

The Secret Rescue

By Elsie Locke

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In the hot sunshine, Alma and Larry trudged the three miles to Jenkins' Beach. "It's a quiet, safe place for a picnic," Mother had said. Besides, Mrs Jenkins in the farmhouse would help them if they needed anything. But when the children came near the house they saw Mr Jenkins bringing his car out of the garage.

"We're going to town," he said. "You can get water from the tap at the tankstand if you want it."

"Down at the beach you'll find a raft that the boys made," said Mrs Jenkins. "Don't go on it. It isn't safe. It tilts over to one side."

The children thanked them and waved goodbye.

At the beach there were two girls, Esther and Sally. It looked as if Mrs Jenkins hadn't seen them to warn them, because they were in their bathing togs playing on the raft, which was tied to the jetty, on the other side from the launch. The raft was made of oil-drums held together by planking. The girls laughed when they were told that it wasn't safe.

"If it tips us off we can easily get on to the jetty," they said.

Alma and Larry had their lunch and made a fort in the sand. They were digging deep channels down to the water's edge when they heard a shout. The two girls were jumping around wildly and the raft was lurching from one steep angle to another. Larry and Alma leapt on to the jetty. Now they could see that the rope had come away and the raft was drifting out with the ebbing tide.

"Why don't you swim ashore?" called Larry.

"I'm scared," Esther said, "the water's too deep." She began to cry.

"I can't swim," said Sally, and she cried louder than Esther.

"You'd better sit down then and keep still while we go to get help," said Larry. "If you jump around like that the raft will go right over, for sure. Go on. Sit down. SIT DOWN!" The girls obeyed.

"No, not like that, sit on the high side with your feet over the edge. If you keep the raft level, nothing can happen to you."

At last the girls did as he told them and sat there looking mournful, with their toes in the water.

"Stay there till we come back, now!" Larry felt as important as an officer giving orders, but he muttered to Alma that he wished those girls had more sense.

"We'll be back soon. We're going for the Jenkinsons," called Alma.

They had gone half way up the path before she remembered.

"It's no good. Mr Jenkins is in town. The next house is more than a mile away, and I don't suppose anyone but Mr Jenkins can drive the launch," she said. "They might fill off and get drowned if they're left too long."

"Or start jumping around again and tip themselves off," said Larry scornfully.

"I could go for help and you could keep talking to them."

"They'll soon be so far out that they won't hear me."

"If Mother hadn't made you promise not to swim out of your depth, you could go out and push the raft back," said Alma hopefully. "I wish I could swim properly, then we could both do it."

"The tide's going out too fast. I know I couldn't manage it," said Larry.

"We've got to think of a way." Alma looked at the girls still obediently dangling their feet. The raft was already four times its own length from the jetty. "They might go all the way round the harbour and out to sea."

"I think the tide would turn before they got as far as that. No, the proper thing would be for them to sit still until we could get Mr Jenkins to go after them. The trouble is, if they get in a panic they'll do something silly." He was thinking fast. Then he gave a little skip and a jump. "I've got it! You've given me an idea, Alma."

As he told her his plan, Alma looked surprised at first, then doubtful, then fearful, then at last hopeful. "Let's be quick!" she agreed.

Larry changed into his bathing trunks, while Alma put his clothes in the haversack and climbed up the hill, until she found a good place where she could watch both the sea and the road. By that time Larry was standing at the end of the jetty. He had to call at the top of his voice for the girls to hear him.

"I'm coming with you and I know how to get you ashore, but you must promise to do what I say."

Sally just stared, but Esther called back that they'd promise. Larry swam to the craft. When he reached it, he found to his dismay that he could not climb aboard. Every effort he made sent the raft lurching, and when Esther tried to help him it was worse. "Never mind," he said cheerfully, "the water's warm. I'll hold on here." And so he did, while the raft drifted gently along.

When the girls began to worry, he told them a funny story; and then another. Soon these grew into one long story in which everything that came into view had a part - a house, a headland, a clump of trees, or a seagull flying. Esther and Sally thought that if Larry was enjoying himself so much in the water, there was nothing for them to worry about. They had learned how to move around a little without tipping the raft.

At last they came right across the harbour and within sight of Silver Bay. Larry watched the scrap of wide sand widen into a crescent like a new moon. They had once camped at Silver Bay, and had watched the old tins and bottles come in with the current and swing out against the bank of sand that lay in line with the south point. He had to find the exact place where the shore would be nearest. It was very hard to be patient and to wait for the right moment. But at last he saw the little knoll on which he remembered sitting to throw stones at the things as they floated by.

Now he began giving orders again. "Sally, I want you to sit quite still. Esther, you jump in with me, hold tight to the raft and kick with all your might. We've got to fight against the tide, but if we work hard we'll ground this raft on the sandbank."

At first Esther said No, but when Larry said he'd pull her off if she didn't come, she jumped in. The two of them swam furiously. At first, the raft did not seem to be responding at all, and for a dreadful moment Larry thought they'd be past the sandbank - their only chance - with Esther, like himself, unable to get aboard again.

"Harder, harder!" he shouted. Their legs beat the surface like the wheel of a paddle-steamer. They went on and on with all their might until they could hardly keep their breath.

"Ouch! Ouch!" yelled Esther, "I've scraped my foot!"

"Hooray!" Larry put his feet down too, and touched bottom. The sandbank was a mass of oystershells that scratched and cut wherever they trod. "It's not fair," said Larry, "I want a live oyster, not a dead one."

They shouted and laughed as they began pushing the raft ashore. Soon it was shallow enough for Sally to jump in and help. They dragged it up on the sand and tied it to a clump of rushes.

"I'm thirsty," said Sally.

"Jumping Jumper! So am I!" said Larry.

It was the first time he had thought about how he felt. But before they made for the fresh-water stream, he remembered Alma. She could not see Silver Bay from Jenkins' Beach, but she could see the south point. So, tired and thirsty as they all were, the three of them climbed up on south point and performed a war dance.

For a while they stayed by the stream, drinking and resting. Then they began to feel cold, and started out on the long walk home. They had to circle the top of the harbour. When the shore came near to a road and they heard a car coming, Esther and Sally went out and asked for a lift. But Larry hid himself. He had promised his mother he wouldn't swim out of his depth, and he didn't want to be found out.

All the time that the raft was drifting, Alma sat watching, until her eyes watered with the glare of the sparkles on the water. It was tiresome waiting. She tried to catch the tiger beetles running around the clay bank; she plaited tiny baskets out of grass blades; she made up games, like guessing how many haystacks she would be able to see. She saw no sign of other people except for a fishing boat far down the harbour.

Often she looked at the raft to see if all three were still there. She could not leave her lookout because she had a job to do to send help if Mr Jenkins or anyone else came along, and to keep silent if she saw the raft go safely ashore.

After a while her eyes began to play tricks with her because of the glare. She could not tell if the three children were with the raft or not. She began to get nervous, and suddenly an idea occurred to her. Why hadn't they thought of it before? She should go into the Jenkins' house - they surely wouldn't mind and telephone the police about the drifting raft. Of course that was what should have been done, long ago.

But just as she stood up, she saw the raft, looking now like a block of wood, disappear round the south point behind which Silver Bay was hidden. It would not have done that if it was still drifting. She waited. And after what seemed a long, long time, she saw three figures, looking like clothes-peg dolls, jumping up and down on the south point and waving their match-stick arms.

Alma was so happy that she skipped and sang as she plunged down the hill on to the jetty. She took a piece of burnt stick from the remains of a picnic fire and wrote on the jetty, "Raft is at Silver Bay." Then she took the haversack and went home, hiding Larry's clothes in the shed before she went inside.

"You're early," said Mother in surprise. "Where's Larry?"

"He met some children and he's coming home another way. He's awful," she added, pretending to be annoyed with her brother.

When at teatime there was no sign of Larry, Mother began to worry and to ask more questions. Alma had promised she wouldn't say a word about how Larry had disobeyed

and swam beyond his depth, and she didn't want to tell lies either, so she pretended to be sulky. This annoyed Mother so much that she packed Alma off to bed - for which Alma was grateful.

It was nearly dark when she heard Larry at the window whispering, "Where are my clothes?" He dressed himself in the shed and came inside.

"I met some children and walked around the shore. We went too far," he explained. This was quite true.

He expected to be scolded, but Mother only looked at him curiously, saw how he was dragging his feet, and suggested a bath and his tea in bed. She didn't say very much either when she put ointment and bandages on his toes all grazed with oyster shells and rocks.

At dinnertime a few days later, Mother read out a paragraph from the local paper. This is what it said:

'On Thursday last, two girls who had drifted out on the harbour on a raft usually moored at Jenkins' Beach, were rescued and brought ashore at Silver Bay. They say that they have promised not to tell who it was that helped them. It was a feat of great patience and endurance, and the parents wish through these columns to thank the unknown rescuer.'

"I wonder who it could have been?" said Mother.