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**Opening Extract from...**

# Offshore

Written by Penelope Fitzgerald

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PENELOPE

FITZGERALD

Offshore

WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE  
INTRODUCTION BY ALAN HOLLINGHURST

# *Offshore*

Penelope Fitzgerald

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*For Grace  
and all who sailed in her*

‘che mena il vento, e che batte la pioggia,  
e che s’incontran con sì aspre lingue.’

# 1

‘ARE we to gather that *Dreadnought* is asking us all to do something dishonest?’ Richard asked.

*Dreadnought* nodded, glad to have been understood so easily.

‘Just as a means of making a sale. It seems the only way round my problem. If all present wouldn’t mind agreeing not to mention my main leak, or rather not to raise the question of my main leak, unless direct enquiries are made.’

‘Do you in point of fact want us to say that *Dreadnought* doesn’t leak?’ asked Richard patiently.

‘That would be putting it too strongly.’

All the meetings of the boat-owners, by a movement as natural as the tides themselves, took place on Richard’s converted *Ton* class minesweeper. *Lord Jim*, a felt reproof to amateurs, in speckless, always-renewed grey paint, over-shadowed the other craft and was nearly twice their tonnage, just as Richard, in his decent dark blue blazer, dominated the meeting itself. And yet he by no means wanted this responsibility. Living on Battersea Reach,

overlooked by some very good houses, and under the surveillance of the Port of London Authority, entailed, surely, a certain standard of conduct. Richard would be one of the last men on earth or water to want to impose it. Yet someone must. Duty is what no-one else will do at the moment. Fortunately he did not have to define duty. War service in the RNVR, and his whole temperament before and since, had done that for him.

Richard did not even want to preside. He would have been happier with a committee, but the owners, of whom several rented rather than owned their boats, were not of the substance from which committees are formed. Between *Lord Jim*, moored almost in the shadow of Battersea Bridge, and the old wooden Thames barges, two hundred yards upriver and close to the rubbish disposal wharfs and the brewery, there was a great gulf fixed. The barge-dwellers, creatures neither of firm land nor water, would have liked to be more respectable than they were. They aspired towards the Chelsea shore, where, in the early 1960s, many thousands lived with sensible occupations and adequate amounts of money. But a certain failure, distressing to themselves, to be like other people, caused them to sink back, with so much else that drifted or was washed up, into the mud moorings of the great tideway.

Biologically they could be said, as most tideline creatures are, to be 'successful'. They were not easily dislodged.



But to sell your craft, to leave the Reach, was felt to be a desperate step, like those of the amphibians when, in earlier stages of the world's history, they took ground. Many of these species perished in the attempt.

Richard, looking round his solid, brassbound table, got the impression that everyone was on their best behaviour. There was no way of avoiding this, and since, after all, Willis had requested some kind of discussion of his own case, he scrupulously collected opinions.

*'Rochester? Grace? Bluebird? Maurice? Hours of Ease? Dunkirk? Relentless?'*

Richard was quite correct, as technically speaking they were all in harbour, in addressing them by the names of their craft. Maurice, an amiable young man, had realised as soon as he came to the Reach that Richard was always going to do this and that he himself would accordingly be known as *Dondeschiepolschuygen IV*, which was inscribed in gilt lettering on his bows. He therefore renamed his boat *Maurice*.

No-one liked to speak first, and Willis, a marine artist some sixty-five years old, the owner of *Dreadnought*, sat with his hands before him on the table and his head slightly sunken, so that only the top, with its spiky crown of black and grey hair, could be seen. The silence was eased by a long wail from a ship's hooter from downstream. It was a signal peculiar to Thames river – I am about to get under way. The

tide was making, although the boats still rested on the mud.

Hearing a slight, but significant noise from the galley, Richard courteously excused himself. Perhaps they'd have a little more to contribute on this very awkward point when he came back.

'How are you getting on, Lollie?'

Laura was cutting something up into small pieces, with a cookery book open in front of her. She gave him a weary, large-eyed, shires-bred glance, a glance whose horizons should have been bounded by acres of plough and grazing. Loyalty to him, Richard knew, meant that she had never complained so far to anyone but himself about this business of living, instead of in a nice house, in a boat in the middle of London. She went home once a month to combat any such suggestion, and told her family that there were very amusing people living on the Thames. Between the two of them there was no pretence. Yet Richard, who always put each section of his life, when it was finished with, quietly behind him, and liked to be able to give a rational explanation for everything, could not account for this, his attachment to *Lord Jim*. He could very well afford a house, and indeed *Jim* had been an expensive conversion. And if the river spoke to his dreaming, rather than to his daytime self, he supposed that he had no business to attend to it.

‘We’re nearly through,’ he said.

Laura shook back her dampish longish hair. In theory, her looks depended on the services of many employees, my hairdresser, my last hairdresser, my doctor, my other doctor who I went to when I found the first one wasn’t doing me any good, but with or without their attentions, Laura would always be beautiful.

‘This galley’s really not so bad, is it, with the new extractor?’ Richard went on, ‘A certain amount of steam still, of course . . .’

‘I hate you. Can’t you get rid of these people?’

In the saloon Maurice, who had come rather late, was saying something intended to be in favour of Willis. He was incurably sympathetic. His occupation, which was that of picking up men in a neighbouring public house, with which he had a working arrangement, during the evening hours, and bringing them back to the boat, was not particularly profitable. Maurice was not born to make a profit, but then, was not born to resent this, or anything else. Those who felt affection for him had no easy way of telling him so, since he seemed to regard friend and enemy alike. For example, an unpleasant acquaintance of his used part of Maurice’s hold as a repository for stolen goods. Richard and Laura were among the few boat owners who did not know this. And yet Maurice appeared to be almost proud, because Harry was not a

customer, but somebody who had demanded a favour and given nothing in return.

‘I shall have to warn Harry not to talk about the leak either,’ he said.

‘What does he know about it?’ asked Willis.

‘He used to be in the Merchant Navy. If people are coming to look at *Dreadnought*, he might be asked his opinion.’

‘I’ve never seen him speak to anyone. He doesn’t come often, does he?’

At that moment *Lord Jim* was disturbed, from stem to stern, by an unmistakable lurch. Nothing fell, because on *Lord Jim* everything was properly secured, but she heaved, seemed to shake herself gently, and rose. The tide had lifted her.

At the same time an uneasy shudder passed through all those sitting round the table. For the next six hours – or a little less, because at Battersea the flood lasts five and a half hours, and the ebb six and a half – they would be living not on land, but on water. And each one of them felt the patches, strains and gaps in their craft as if they were weak places in their own bodies. They dreaded, and were yet painfully anxious, to get back and see whether the last caulking had given way. A Thames barge has no keel and is afloat in the first few inches of shoal water. The only exception was Woodrow, from *Rochester*, the retired director of a small company, who

was fanatical in the maintenance of his craft. The flood tide, though it had no real terrors for Woodie, caused him to fret impatiently, because *Rochester*, in his opinion, had beautiful lines below water, and these would not now be visible again for twelve hours.

On every barge on the Reach a very faint ominous tap, no louder than the door of a cupboard shutting, would be followed by louder ones from every strake, timber and weatherboard, a fusillade of thunderous creaking, and even groans that seemed human. The crazy old vessels, riding high in the water without cargo, awaited their owner's return.

Richard, like a good commander, sensed the uneasiness of the meeting, even through the solid teak partition. He would never, if he had taken to the high seas in past centuries, have been caught napping by a mutiny.

'I'd better see them on their way.'

'You can ask one or two of them to stay behind for a drink, if you like,' Laura said, 'if there's anyone possible.'

She often unconsciously imitated her father's voice, and, like him, was beginning to drink a little too much occasionally, out of boredom. Richard felt overwhelmed with affection for her. 'I got *Country Life* to-day,' she said.

He had noticed that already. Anything new was noticeable on shipshape *Lord Jim*. The magazine was lying open at the property advertisements, among which was a photograph of a lawn, and a cedar tree on it with a shadow, and

a squarish house in the background to show the purpose of the lawn. A similar photograph, with variations as to size and county, appeared month after month, giving the impression that those who read *Country Life* were above change, or that none was recognised there.

‘I didn’t mean that one, Richard, I meant a few pages farther on. There’s some smaller places there.’

‘I might ask Nenna James to stay behind,’ Richard said. ‘From *Grace*, I mean.’

‘Why, do you think she’s pretty?’

‘I’ve never thought about it.’

‘Hasn’t her husband left her?’

‘I’m not too sure what the situation is.’

‘The postman used to say that there weren’t many letters for *Grace*.’

Laura said ‘used’ because letters were no longer brought by the postman; after he had fallen twice from *Maurice’s* ill-secured gangplank, the whole morning’s mail soaked away in the great river’s load of rubbish, the GPO, with every reason on its side, had notified the Reach that they could no longer undertake deliveries. They acknowledged that Mr Blake, from *Lord Jim*, had rescued their employee on both occasions and they wished to record their thanks for this. The letters, since this, had had to be collected from the boatyard office, and Laura felt that this made it not much better than living abroad.

‘I think Nenna’s all right,’ Richard continued. ‘She

seems quite all right to me, really. I don't know that I'd want to be left alone with her for any length of time.'

'Why not?'

'Well, I'm not quite sure that she mightn't burst into tears, or perhaps suddenly take all her clothes off.' This had actually once happened to Richard at Nestor and Sage, the investment counsellors where he worked. They were thinking of redesigning the whole office on the more modern open plan.

The whole meeting looked up in relief as he came back to the saloon. Firmly planted on the rocking boat, he suggested, even by his stance in the doorway, that things, however difficult, would turn out reasonably well. It was not that he was too sure of himself, simply that he was a good judge of the possible.

Willis was thanking young Maurice for his support.

'Well, you spoke up . . . a friend in need . . .'

'You're welcome.'

Willis half got up from the table. 'All the same, I don't believe that fellow was ever in the Merchant Navy.'

Business suspended, thought Richard. Firmly, but always politely, he escorted the ramshackle assembly up the companion ladder. It was a relief, as always, to be out on deck. The first autumn mists made it difficult to see the whole length of the Reach. Seagulls, afloat like the boats, idled round *Lord Jim*, their white feathers soiled at the waterline.

‘You’ll probably have plenty of time to do something about your trouble anyway,’ he said to Willis, ‘it’s quite a long business, arranging the sale of these boats. Your leak’s somewhere aft, isn’t it? . . . you’ve got all four pumps working, I take it . . . one in each well?’

This picture of *Dreadnought* was so wide of the mark that Willis found it better to say nothing, simply making a gesture which had something in common with a petty officer’s salute. Then he followed the others, who had to cross to land and tramp along the Embankment. The middle Reach was occupied by small craft, mostly laying up for the winter, some of them already double lashed down under weather-cloths. These were for fairweather people only. The barge-owners had to go as far as the brewery wharf, across *Maurice*’s foredeck and over a series of gangplanks which connected them with their own boats. Woody had to cross *Maurice*, *Grace* and *Dreadnought* to rejoin *Rochester*. Only *Maurice* was made fast to the wharf.

One of the last pleasure steamers of the season was passing, with cabin lights ablaze, on its way to Kew. ‘Battersea Reach, ladies and gentlemen. On your right, the artistic colony. Folk live on those boats like they do on the Seine, it’s the artist’s life they’re leading there. Yes, there’s people living on those boats.’

Richard had detained Nenna James. ‘I wish you’d have a drink with us, Laura hoped you would.’

Nenna’s character was faulty, but she had the instinct



to see what made other people unhappy, and this instinct had only failed her once, in the case of her own husband. She knew, at this particular moment, that Richard was distressed by the unsatisfactory nature of the meeting. Nothing had been evaluated, or even satisfactorily discussed.

‘I wish I knew the exact time,’ she said.

Richard was immediately content, as he only was when something could be ascertained to the nearest degree of accuracy. The exact time! Perhaps Nenna would like to have a look at his chronometers. They often didn’t work well in small boats – they were affected by changes of temperature – he didn’t know whether Nenna had found that – and, of course, by vibration. He was able to give her not only the time, but the state of the tide at every bridge on the river. It wasn’t very often that anyone wanted to know this.

Laura put the bottles and glasses and a large plateful of bits and pieces through the galley hatch.

‘It smells of something in there.’

There was the perceptible odour of tar which the barge-owners, since so much of their day was spent in running repairs, left behind them everywhere.

‘Well, dear, if you don’t like the smell, let’s go aft,’ said Richard, picking up the tray. He never let a woman carry anything. The three of them went into a kind of snug, fitted with built-in lockers and red cushions. A little yacht

stove gave out a temperate glow, its draught adjusted to produce exactly the right warmth.

Laura sat down somewhat heavily.

‘How does it feel like to live without your husband?’ she asked, handing Nenna a large glass of gin. ‘I’ve often wondered.’

‘Perhaps you’d like to fetch some more ice,’ Richard said. There was plenty.

‘He hasn’t left me, you know. We just don’t happen to be together at the moment.’

‘That’s for you to say, but what I want to know is, how do you get on without him? Cold nights, of course, don’t mind Richard, it’s a compliment to him if you think about it.’

Nenna looked from one to the other. It was a relief, really, to talk about it.

‘I can’t do the things that women can’t do,’ she said. ‘I can’t turn over *The Times* so that the pages lie flat, I can’t fold up a map in the right creases, I can’t draw corks, I can’t drive in nails straight, I can’t go into a bar and order a drink without wondering what everyone’s thinking about it, and I can’t strike matches towards myself. I’m well educated and I’ve got two children and I can manage pretty well, there’s a number of much more essential things that I know how to do, but I can’t do those ones, and when they come up I feel like weeping myself sick.’

‘I’m sure I could show you how to fold up a map,’ said Richard, ‘it’s not at all difficult once you get the hang of it.’

Laura’s eyes seemed to have moved closer together. She was concentrating intensely.

‘Did he leave you on the boat?’

‘I bought *Grace* myself, while he was away, with just about all the money we’d got left, to have somewhere for me and the girls.’

‘Do you like boats?’

‘I’m quite used to them. I was raised in Halifax. My father had a summer cabin on the Bras d’Or Lake. We had boats there.’

‘I hope you’re not having any repair problems,’ Richard put in.

‘We get rain coming in.’

‘Ah, the weatherboarding. You might try stretching tarpaulin over the deck.’

Although he tried hard to do so, Richard could never see how anyone could live without things in working order.

‘Personally, though, I’m doubtful about the wisdom of making endless repairs to these very old boats. My feeling, for what it’s worth, is that they should be regarded as wasting assets. Let them run down just so much every year, remember your low outgoings, and in a few years’ time have them towed away for their break-up value.’

'I don't know where we should live then,' said Nenna.

'Oh, I understood you to say that you were going to find a place on shore.'

'Oh, we are, we are.'

'I didn't mean to distress you.'

Laura had had time, while listening without much attention to these remarks, to swallow a further quantity of spirits. This had made her inquisitive, rather than hostile.

'Where'd you get your guernsey?'

Both women wore the regulation thick Navy blue sailing sweaters, with a split half inch at the bottom of each side seam. Nenna had rolled up her sleeves in the warmth of the snug, showing round forearms covered with very fine golden hair.

'I got mine at the cut price place at the end of the Queenstown Road.'

'It's not as thick as mine.'

Laura leaned forward, and, taking a good handful, felt the close knitting between finger and thumb.

'I'm a judge of quality, I can tell it's not as thick. Richard, like to feel it?'

'I'm afraid I can't claim to know much about knitting.'

'Well, make the stove up then. Make it up, you idiot! Nenna's freezing!'

'I'm warm, thank you, just right.'

'You've got to be warmer than that! Richard, she's your guest!'

'I can adjust the stove, if you like,' said Richard, in relief, 'I can do something to the regulator.'

'I don't want it regulated!'

Nenna knew that, if it hadn't been disloyal, Richard would have appealed to her to do or say something.

'We use pretty well anything for fuel up our end,' she began, 'driftwood and washed-up coke and anything that'll burn. Maurice told me that last winter he had to borrow a candle from *Dreadnought* to unfreeze the lock of his woodstore. Then when he was entertaining one of his friends he couldn't get his stove to burn right and he had to keep it alight with matchboxes and cheese straws.'

'It's bad practice to keep your woodstore above deck,' said Richard.

Laura had been following, for some reason, with painful interest. 'Do cheese straws burn?'

'Maurice thinks they do.'

Laura disappeared. Nenna had just time to say, I must be going, before she came back, tottering at a kind of dignified slant, and holding a large tin of cheese straws.

'Fortnum's.'

Avoiding Richard, who got to his feet as soon as he saw something to be carried, she kicked open the top of the Arctic and flung them in golden handfuls onto the glowing bed of fuel.

‘Hot!’

The flames leaped up, with an overpowering stink of burning cheese.

‘Lovely! Hot! I’ve got plenty more! The kitchen’s full of them! We’ll make Richard throw them. We’ll all throw them!’

‘There’s someone coming,’ said Nenna.

Footsteps overhead, like the relief for siege victims. She knew the determined stamp of her younger daughter, but there was also a heavier tread. Her heart turned over.

‘Ma, I can smell burning.’

After a short fierce struggle, Richard had replaced the Arctic’s brass lid. Nenna went to the companion.

‘Who’s up there with you, Tilda?’

Tilda’s six-year-old legs, in wellingtons caked with mud, appeared at the open hatch.

‘It’s Father Watson.’

Nenna did not answer for a second, and Tilda bel-  
lowed:

‘Ma, it’s the kindly old priest. He came round to *Grace*, so I brought him along here.’

‘Father Watson isn’t old at all, Tilda. Bring him down here, please. That’s to say . . .’

‘Of course,’ said Richard. ‘You’ll have a whisky, father, won’t you?’ He didn’t know who he was talking to, but believed, from films he had seen, that RC priests drank whisky and told long stories; that could be useful at the

present juncture. Richard spoke with calm authority. Nenna admired him and would have liked to throw her arms round him.

‘No, I won’t come in now, thank you all the same,’ called Father Watson, whose flapping trousers could now be seen beside Tilda’s wellingtons against a square patch of sky. ‘Just a word or two, Mrs James, I can easily wait if you’re engaged with your friends or if it’s not otherwise convenient.’

But Nenna, somewhat to the curate’s surprise, for he seldom felt himself to be a truly welcome guest, was already half way up the companion. It had begun to drizzle, and his long macintosh was spangled with drops of rain, which caught the reflections of the shore lights and the riding lights of the craft at anchor.

‘I’m afraid the little one will get wet.’

‘She’s waterproof,’ said Nenna.

As soon as they reached the Embankment Father Watson began to speak in measured tones. ‘It’s the children, as you must be aware, that I’ve come about. A message from the nuns, a message from the Sisters of Misericord.’ He sometimes wondered if he would be more successful in the embarrassing errands he was called upon to undertake if he had an Irish accent, or some quaint turn of speech.

‘Your girls, Mrs James, Tilda here, and the twelve-year-old.’

‘Martha.’

‘A very delightful name. Martha busied herself about the household work during our Lord’s visits. But not a saint’s name, I think.’

Presumably Father Watson said these things automatically. He couldn’t have walked all the way down to the Reach from his comfortless presbytery simply to talk about Martha’s name.

‘She’ll be taking another name at confirmation, I assume. That should not long be delayed. I suggest Stella Maris, Star of the Sea, since you’ve decided to make your dwelling place upon the face of the waters.’

‘Father, have you come to complain about the girls’ absence from school?’

They had arrived at the wharf, which was exceedingly ill-lit. The brewers to whom it belonged, having ideas, like all brewers in the 1960s, of reviving the supposed jollity of the eighteenth century, had applied for permission to turn it into a fashionable beer garden. The very notion, however, ran counter to the sodden, melancholy, and yet enduring spirit of the Reach. After the plans had been shelved, the whole place had been leased out to various small-time manufacturers and warehousemen; the broken-down sheds and godowns must still be the property of somebody, so too must be the piles of crates whose stencilled lettering had long since faded to pallor.



But, rat-ridden and neglected, it was a wharf still. The river's edge, where Virgil's ghosts held out their arms in longing for the farther shore, and Dante, as a living man, was refused passage by the ferryman, the few planks that mark the meeting point of land and water, there, surely, is a place to stop and reflect, even if, as Father Watson did, you stumble over a ten-gallon tin of creosote.

'I'm afraid I'm not accustomed to the poor light, Mrs James.'

'Look at the sky, father. Keep your eyes on the lightest part of the sky and they'll adapt little by little.'

Tilda had sprung ahead, at home in the dark, and anywhere within sight and sound of water. Feeling that she had given her due of politeness to the curate, the due exacted by her mother and elder sister, she pattered onto *Maurice*, and, after having a bit of a poke round, shot across the connecting gangplank onto *Grace*.

'You'll excuse me if I don't go any further, Mrs James. It's exactly what you said, it's the question of school attendance. The situation, you see, they tell me there's a legal aspect to it as well.'

How dispiriting for Father Watson to tell her this, Nenna thought, and how far it must be from his expectations when he received his first two minor orders, and made his last acts of resignation. To stand on this dusky wharf, bruised by a drum of creosote, and acting not

even as the convent chaplain, but as some kind of school attendance officer!

‘I know they haven’t been coming to class regularly. But then, father, they haven’t been well.’

Even Father Watson could scarcely be expected to swallow this. ‘I was struck by the good health and spirits of your little one. In fact I had it in mind that she might be trained up to one of the women’s auxiliary services which justified themselves so splendidly in the last war – the WRENS, I mean, of course. It’s a service that’s not incompatible with the Christian life.’

‘You know how it is with children; she’s well one day, not so well the next.’ Nenna’s attitude to truth was flexible, and more like Willis’s than Richard’s. ‘And Martha’s the same, it’s only to be expected at her age.’

Nenna had hoped to alarm the curate with these references to approaching puberty, but he seemed, on the contrary, to be reassured. ‘If that’s the trouble, you couldn’t do better than to entrust her to the skilled understanding of the Sisters.’ How dogged he was. ‘They’ll expect, then, to see both your daughters in class on Monday next.’

‘I’ll do what I can.’

‘Very well, Mrs James.’

‘Won’t you come as far as the boat?’

‘No, no, I won’t risk the crossing a second time.’ What had happened the first time? ‘And now, I’m afraid I’ve

somewhat lost my sense of direction. I'll have to ask you my way to dry land.'

Nenna pointed out the way through the gate, which, swinging on its hinges, no longer provided any kind of barrier, out onto the Embankment, and first left, first right up Partisan Street for the King's Road. The priest couldn't have looked more relieved if he had completed a mission to those that dwell in the waters that are below the earth.

'I've got the supper, Ma,' said Martha, when Nenna returned to *Grace*. Nenna would have felt better pleased with herself if she had resembled her elder daughter. But Martha, small and thin, with dark eyes which already showed an acceptance of the world's shortcomings, was not like her mother and even less like her father. The crucial moment when children realise that their parents are younger than they are had long since been passed by Martha.

'We're having baked beans. If Father Watson's coming, we shall have to open another tin.'

'No, dear, he's gone home.'

Nenna felt tired, and sat down on the keelson, which ran from end to end of the flat-bottomed barge. It was quite wrong to come to depend too much upon one's children.

Martha set confidently to work in *Grace's* galley, which

consisted of two gas rings in the bows connected to a Calor cylinder, and a brass sink. Water came to the sink from a container on deck, which was refilled by a man from the boat-yard once every twenty-four hours. A good deal of improvisation was necessary and Martha had put three tin plates to heat up over the hissing saucepan of beans.

‘Was it fun on *Lord Jim*?’

‘Oh, not at all.’

‘Should I have enjoyed it?’

‘Oh no, I don’t think so. Mrs Blake threw cheese straws into the stove.’

‘What did Mr Blake say?’

‘He wants to keep her happy, to make her happy, I don’t know.’

‘What did Father Watson want?’

‘Didn’t he talk to you at all?’

‘I daresay he would have done, but I sent him out to fetch you, with Tilda, she needed exercise.’

‘So he didn’t mention anything.’

‘He just came down here, and I made him a cup of tea and we said an act of contrition together.’

‘He wanted to know why you hadn’t been to class lately.’

Martha sighed.

‘I’ve been reading your letters,’ she said. ‘They’re lying about your cabin, and you haven’t even looked at most of them.’

The letters were Nenna's connection, not only with the land, but with her previous existence. They would be from Canada, from her sister Louise who would suggest that she might put up various old acquaintances passing through London, or find a suitable family for a darling Austrian boy, not so very much older than Martha, whose father was a kind of Count, but was also in the import-export business, or try to recall a splendid person, the friend of a friend of hers who had had a very, very sad story. Then there were one or two bills, not many because Nenna had no credit accounts, a letter-card from an old schoolfriend which started *Bet you don't remember me*, and two charitable appeals, forwarded by Father Watson even to such an unpromising address as *Grace*.

'Anything from Daddy?'

'No, Ma, I looked for that first.'

There was no more to be said on that subject.

'Oh, Martha, my head aches. Baked beans would be just the thing for it.'

Tilda came in, wet, and black as coal from head to foot.

'Willis gave me a drawing.'

'What of?'

'*Lord Jim*, and some seagulls.'

'You shouldn't have accepted it.'

'Oh, I gave him one back.'

She had been waiting on *Dreadnought* to watch the water coming in through the main leak. It had come half way up the bunk, and nearly as far as Willis's blankets. Nenna was distressed.

'Well, it goes out with every tide. He'll have to show people round at low tide, and get them off before it turns.'

'Surely he can do some repairs,' said Martha.

'No, Fate's against him,' said Tilda, and after one or two forkfuls of beans she fell fast asleep with her head across the table. It was impossible, in any case, to bath her, because they were only allowed to let out the bathwater on a falling tide.

By now the flood was making fast. The mist had cleared, and to the north-east the Lots Road Power Station had discharged from its four majestic chimneys long plumes of white pearly smoke which slowly drooped and turned to dun. The lights dazzled, but on the broad face of the water there were innumerable V-shaped eddies, showing the exact position of whatever the river had not been able to hide. If the old Thames trades had still persisted, if boatmen had still made a living from taking the coins from the pockets of the drowned, then this was the hour for them to watch. Far above, masses of autumn cloud passed through the transparent violet sky.

After supper they sat by the light of the stove. Nenna was struck by the fact that she ought to write to Louise,

who was married to a successful business man. She began, Dear Sis, Tell Joel that it's quite an education in itself for the girls to be brought up in the heart of the capital, and on the very shores of London's historic river.