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By Chris Sugden and Sid Kipper

The novel of the ballad opera, revealing, in its course, how the opera came to be written.

Featuring the second greatest love story ever told, and revealing the hilarious truth about the war between Sheringham and Cromer in the 17th century.

Includes extracts of songs from the opera, plus complete lyrics of *The Great Crab of Scroby Sands*.

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SAMPLE

The beginning of

CRAB WARS

(incorporating the comic-tragedy

of Cromeo and Sheriet)

by Chris Sugden and Sid Kipper

FOREWARNED

by Sid Kipper

When we were putting this book together the people at the Mouse Hole Press wanted me to write ‘a word to the wise’ to go at the start. But I refused to do it. I mean the wise shouldn’t need it, should they? So here’s a word to the rest of us instead.

This book is a rattling good yarn. It's got everything you need in a good story. It's got just enough sex and violence to keep the vicar happy but not enough to worry my old mother; it's got lots of love interest if you like that, and it's got lots of hate interest too, which is just as much fun if you ask me, which they did, which is why I'm writing this in the first place. It's got heroes and heroines, and villains and goodies and baddies and mostly they're all exactly the same people; it's got a horse, too.

And it's a tale well told. Now there's more to that than meets the eye. They reckon that to tell a story you're supposed to have a beginning, a middle and an end – preferably in that order. And some people say that if you get a good beginning and a good end then you'll have a good story – but they're just plain wrong. Let me give you a 'for instance' to prove my point. Here's a story with a good beginning and a good end:

> *Once upon a time, they all lived happily ever after.*

Now if you're sharp you'll have noticed there's something missing from that. The beginning is excellent; the end is fine; but it's got no middle at all, and despite what those people who are wrong say it's the middle that really counts. And this book has got more middle than Middlesex.

But never mind the width, I hear you say – what about the quality? Well I reckon it's first class. If you'll excuse my French it's what publishers call *sans serif*, which means 'bloomin' marvellous' in English. It's like one of those pies that are filled with lots of meaty chunks and rich, thick gravy, with no lumps of gristle or bits of carrot or peas to spoil it. (Although don't get me wrong: this book is still suitable for vegetarians. It's even suitable for people from Vega if they can understand English, and don't mind travelling 25 light years to read it!).

Now the secret of a good middle is research. Search on it's own isn't good enough – you've got to search, and then research. Which is what we've done here. And it's amazing what we've found out. For instance, it seems that during the crab wars Sheriet – who is the heroin – actually visited my little village of St Just-near-Trunch and met two blokes called Jethro and Titus Kipper who, it then turns out, were actually related to me through someone called Ann Cestor!

Of course I can't promise that everyone will find a long lost relative in this book. Although come to think of it Eve – you know, the one that tempted Adam with her beauties of bath – she gets a mention somewhere in the middle. So ignore what I just said – everyone will find a long lost relative in this book.

But I digress – and why not? Look, this book has got plot; it's got characters; and it's got incidents. It's got valour rewarded, and evil defeated, but it's also got valour defeated, and evil rewarded, for balance. It's got a miserable beginning and a happy ending, and every other sort of mood you could ever want in between.

Now, I'm not going to say that you just won't be able to put this book down. Because that's just stupid. All I'm going to say is that if you do put it down then you'll pick it up again soon enough. Always assuming you can remember where you put it down, that is!

So I hope I've given you some idea of what to expect from *Crab Wars*. Because forewarned if four armed, as my great uncle Albert used to say. Mind you, he was only two armed, so he was always being taken completely by surprise. And I suppose that's what I'm trying to say, really – I reckon you'll be pleasantly surprised with this book.

Sid Kipper.

Persons Represented

IN SHERINGHAM

Admiral Ben Bow, *leader of Sheringham*

Belle Bow, *wife of Ben*

Sheriet, *half of a pair of stark, cross young lover*s

Captain Sinnings, *a crabber*

The Parson of Sheringham, *it's obvious, isn't it?*

The Bosun, *an old sea-dog*

Elsie Primrose, *a woman of easy virtue*

Shorty, Middley and Lofty, *the* Hampton's *port side crew*

The wives, *of the* Hampton's *port side crew*

Ben, *the* Hampton's *cabin-boy*

Lawrence Littlejohn, *the Sheringham nightsoilman*

IN CROMER

Captain George Upspoke, *leader of Cromer*

Rudolph Upspoke, *son of George*

Cromeo, *the other half of a pair of stark, cross young lover*s

Captain Smellit, *captain of the* Sidler

Captain Coke, *another crabber*

Doctor Flawd, *a quack*

Clarence Crabbe, *a lawyer*

Mrs Taylor, *an extortionist*

Blake Vincent, *the Town Crier*

The Piggotts, the Lillywhites and Jim Larkins, *of the* Scuttler

Wayne, *one of the Market Forces*

Widow Walcott, *landlady of Wayne*

The small fisherman, *a small fisherman*

IN THE RUNTONS

Mr and Mrs Primrose, *parents of Elsie*

Theobald Narrator, *the Narrator*

IN ST JUST-NEAR-TRUNCH

Tipsy, *a traveller*

Tipsy's horse, *a fellow traveller*

Jethro Kipper, *nephew of Titus*

Titus Kipper, *uncle of Jethro*

Denizens of the *Kid Inn*

IN THE DEPTHS

The crabs, *laying in wait*

Citizens *of Sheringham and Cromer; several* Men, Women *and* Children, Crabbers, Messengers, Monks, Patients *of Doctor Flawd and* Clients *of Elsie Primrose*.

THE FIRST LEG

The Calm Before The Storm Troopers

All around the British Isles, in the waters between the shore and the deep ocean, live the crabs. They are waiting. They are waiting for us. Sooner or later, they know, the land will fall into the sea, and then they will feast upon us. Which is why the coast of north-east Norfolk, where the land is already falling into the sea, is known far and wide for its crabs. They remember with gratitude the people of Shipden, lost to the sea many years ago. They enjoyed a fine time with some of the slower inhabitants. They were already waiting there three hundred years ago, when the crabbers of Cromer and Sheringham fought on the surface of the sea above them. Just before then the Cromer crabs had been contemplating religious matters. After many years of observation they had noticed that those crabs that went into the little wicker caves full of tit-bits that appeared on the ocean floor now and then didn't come back.

For some time they had debated the matter. Had they gone to heaven? Had they gone to hell? Now they were experimenting by not going into the caves at all. Time would tell. They could wait.

We start, and we mean to go on.

Seagulls stooped all around the crab boat the Scuttler as she put out from Cromer beach, although goodness knows there was more than enough room for them to stand up straight. It was a bright and stormless day as Captain George Upspoke and his crew set off to visit their crab pots. A light breeze fluffed the crests of the waves and the arc of the sky seemed to go on for ever, although, of course, it didn't. The town of Cromer stood proudly atop its cliffs, which had for many years proved to be a very good arrangement.

(I'm sorry about all that, but you have to do this descriptive stuff in the first paragraph of a story. I don't know why. You'd think that people who liked that sort of thing would buy a picture book and leave the rest of us in peace. But there – it's done now.)

The Scuttler was a crab boat of the old style, and as such she went sideways. This wasn't a very efficient arrangement, but in those far off days all forms of hunting were regarded as sport, and it was therefore considered only sporting to give themselves the same handicap as their prey.

So two long oars projected through rowlocks fixed at what were known in the ancient Norfolk dialect as 'the pointed bits'.

Upspoke hadn't always been a captain. He had worked his way up from the ranks. In fact his rise can be traced in songs from the time, where we find that he actually started as Upspoke the cabin boy, went on to become Upspoke the mate, and so on. Now he leaned on the tiller of his own boat while six men rowed mightily. Of course, in a beam-on craft the tiller had little or no effect, but it did give the captain somewhere to lean and something on which to knock out his pipe.

The oarsmen had all been born to their positions. The two giants who held the ends of the oars were Lillywhites, a family bred, over the years, for their height and long arms. The Lillywhite boys, Les and Len, wore green, as always.

On the outside of the boat were Peter and Paul, the Piggott cousins, who were as short as the Lillywhites were long. They were born to the job of 'outside men', and like all the Cromer outside men they wore children's clothes, as these were the only ones that would fit them. This did have tax advantages – it was just their bad luck to live at a time when boys wore dresses.

In the middle of the two great oars were George's sons – the handsome Cromeo on the right and his elder brother, the ugly Rudolph, on the left. The brothers were of average height, like all the Upspokes, but there any similarity ended. For while Cromeo was medium, dark and handsome, Rudolph was medium, pale and so ugly that even the crabs ran from him. If Cromeo was like the bright, warm sun on a summer's day then Rudolph was like the thick black cloud on the horizon that looked like rain.

While Cromeo pulled effortlessly on the oar, Rudolph strained and sweated uselessly over his. For Rudolph was no oarsman. He was, in fact, worse than useless. Not only did he contribute little, but he was so uncoordinated that he made it impossible for the men on his side to row at all effectively.

So the Scuttler lazily circled it's way to the crabbing grounds, crossing the vast waste of the sea under a huge Norfolk sky, the silence broken only by a steady cursing.

We meet the well-read Admiral.

The day was just as lovely at Sheringham, five and a half inches west along the coast as the map lies.

But as Admiral Ben Bow looked out from his lookout on a calm, flat sea and dreamed of full crab pots and good prices he was rudely aroused from his pleasant reverie by the voice of his wife, Belle.

Belle was three streets away at the bakery, but he was rudely aroused nonetheless. So was everyone else in Sheringham, because she was a very loud woman. In fact it was said that if you were born within the sound of Belle Bow you were a proper Shannock – that being the term for someone ……. well, someone born within the sound of Belle Bow.

(The phrase 'out of sight, out of mind' didn't apply to Belle Bow. It was more a case of 'out of hearing, out of town'.)

But having a loud wife had its compensations. For instance, Ben had a lady friend – well, the term 'lady' may be a little misleading. So might the concept of friendship. Nevertheless he never need fear being caught in the act by his wife, because he could hear her whisper at fifty paces. Many was the time when he'd smoked a final

cigarette, got dressed, done the crossword and slipped out of the back door before Belle had even knocked at the front.

Strictly speaking Ben should have been out crabbing this morning, but he'd stayed behind to finish a book he was reading. It was a lurid tale of guns and mud and birds called The Tenant of Wildfowl Hell. Anyway, truth be told, he really wasn't needed in the Hampton – that being the name of his boat. His crew could manage perfectly well without him, as Sheriet would skipper it in his place.

Because his daughter was a real chip off the old block. Medium build, except where it matters, she was a real beauty, with auburn hair and a dark and roving eye – although after a bit you hardly noticed that. Except in a noisy sea, of course, when she had to indicate directions with her gaze. Then things could get rather confusing.

Yes, thought Ben, never mind about Belle. What with the crabbing being so good, his daughter being so fine, and his lady friend being so – well, life was just a bowl of sherry really. He was extremely contented.

Of course, if it stays like that, this won't be much of a story.

Even the good times are bad for someone.

A few miles inland, in the village of Roughton, The Narrator was sipping a half pint in the Barmaid's Arms – which was his local pub, as well as wishful thinking.

His full name was Theobald Frederick Xerxes Narrator but he'd almost forgotten that over the years, and who can blame him? His mother still called him Theo, but everyone else knew him as The. As for his surname, it was one of that family of names which describe the occupation of a person, such as Cooper, Scrivener, and Layabout.

These were hard times for Narrators. The world was at peace, commerce was busy, farming was fruitful and fishing seemed to be good. What, he asked the landlord of the Barmaid's Arms, was there to narrate about that? The landlord's reply is not recorded, but was no doubt something along the lines of "Absolutely, mate – don't know what things are coming to. Can't be doing with all this peace and prosperity myself".

The Narrator's mind went back to the good old days. His grandfather Albert –

known to one and all as A Narrator – had been there to narrate Kemp's Rebellion of 1599, when Will Kemp had led a thousand morris dancers against the City of Norwich in protest against the stick tax. They might have succeeded too, if their bells hadn't given them away.

Not that it was a narrator's job to take sides.

His own father – Arthur Finegal, or A Fine Narrator – had narrated the exciting times of the Diggers and the Levellers. The Diggers had thought that Norfolk was too flat, while the Levellers reckoned it was fine just the way it was. As making mountains was out of the question, the Diggers decided to dig holes so as to make the normal ground seem higher. But as fast as the Diggers dug, almost as quickly the Levellers filled in the holes to level the ground again. The Diggers had won in the end, of course – who could deny the evidence of the Norfolk Broads?

But now? Nowadays nothing interesting every happened, and he was forced to hone his skills with practice narrations of his wife washing the pots. She, of course, didn't understand narrating. "That's all very well The, you standing on the draining board commentating" she'd say, "But that'd be a lot more use if you got down and helped." But a narrator mustn't get involved, he would tell her. "No, that's right – mustn't get involved with washing the pots, mustn't get involved with chopping the logs, mustn't get involved with anything that looks like work, I'd say".

Ah well, he sighed, he'd have the other half pint, then he might as well go and do a bit of commentary down at the cobbler's. He'd thought up a great new line, if he could only time it right. It had to be delivered just at the moment when the cobbler put down his piercing tool. Then he'd cry "They think it's awl over", pause just long enough, and follow up with the killer line, "Well, it is now!"

We meet an Alpha Cromeo.

When the tide was right the Scuttler circled back to Cromer on a sea as soft as a maiden's breast, but without the firm pointy bit.

The Piggotts and Lillywhites hauled her sideways up the beach, while Cromeo, stripped to the waist, with torso glistening and long dark locks tossing, picked up his oar as if it were no more than a feather. Rudolph, clumsy as ever, managed to drop his oar on his foot as if it was a hot potato.

The trouble with Cromeo, thought Rudolph, is that he's the only one who doesn't realise the effect he has on people.

Which was true. Men liked him and respected him and thought he was just one of the lads. Women, though Cromeo didn't realise this, worshipped him. Rudolph alone had his own ideas.

So as they went about the business of securing the Scuttler Cromeo was quite innocent of the women and girls, and a few men who were that way inclined, who watched his every move from the various windows and doorways which overlooked the beach.

Most of the men in Cromer couldn't understand the new fashion that windows must be washed, rugs shaken and doorsteps scrubbed according to the state of the tide. Nor why these activities seemed nowadays to be accompanied by a low sighing sound.

Once the boat was secure the meagre catch was loaded onto a cart and pulled up the gangway to the boiling shed. Here the crabs would soon learn the meaning of the phrase 'getting into hot water'. Or, rather, they wouldn't. In fact they'd learn the meaning of the phrase 'getting into cold water'. Then the water would be heated until it boiled. So just as the crabs were thinking 'Gosh, it's getting a bit warm in here, must turn the heating down' they would drift out of consciousness and never learn anything ever again.

Then, pink and fresh, they would go to the crab market.

The Upspokes made their weary way back home, to the small fisherman's cottage just back from the cliff edge. All being well the small fisherman would be there to greet them with a hot drink and some food as he usually did. He was a nice man for his size. Actually he couldn't remember ever asking the Upspokes to come and stay with him but they had, and now he didn't know how to ask them to leave. The worst thing was that the place was continually full of females, popping in on the flimsiest of excuses – especially if they thought Cromeo was at home.

One woman old enough to know better had been round that afternoon to borrow some sugar. After asking if this was the very same sugar that Cromeo used, and then standing looking at it dreamily for some time, she'd thanked him for the loan and returned it. That sort of thing was always happening.

The three crabbers left their sea gear in the yard, and before long Captain Upspoke had his feet up as he sipped his roes hip tea.

(This was made by infusing dried cod roes in boiling water. The 'hip' is as in 'fashionable', since no-one could be persuaded to drink such a drink for any other reason. The same applies to those strange drinks that appear from time to time in pubs and bars, made from equally odd materials such as bananas.)

"Well", said Upspoke in his bluff, Captainly way, "Suppose that wasn't a bad day's work".

It wasn't even an attempt at conversation, really. It was just to take his mind off the taste of the tea. But Cromeo took it as an opening.

"No", he said, "It wasn't a bad day's work, father. In fact it was a good day's work. But I'll tell you what – it wasn't much of a day's crabbing."

"Actually", said Rudolph, "To be strictly accurate it was a whole day's crabbing. It just wasn't much of a catch".

Cromeo, who was potentially the greatest catch ever, as any poll of the ladies of Cromer would have shown, imitated the recent behaviour of the crabs and refused to come to the bait.

"Been poor catches before", said George. "Remember in my father's time – went three whole weeks without ……" And with this he yawned and gently fell asleep. Why not? He may have been a man of action, but his stories were always extremely boring, and anyway, he'd heard them all before a hundred times. So he slept in self defence, which was, of course, a great blessing to both him and everyone else.

The boys were worried, however. Times were getting hard, and the small fisherman was getting a look in his eye that said non-payment of rent was a perfectly valid reason for asking them to go. Well it would be if he could persuade them to pay any rent in the first place.

Now normally if there was a crab shortage they simply left matters to The Market Forces. This was a small gang of very persuasive young men who worked for the crab market, and it was their job when catches were poor to go round and demand that people pay more for their crabs. This was known as the law of demand – the

supply bit came much later.

To be fair, when catches were good they then demanded that people pay less.

The Market Forces would hawk the crabs around the town and the surrounding villages. Their powers of persuasion were legendary. Many people don't realise that street cries didn't originate with the vendors – no, it was the customers who first started them. The earliest street cries were simple calls for help!

But the sickening part of the current situation was that Sheringham, by all reports, were catching record numbers of crabs. So many, in fact, that they had a surplus, and many of these were getting into Cromer on the black market. The Market Forces were very efficient, but even they couldn't get people to pay more for Cromer crabs they weren't actually buying.

"Well", said Cromeo, pushing aside his plate, "I'll be sure to pray for good crabbing". And with that he set off for evensong. He'd recently begun going regularly.

Attendances were booming.

Move to the coast and avoid Inland Revenue.

In his cosy vestry, tucked away in a corner of the church, the Parson of Sheringham was counting his blessings. He'd reached thirty-five, but now he couldn't remember if he'd already counted Catherine, the cobbler's wife, who came to help him with the hassocks every Thursday.

He decided it didn't really matter. Thirty-five was more than enough to be getting on with. Actually Catherine alone was enough to be getting on with. No wonder the cobbler stuck to his last.

Anyhow, he told himself, all this counting of blessings just wouldn't do. He had work to be getting on with. He was expecting a delivery of duty freed goods. Which was not to say they were immune from duty – it was just that all concerned preferred not to pay any.

The Parson's contribution was to supply a landing and storage place, and that meant going down to the crypt to unlock the hatch. Then he had to help tie up the boat and supervise the unloading of the contraband. For this he got a tenth of the

cargo. That's the way it had always been in Sheringham for as long as anyone could remember, and perhaps that's why his tithe was known thereabouts as 'customs'. "We'll have a good profit", they used to say, "Even after the customs". A few smugglers were less than scrupulous about paying the fee, and then the Parson had to pursue them for the money and extract it from them under threat of exposure. This was known as 'excise'.

Today he was looking forward to a tenth of a cargo of French brandy, so after ensuring there was nobody else about he went down to the crypt. He locked the door behind him, unbolted the hatch, and waited. Sure enough, before long he heard sailors' voices singing;

Bobby Dazzler's gone to seed,

Legs all buckled at the knee,

When he gets home he'll fall asleep

Shoddy Bobby Dazzler.

And then, into the flickering candle light, loomed the Hampton, with a dark lantern at her mast. She came slowly, because it was an awkward manoeuvre. The boat was far too wide to fit into the tunnel in its normal sideways orientation, and had to be propelled sideways to that, if you see what I mean. The Parson was surprised to recognise Sheriet at the helm for this trip. Not that she wasn't perfectly capable of it – it was just that smuggling was generally considered to be a man's game.

He rushed to offer his arm to help her out of the boat, but before he got there she'd already sprung ashore. She slapped her thigh, struck a pose, and said "Where would you like it matey?"

He was sometimes worried that she spent quite so much time in the exclusive company of men.

"Well, my dear, I think these chaps know what's to be done. Come and join me in a glass of Madeira while they unload. I trust you weren't listening to all that rough singing."

"As a matter of fact I was leading all that rough singing," said Sheriet a bit frostily. "It's the helm's job you know. It helps the men to row."

(The theory was that if the singing was bad enough the crew would pull harder in order to try and get away from it. The principle was much like the idea of the carrot and the stick, but without the carrot. Or the stick, come to that. It's no coincidence that the word for pulling on an oar and the word for a horrible noise are spelt the same: indeed, the use of the word 'rowing' to describe a dispute is thought to have originated from the oarsmanship of Cromeo and Rudolph Upspoke.)

The Parson led Sheriet to a corner of the crypt, away from the barrels and boxes and crates that filled most of it. Here stood a couple of chairs and a table, their shadows big in the flickering light. He poured each of them a glass of wine.

"And how goes the crabbing?" he enquired.

"Oh, very well indeed," said Sheriet, relaxing a little. "In fact we're doing so well we're actually selling some crabs to Cromer. I bet they're sick about that."

"Indeed my dear – that's hardly a long odds gamble. But now, there's a pastoral matter I want to raise. Or perhaps it's a personal one."

He mused a while. "Let's say it's a personal pastoral matter. I wonder, have you had any thoughts about marriage? After all, you are of an age."

"Oh, I am, am I?" said Sheriet, jumping to her feet. "Well I tell you what, I'll get married when I find a man who can better me at commanding a boat."

"Well, of course, you've always been a bit of a tomboy – or should it be tomgirl? I'm never quite sure. Perhaps, though – don't you think it might be time to accentuate the feminine? You know, allow someone to be a little masterful with you, perhaps?"

Her eyes flickered – and it may not have just been the candle light. "Well now, if anyone wants to be masterful with me they'll have to prove themselves first. Which means it won't be any man in Sheringham – I've already mastered all of them."

Sheriet had often talked like this, but somehow the Parson felt it now had a slight air of desperation to it.

"Anyhow", she continued, "I'll sort things out for myself, thank you. I'm a big girl now."

And there, exactly, was the problem, thought the Parson a short time later when the

job was done and he prepared to close the hatch behind them. She was indeed a big girl. Very soon she'd be a big woman. And then, perhaps, nature would out.

The sailor's voices faded down the passage.

Once the girls he did bedazzle,

Every night out on the razzle,

Now he lives with Reg and Basil

In a home for clapped out sailors.

Ah well, he thought, all that was for the future. Just now he must see to matters at hand. Now where had he left the funnel? He only wished that smugglers wouldn't take everything quite so literally. They didn't have to actually give him a tenth of every bottle. One whole bottle out of ten would do.

And Jim the cabin boy just frowned and said something.

Jim Larkins was a Cromer cabin-boy. He'd been a cabin-boy, man and boy, since he'd been – well, a boy. Now nobody knew how old he was because none of them could count above sixty. Let's face it, most of them couldn't count to twenty-one with their underpants on.

Over the years others had been promoted, gone on to greater things, but somehow Jim never had. But if there was anything to know about the business of cabin-boying, then Jim knew it.

It was a steady job. Even though the old crab boats didn't actually have cabins on them, nevertheless they still had to have boys. Because everyone knew you couldn't put to sea without a cabin-boy. Everyone knew that, so it must be true.

Which only left the small problem of what to do with them. In north-east Norfolk it was the custom for the cabin-boy to sit in the middle of the boat, in front of the helmsman, and grumble. This left the others free to get on with their work without distractions. Because he wouldn't just grumble about the weather, the catch, and so on. He would also complain on behalf of each member of the crew.

So a good cabin-boy had to be very well informed. He had to know that Len

Lillywhite's mother-in-law was coming to stay for the weekend so he could moan about that. He had to know that Paul Piggott's wife was a rotten cook, too.

But he also had to be discrete. For instance, it was common knowledge that Les Lillywhite's wife was having an affair, but did Les know? And if he did, did he know who the other party was? It certainly wouldn't do for Jim to give the game away. Although it did seem strange that Les hadn't noticed that his diet now consisted largely of pheasant, partridge and hare. Clearly someone was giving the game away, and the poulterer she was having the affair with had to be the most likely candidate.

Not that Jim would ever make a mistake in such matters. He was an expert moaner, and now the senior cabin-boy in the whole Cromer fleet.

And as such he had been summoned by Captain Upspoke to have "a little chat".

There wasn't a lot of room in the small fisherman's cottage. Well, there was plenty of room for one small fisherman, but not a lot for him, the two boys, Jim, and one large Captain. So the fisherman and the boys had been sent out for 'a walk or something' while the little chat took place.

"Bad times", began Upspoke in his customary blunt way. "Catches dropping; crews starting to complain. Goes on much longer you'll be out of a job, me lad. What do you say to that?"

"Well it's not fair", said Jim, getting in a complaint straight off. "It's not me that's not catching crabs, is it? It's you lot. I'm doing my bit. I'm moaning fit to bust, but do I get any credit? No I do not. Do I complain about it? Of course I do – that's my job. What I say is you can lead a crab to water, but you can't make it drown."

"You're right," said Upspoke. "Not your fault. Crabs just aren't there. Don't understand it – Sheringham have got loads."

"Well it's obvious, isn't it," said Jim. "They must be nicking ours. It's a disgrace that someone doesn't do something about it."

"Tried to get that piper bloke from Hamlyn to lure them here. Reckoned it wouldn't work."

"Look," said Jim, "When there's a problem why is it always left to me to come up

with the obvious solution? Can nobody else in this town see what needs doing?”

“Can they? Damned if I know! What is it?”

“Go over to Sheringham and catch some of theirs.”

The enormity of this idea hit Upspoke so hard that he had to sit down. As he was already seated that meant he had to stand up first.

“Unprecedented!” he said. “Outrageous! Brilliant idea! We’ll do it – as soon as we can.”

“Now isn’t that just typical?” moaned Jim. “I come up with a good idea, and is it ‘we’ll do it straight away’? No – it’s ‘we’ll do it as soon as we can’. No wonder nothing never gets done around here.”

“No – not prevaricating,” said Upspoke. “But historic – definitely need to send for a Narrator”.

Which, thought Jim, was fair enough. Stealing someone else’s crabs might be theft, but it nevertheless had to be done with the proper formalities. That was what kept the world civilised.

Sheriet contemplates the bare necessities.

Sheriet was laying on her bed, day-dreaming about men. The bed was trimmed with lace, with pink bows at the top and bottom and flounces above. The men were not.

One by one she eliminated all the men of her acquaintance as being unworthy of her. She already knew that, of course, but it would have been nice to have a real man to day-dream about. Which left only Him.

‘He’ was a product of her imagination – her perfect man. Now Sheriet actually knew very little about perfect men because, like the rest of us, she had never met one. But over a period of time, in her private moments, she had created Him. He was medium, dark and handsome. He had a square jaw, a straight nose, and two clear eyes. He had strong arms, broad shoulders, a manly chest, and a trim waist. Below the waist things were a bit more sketchy, as she had very little experience of men below the waist. From various hints and clues she knew the sort of thing to expect,

but she had no idea how much of it to budget for. But He had pert buttocks – she was sure about that. And the composite result of all those qualities was Him.

The picture wasn't perfect, of course. In fact to get a clear, full-length view of the bits she was absolutely sure about she had to imagine Him standing with His back to her while twisting round awkwardly and looking over his shoulder. Unfortunately this made him look rather like the Bosun had on the occasion when she'd accidentally caught him in the privy because he hadn't been whistling. Except she could see His hands.

Sheriet had tried asking her mother about men, but communicating with Belle was never easy. If you stood close enough for her to hear what you were saying then you risked being deafened. If you bunged your ears up with – say – bees wax you risked being plagued by bees. The method Sheriet had developed was to send a deaf runner with messages from the other side of town. Belle would reply to the runner "Tell her to try using vaseline" or whatever, which Sheriet would be able to hear quite clearly.

(You may be wondering, by the way – vaseline was a material produced by the local apothecary. Its name was derived from the two words 'vase' and 'line' because it was originally used for making lines on vases before firing. When firing vases with lines on fell out of favour as a means of warfare the material was put to other uses.)

But while Sheriet would indeed be able to hear Belle's reply, unfortunately so would everyone else in the town. So on the matter of men she had given up after the occasion when all of Sheringham had heard "Well, in my experience if he's got one as big as this you'll be lucky". It was downright embarrassing. And anyhow, she hadn't been near enough to see just how big 'this' was. So she'd given up asking her mother.

Of course, there were stories.

There were tall, swarthy princes, who would put you across their horse and have their way with you, but Sheriet thought that sounded rather uncomfortable – and anyhow, how did they get the horse to stand still while all that having their way was going on? And what about her having her way – didn't that come into it?

Then again, there were impossibly handsome creatures from the other world, whose very presence would make a maiden swoon. And when she revived the creature

would have come and gone, and she wouldn't have felt a thing. But, not to put too fine a point on it, feeling a thing sounded like just what Sheriet had in mind.

Ah well, she thought, Can't lie here dreaming all day. So she got up, put on her coat, and went to help her father mend the crab pots.

But only after mentally dressing Him again, of course.

A runner's been.

The Narrator had found something novel to practice on.

> I'm speaking to you now live from Roughton Heath, where the news is that I can see a man approaching from the North. He seems to have, yes, I can see it clearly now, he has a piece of paper in his hand. He's coming towards me, up the hill and past the Tumuli, heading directly for my position.
>
> 'Are you The Narrator?' he asks, and I say that I am. 'Then this here is for you' he adds, giving me the paper he's carrying. Opening it out I'm amazed and delighted to see that it's news. It is an offer of work. It seems I must pack immediately and leave post-haste for the Runtons. So this is The Narrator, Roughton, with news at five-and-twenty to ten.

"Daft bugger", said the messenger, trudging down the hill again.

We meet the long, the short, and the middley.

The motto of the county of Norfolk is 'Do Different'. Mind you, they don't say if once you've done different you can do the same different again, or if you have to do a different different the next time. Nevertheless, in Sheringham they did do things different. Their crab boats, for instance, although basically the same as the Cromer boats, went sideways the other way. So while in Cromer the port side was the stern, in Sheringham the starboard side was. And while the Cromer oarsmen were picked in matched pairs, in Sheringham they were in unmatched trios.

These trios got together at an early age and stayed together for all their working lives. The ones on the outside were always called Shorty. The tall ones on the ends

of the oars were known as Lofty. And the ones in between were, by a process of elimination, called Middley.

This wasn't a perfect arrangement. In fact it led to a lot of confusion – even within the boat. Terms such as Starboard Shorty and Port Lofty were cumbersome, so misunderstandings often happened.

On land it was much simpler – you knew a man's name as soon as he stood up.

The Hampton's port trio often went drinking together. Tonight, like every other night, they were meeting in a corner of the Ten Belles. Lofty arrived just after Shorty, who stood by the bar.

"Evening Lofty," he said, "What's the weather like up there?"

"Fine thanks," replied Lofty. "No – don't bother to get up."

These remarks, and others like them, were heard an awful lot in Sheringham.

Middley arrived a few minutes later, but neither of the others could think of anything to say to him.

Don't cry for me emphysema.

"Hear Ye! Hear Ye!"

Blake Vincent, the Cromer town crier, was practising his cry. He'd only been in the job for a week. Well, to be strict he'd only been in the job for one hour and forty-five minutes – that being how long it was since Mr Davies, the old crier, had dropped dead in mid announcement and Blake had been instantly propelled from apprentice to master.

"Hear Ye! Hear Ye!"

It would all be a lot easier if his voice had finished breaking. At the moment it just couldn't seem to make up its mind. Mr Davies had assured Blake that it would settle down eventually. The plan had been to use it as a gimmick in the meantime.

Now the voice decided to go the other way. "Hear Ye! Hear Ye!"

Blake wasn't sure if that was better or worse. And he didn't think people would want a permanent gimmick either. Anyhow, it wouldn't be a gimmick then, would it? It would just be normality. He shuddered slightly at the thought of his booming and squeaking becoming normality.

He was practising his crying in Happy Valley, well away to the East of the town, so that no-one should hear him. But if there was any happiness resident in the valley it was more than overwhelmed by Blake's misery.

And the weather seemed to sympathise.

(This is a standard line that comes in most stories. It's meant to imply that the author has cunningly matched the mood of the story with the mood of the prevailing conditions in which that story occurs. It actually means that most writers can't write decent weather to save their lives.)

"Hear Ye! Hear Ye!"

Becoming a town crier had been his mother's idea. Most mothers let it rest at "If you don't stop that crying I'll jolly well give you something to cry about", but no, his mother had to be more ambitious. From an early age it had been "If you don't stop that crying I'll apprentice you to Mr Davies, and then you'll have lots to cry about."

"Hear Ye! Hear Ye!"

Well, now he did.

In an hour's time he had to report to Captain Upspoke to be given an important public information message which he would then have to cry in the evening bulletin. And then everyone would laugh at him.

And he couldn't put Mr Davies' obituary off for too long, either.

He just wished the weather would cheer up.

Between a plaice and a rock salmon.

Sheringham was a town with a chip on its shoulder. (Wells-next-the-Sea was a town with a fish behind its knee, but that's another story.) For a start what we now call Sheringham, and what I'll call Sheringham for the purposes of this story, was

actually known at the time of the Crab Wars as Lower Sheringham. It fought long and hard for many years to become just Sheringham. But when it finally succeeded it was a hollow victory, because the town which until then had been known as Sheringham immediately changed its name to Upper Sheringham. So that didn't help much.

And then there was the matter of the crabs. No matter how much they worked on quality control and market position, as soon as the crabs had been sent more than a few miles away they were always described as Cromer crabs. It was a matter of much resentment in Sheringham.

It was said by some that the people of Sheringham lived longer than any others in England. Others said it just seemed like that. But the single most important thing that gave Sheringham pride and identity was its age-old rivalry with Cromer.

Nor was this in any way a friendly rivalry. In 1437 Cromer had carried out the Spratt Raids, when Eugene d'Spratt had attempted to take Sheringham from the sea. (This was in stark contrast to the actions of King Canute, who had earlier failed in his attempt to take the sea from Sheringham.)

In 1542 Sheringham had attempted the disastrous 'Bay Of Crabs' operation. This had involved a pincer movement designed to catch the town by surprise. The surprise was all their own however, as the tide swept them down the coast and they accidentally took Understrand instead. Understrand was delighted, because, as one local scribe put it "Nought much ever happens in Understrand".

So, to sum up, Cromer and Sheringham were not on the best of terms. In fact, the two never met. Cromer traded and mixed with the south and Sheringham with the west. In Sheringham you might come across people from Kings Lynn, Blakeney and so on. In Cromer you could meet visitors from Great Yarmouth and Eccles. But not vice-versa.

Lying in between Cromer and Sheringham were the Runtons. The people here were gentle and peace loving. Well, they had to be really, what with the towns on either side being such fierce rivals. What commerce there was between Cromer and Sheringham was carried out through East and West Runton, with East Runton being neutral on the Cromer side, and West Runton being neutral on the Sheringham side.

As I said before, 'never the twain shall meet'. I didn't? Well, I certainly meant to.

Of course, there were exceptions to the twain never meeting. But I'll come to that later.

Crying tonight.

Ding-dong! Ding-dong. "He ar Ye! He ar Ye!"

Blake Vincent was on the streets of Cromer, and his voice was even more out of control that ever. But I won't mention that again unless it's strictly relevant, because the lad is clearly embarrassed enough already. Besides, he still has descendants living in the town, and it's not just my voice they've threatened to break!

"Hear Ye! Hear Ye!

Here is the news! Here is the news!

Captain Upspoke wishes to announce, with not a little sorrow,

That he cannot tell you anything 'bout what he'll do tomorrow.

In fact he's quite succinct in what he has to say;

His own business is none of your damned business anyway.

So keep your noses out of it, he wants me to insist,

Or he'll be glad to flatten them with someone else's fist.

And now the weather forecast – it's going to be rough,

With tempest, storms and pestilence, and all that sort of stuff.

And that was the news, the very latest news."

Thank goodness it was a short cry tonight, thought Blake. Not that anyone took much notice. In all his fretting he'd forgotten that people had got out of the habit of listening to the news these days. What with Mr Davies' laryngitis and the general lack of scandal people nowadays tended to go for a cup of tea when the news was cried. Either that or they just talked through it. They'd found that way they often

got tomorrow's news a day early.

When it was over Blake only wanted to go home and put away his bell and hang up his crier's coat and tri-cornered hat. Or rather, Mr Davies' coat and hat – there'd been no time to get new ones. And given that Mr Davies had been about twice Blake's size in every direction he needn't have worried about what people thought of him. He'd been totally anonymous in fact. The hat came down over his nose and muffled his voice. The coat dragged on the ground. And the sleeves had pretty much silenced the bell, too.

Of course, one person had noticed. But then, Mrs Taylor noticed everything. If she'd been town crier everyone would have paid attention every time. Because there's only one word to describe Mrs Taylor's trade, and that word is extortion. (Actually my thesaurus suggests that 'blackmail' would describe her trade just as well, but I decided not to mention that because it would only confuse matters.)

And, as everyone knows, extortion is an ugly word. (Is it the 'ex' bit, do you think, or the 'tortion'? Is 'hideous' an ugly word? I'm working on it.)

So when Blake cried the news Mrs Taylor definitely noticed.

REVIEWS

"A wonderfully sustained example of comic writing, a worthy follow-up to Prewd and Prejudice."

"Awash with memorable characters."

"Laughter will not be confined to the North Norfolk coast."

(Eastern Daily Press)

"Sid Kipper proves the pen can be just as mighty as the boards when it comes to spreading a cheerful gospel.

His sideways look at a distinctly uncivil war between Cromer and Sheringham is a. wonderfully sustained example of comic writing, a worthy follow-up to Prewd and Prejudice, the mock diary of a London lady who headed for the depths of darkest Norfolk in 1904.

Crab Wars, incorporating the comic-tragedy of Cromeo and Sheriet – where on earth did that idea come from? – is awash with memorable characters .like Doctor Flawd, a man who never let the symptoms get in the way of a good diagnosis, Blake Vincent, thrust into the job of town crier just as his voice was breaking, and the Market Forces, a gang of young men who demanded muchand supplied little.

Laughter will not be confined to the North Norfolk coast, although it is here that imaginations will be stretched most as lingering rivalries continue to be eroded by tides of.good humour."

(Eastern Daily Press)