'd be too lively with all the ballast on the keel. She's got about three tons of lead outside, as well."

"I never knew that," said the mechanic. "What's this hole been left here for, then?"

"I don't really know. She's got another like it at the stern, but that's used for a sump; the bilge pump suction goes down into it. Perhaps they thought she'd want another sump up here. I don't know. She never makes any water, anyway."

Keith knelt down and fingered the concrete hole. "It's a bit oily," he remarked. "I think I'll chip it a bit first—clean it up and make a sort of rebate, so it'll hold." He fetched his tool bag,

and set to work with hammer and cold chisel.

Half an hour later he was mixing a little concrete of cement, fine stones and sand. He made a bed of it at the bottom of the hole, greased the copper box, and set it carefully in the middle. Then he filled in the spaces round it with the wet mixture, working it carefully into the corners and the newly cut recesses. "Look your last on it," he said, and covered it over with a smooth layer of the mix, patting it, working it with a little builders' trowel, taking up the surplus, till it was smooth and level with the original concrete floor, only the darker wetness of the new material showing the difference. He gathered his tools and the remainder of the mix in new paper, cleaned up the mess, and got up from his knees a little stiffly. "I'd leave the floor boards up for a day or so, till it's set hard," he said. "It'll take a week to harden properly, but you can put the boards back."

His sister asked, "What do we do when we want to get it out, Keith?"

"Just cut around the edge with a cold chisel and a hammer, like this," he said. "You'll probably be able to see where the concrete's a bit different, but even if you can't, it'll sound hollow when you tap it with a hammer. The top layer of concrete'll come off easy enough, because it's only an inch or so thick. Then when you can see the box you'll have to cut around with the chisel till you can get it out. You won't have any trouble."

He stayed for a cold lunch with them on board, and while the meal was in preparation he examined the ship, a short, white-faced, plump little man completely out of his element. He knew nothing of yachts and the sea. She seemed to him to be cosy enough downstairs, though a bit cramped; upstairs he was confused by the complexity of her and by the unfamiliar materials, the sisal, nylon, flax, cotton, hemp, and teak. He was unfamiliar with the sea and did not like it much; it was a place that made you cold and wet and sick. His brother-in-law was a sensible man in most ways though not in matters technical, and he liked the sea so there must be something in it for some people, though not for him. They had asked him once or twice to go down with Katie for a weekend on the yacht in the Solent, but he had always made excuse, and they had not pressed the point. The Stewarts had their way of life, and the Dermotts had theirs.

After lunch John Dermott drove Keith into Southampton and put him down at the West station to catch a train to London. They would meet again before the Dermotts started off across the world in Shearwater; they parted cordially, the naval officer grateful to his dissimilar brother-in-law for his help. He drove back from Southampton to Hamble; they would live on the yacht now till they sailed but for one last trip to London. There was still much to be done.

He parked the car and went on board. Jo met him in the cockpit "Catch his train all right?"

He nodded. "Ten minutes to spare."

"Oh, good. I've just put on the kettle for a cup of tea."

They had their cups of tea sitting in the cockpit in the sun. The naval officer glanced down into the forward end of the ship, to the rolled-back linoleum and the floor boards piled beside it. The dark wetness of the concrete patch was already drying, turning a lighter grey at the edges that would match the original surface. "Well, that's the most important job done," he said with satisfaction. "I was worried about that, but it's all right now."

Joanna nodded. "Keith's awfully good at that sort of thing," she said quietly. "When he's got somebody to tell him exactly what to do."

She seldom talked openly to him about her brother; now in their shared satisfaction and relief that remark had slipped out. He glanced at her. "I know," he said. "Not much initiative."

She sat silent for a minute. "Poor old Keith," she said at last. "I always feel he's missed the boat, somehow. That I've had everything, and he's had nothing."

"Everything?" he asked. He was morbidly conscious of his truncated career, of the failure inherent in his early retirement, of the forty years of idleness that might lie ahead of him

unless he could reorganize his life.

She knew what he was thinking, and he mustn't think it. She turned to him. "Oh, yes," she said. "I've had Janice, and money, and the Navy, and this boat. And I've been to China, and to Italy, and Malta. And now we're going off across the world, and we'll see the coral islands, and Hawaii, and Canada, and the States. I've had everything. But poor old Keith, he goes on in that ghastly half-a-house in Ealing and just makes his models and gets practically nothing for them, and Katie has to work in the shop. And he's so good at what he does. It isn't fair."

He tried to comfort her. "I don't think he's unhappy."

"No," she agreed, "he's not. Nor Katie, either. They're neither of them a bit jealous of the things we've got. I think it's going to do Janice a lot of good to be with them for a bit. But he's so much better than I am, he ought to have so very much more."

He smiled. "Wants somebody to put a squib up his behind."

"He always has to be told what to do," she agreed.

"Apart from making models," he remarked. "He seems to be original enough in that."

"Yes," she agreed. "But that doesn't get him anywhere."

Keith Stewart got to Waterloo at about half past four, and travelled out to Ealing Broadway on the Underground. From there he took a tram to West Ealing and walked up to his house. He got in about ten minutes before Katie and put the macaroni cheese into the oven as she had told him to, and took the mail from the letter box in the front door and shuffled it through; there was one letter for her and eleven for him, three from the United States. He sighed a little. You could produce an induced current on the surface of a metal sphere that would act as a gyroscope, and from this you could devise a tiny automatic pilot for ship or aircraft models that would weigh only a few ounces. He was aching to get on with the experimental work on that, but first he had to write the last instalment of his serial upon the Congreve clock. After that this heavy mail must be dealt with, and he would be too tired then, and it would be too late to start off on experimental work. He was already inclined to be sleepy from his unaccustomed day in the open air.

He sat with Katie at the kitchen table over the macaroni cheese and the cups of strong tea. "Get the light fixed up for them all right?" she asked.

"The light?" And then he recollected. "Oh, the compass light. Yes, I fixed that for them."

"What's it like in the boat?" she asked. "How do they cook anything?"

"It's like a caravan," he told her. "They cook on Primus stoves."

"Oh. With everything rocking about?"

"I suppose so."

"It must be ever so uncomfortable."

"I think it is," he agreed. "It looks all right when she's tied up in calm water, like she is now, but even then she goes up and down a bit. I don't know what it's like when she gets out to sea, where it's rough. Wouldn't suit me."

"Would the water come in, say in a storm?"

"I think it would. Of course, she's all decked in. I don't suppose that much would get inside."

"It sounds awful. I mean, Jo was saying that one of them must be on top to steer. Why do they want to go like that, K? I mean, they've got plenty of money. Why don't they take a cabin on a proper ship, or else fly?"

"I dunno," he said. "I think they just like doing it."

They sat in silence; they would never understand the Dermotts and there were times when they abandoned the attempt. At last Katie said, "They won't get shipwrecked, will they?"

Keith shook his head. "That's one thing they won't do. John's a naval officer and he knows all about it. They've got two sextants to take sights with to tell them where they are,