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The Dunbridge Chronicles: Book 4

Saints and Sailors

Written by Pam Rhodes

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The
Dunbridge
Chronicles

BOOK 4

SAINTS AND SAILORS

Pam Rhodes



LION FICTION

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DUNBRIDGE AND » BURNTACRE «

Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go.

Charles Wesley

“Will we need wellies?”
“Probably not. I’d take your walking boots, though.” Claire answered Neil without looking up from the holdall she was packing.
“Umbrella?” he asked.
“I’ve got a small one, and you’ve got a hood on your jacket.”
“Should I take one pair of thick socks, or two?”
“One.”
“How many dress shirts?”
“You’ve only *got* one.”
“And jumpers?”
“For heaven’s sake!” Claire looked at Neil with exasperation.
“You go and sort out the paperwork and books you need to take with you, and I’ll do the rest.”
He grinned. “That worked, then! I hate packing.”
“I’d never have guessed,” she laughed, aiming an odd sock in his direction as he headed for the door. “And put the kettle on while you’re at it.”

Ten minutes later, when Neil returned with two mugs of steaming coffee, the holdalls were neatly packed. Claire tidied away the last bits and pieces before sitting down on the bed next to him, lifting her face for his kiss as he handed her the cup.

“I’ve just had a call from Mum,” he said. “She’s all ready to go.”

Claire chuckled. “Iris has had her case packed for about a week.”

“Peter and Val are picking her and Harry up at eleven. But they reckon it should only take a couple of hours for them to get to Tilbury Docks. It’s so much further from here – I’ve no idea how long it’ll take us to battle our way down the M1 and around the M25 to get there.”

“It’ll be nice to see the St Stephen’s crowd again,” said Claire, taking a sip of coffee. “Even nicer to be on holiday with them. This was a great idea, to get some of your old parish and your new one to meet up. And cruising round Britain sounds brilliant!”

“I’m not sure how much of a holiday it’s going to be for me,” mused Neil. “I’m thrilled that they asked me to be one of the Christian team on board, of course, but I’d feel better if I had a clearer idea of what it involves.”

“That’s why you’ve got all those books on Celtic saints taking up space in our bags,” she teased. “I’d be squeezing in a couple of extra pairs of shoes if it weren’t for them.”

“Well, I wouldn’t need so many reference books if I knew for sure that the internet always works reliably on a cruise ship. Do you think it does when you’re out in the middle of the ocean?”

“Oh, I should think so...”

“Bishop Paul’ll know what he’s doing, of course, and it’s flattering that he asked me to help with the ministry side of things. After all, I was just a curate in Dunbridge for the three years he was my bishop, and that was only nine months ago. I’ve still got a lot to learn. I hope I don’t let him down.”

Claire smiled. "Not many curates find themselves running a busy parish all by themselves when they've hardly been ordained a year. Bishop Paul knows how much you took on when the rector left, and how well you coped. For heaven's sake, by the time you left Dunbridge, your parishioners were asking him to let you stay and take on the parish as their full-time priest. He said himself he'd never known that happen before!"

"Do you ever regret moving to Derbyshire instead of staying there, Claire? After all, we had to take Sam out of his school and leave your Uncle Harry just after his eightieth birthday. It was a big upheaval."

"Sam's OK – he's really settled here. What six-year-old wouldn't love all these trees to climb and space to kick a ball about with a gang of friends? He loves it."

"Quiet, isn't it, without him?"

"Mmm. He loves staying with Mum in Scarborough, though."

"Let's face it, he couldn't wait to get out the door, because she and David always spoil him rotten. He'll have a lovely holiday."

"Do you think he's missing me?"

"Probably not as much as we're missing him, but you know we can ring him."

"I'm looking forward to all the places we're going. I've always wondered what Orkney is like, after years of hearing it mentioned on the weather forecast!"

"And Lindisfarne. A group of us went to Holy Island in my first year at college. I've never forgotten the impact it had on me."

"Dublin, Guernsey and the Normandy coast – so many lovely places."

"And we get to sail round the coast being pampered on a cruise ship..."

"I wonder how the Christianity bit will fit in?" mused Claire, her face thoughtful. "You know, I'm still not completely

into this God stuff. I hope it's not going to be all worthy and prim."

Neil laughed. "Because you, Mrs Fisher, are definitely not prim, I'm very glad to say."

Smiling cheekily in return, she continued, "I think the evenings will be good, though, because they put on some big production shows. And then, of course, Rhyddian's going to be on board..." Claire's expression became dreamy as she spoke. "I wonder if I'll get a chance to meet him. He's really famous! I love his voice – and he's very attractive..."

Neil looked indignant. "I'm attractive – and I can serenade you, if you like."

"My darling Neil, you have many abilities, but serenading is not one of them."

He laughed. "I remember at theological college when they were trying to teach us various options for singing the responses during the Eucharist. The music lecturer took me to one side and said it would probably be better if I just spoke them. I felt deeply offended."

"The truth hurts," laughed Claire, "and so would your congregation's ears if you put them through that!"

"Anyway, I won't be seeing much of the shows. I've got my evening worship services to prepare, when I say something about the life and spirituality of each saint, and lead worship based on the Celtic tradition. Apparently those gatherings will be held in the ship's chapel, so they'll feel very intimate and hopefully moving. That's the plan anyway. I really want to get everything just right."

"You'll be great," said Claire.

"Oh, and that woman off the telly – you know, Pam Rhodes, who's been on *Songs of Praise* since I was in short trousers – she's coming too."

"Harry'll like that. *Songs of Praise* has been his favourite television programme for years."

"Mum's too."

"Will there be cameras on board, then?"

"No. She'll be organizing our own version of *Songs of Praise* on the ship towards the end of the cruise, but it's not for broadcasting."

"Good job we've got some of our St Jude's choir coming, then," said Claire, "and I think most of the Dunbridge group have sung in St Stephen's choir at one time or another. I'm really looking forward to seeing them again."

"Me too," agreed Neil, glancing at the bedside clock. "Come on, it's nearly midnight. I need my beauty sleep. Early start in the morning!"

She leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder. "It'll be like a second honeymoon, cruising around Britain for nine days."

"I hope I'm not seasick."

She looked up at him. "You've just ruined a romantic moment!"

"Oh," he said, planting small kisses across her cheek until he could whisper in her ear, "don't you worry. There'll be plenty of those. I'll make sure of that..."

Claire turned her face so that her lips met his. "Sounds good to me..."

"I haven't slept a wink. I'm worried."

Iris made her announcement the moment she stepped inside Harry's back door. Harry, who was still in his dressing gown, looked at her in surprise.

"It's only eight o'clock. We're not being picked up for three hours."

"I'm ready. I hate being late. And I'm worried."

Reaching for the kettle, Harry sighed. "Let me guess. You're worried about high winds on the high seas?"

She looked at him with disdain. "Of course not. I'm excellent on water. I often went sailing with my father when I was a girl. That was one of the benefits of growing up in Bristol. We had our own boat."

“You did?” asked Harry, plainly impressed.

“A rowing boat called Dumpy.”

“Nice!” Harry suppressed a smile as he turned away to fill the kettle. “Well, you can’t be worried that you won’t have enough clothes to wear. You ended up putting some of your things in *my* case!”

“You don’t need to take much. You’re a man.”

“A mere man I might be – and into my eighties – but I do still like to look smart.”

“Yes, but gentlemen don’t need to bother as much as ladies to look smart on a cruise ship. We have to dress for dinner, you know. And on formal nights we really do need evening gowns – with shoes to match, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” smiled Harry, who was really more interested in filling the kettle than Iris’s fashion plans. “So, let me guess. Are you worried you haven’t got enough handbags?”

“Now you’re being sarcastic. I have two for days out, one containing a foldaway shopping bag, plus two evening clutch bags in gold and silver. That should be ample.”

“Well, I give up. What’s *left* to worry you?”

“The catering. How hygienic can it possibly be if they’re having to cook three meals, plus afternoon tea, for around four hundred passengers every day? And that’s not to mention feeding all the staff too. *The Pilgrim*’s small fry as far as these cruise ships go nowadays, but then it’s really quite old. I’ve been looking it up. Do you think, in an old ship, the kitchens are up to scratch?”

“Yes, I do.”

“But what if someone brings a sickness bug or something on board? What’s to stop us all going down with runny tummies?”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Iris,” groaned Harry. “I’ve not even opened my eyes properly yet, and you’re already talking about bodily malfunctions...”

“Rest assured, if that happens, you and I will have a head start. I’m taking our own very comprehensive first aid kit,

complete with prescribed medicines. All that's in your bag too."

"There's a doctor on board! And a nurse and a proper surgery. I'm sure they've got infection control well organized. Anyway, we're only going round the coast. The food will probably be as British as you are. You're talking as if you're Doctor Livingstone heading off into the African jungle!"

"You know my stomach is delicate. What happens if the kitchen team all come from the Philippines or somewhere equally exotic? I can't cope with curries. You know that!"

Without answering immediately, Harry placed the full kettle in its holder and switched it on. Then he reached out to take Iris's hand, leading her gently over to the kitchen table, where he pulled out a chair for her before sitting down himself.

"How long is it since you went away on a proper holiday like this? And I don't mean staying with Neil for a week or two, when it's felt like home from home."

She shrugged. "I can't quite recall. The last time must have been when Robert was alive, and we went to the Isle of Wight for a week."

"And Robert died not far off twenty years ago, didn't he? So it must be at least that long since you've done anything even remotely like this."

"I don't see what that's got to do with anything..."

"Robert was with you then. You two may have had your moments over the years, but Neil told me his dad was your rock. And here you are, going off on this great adventure without him by your side. No wonder you're nervous."

"Of course I'm not nervous!"

"Yes, you are – and so am I. It's five years since my Rose passed on, and until then, in all our fifty years of marriage, we did everything together. We never spent a night apart, because I never wanted to go anywhere without her at my side. I've worked all my life and it must have looked as if I could cope with anything – but she was the strong one in our marriage. I was nothing without her."

Iris nodded, her eyes unnaturally shiny as she listened to Harry.

“And I can tell you now, I used to get quite panicky at the thought of being somewhere unfamiliar or different, but it felt all right if we did it together. I think if it had been left to me, we would never have gone on holiday at all. But although I dreaded leaving home, I always enjoyed it in the end. She organized a surprise weekend for us in Dublin once, and for our fortieth anniversary we went to the Scilly Isles, because she’d always wanted to go there. Those two places are the reason I’m booked on this cruise. Rose loved being there then, and I think she’d be pleased I’m going back there again now, taking our memories with me.”

Iris smiled with relief and understanding. “I know what you mean. Everyone always said I wore the trousers in our marriage. Even Robert said he was henpecked! On the surface it might have seemed that way – but really, I might have made all the noise, but he was the strong one. You’d have thought, in all these years, I’d have got used to being without him, but I still feel so lost. Not just lonely, but alone, all alone...”

“Even in a crowd...” agreed Harry softly. “And you and I are going to be with hundreds of people for the next week and a half.”

“Suppose I can’t find my way around the ship? What if I don’t remember what deck my cabin’s on – or I forget the number or the key?”

“Then, dear lady, we will make sure that our cabins are close together. We will keep each other company and out of harm’s way. I’ll be there for you, if you promise to be there for me.”

Vulnerability was not something often seen in Iris’s expression, and Harry was moved to see the uncertainty gradually easing from her face as she considered his words. Finally, she smiled a little as she reached out to touch his hand.

“Of course I’ll look after you. You’re my friend, my best friend.”

“And don’t forget, Neil and Claire will be with us too.”

“I hope he’s packed everything he needs. He can be *so* disorganized. And I’ve been trying to remember whether he ever did get his badge for swimming when he was in the Cubs. I do know he was never that confident around water – and he’s taking us all on a cruise!”

“Well, aren’t we lucky that the younger generation in our families – your Neil and my Claire – care enough about us to want us with them on this wonderful trip? They both insisted they wouldn’t go unless we came too. So you and I *will* go, and we’ll have a bloomin’ good time!”

“We will!”

“Now,” said Harry, scraping back his chair, “let’s get that tea.”

Iris looked anxiously at her watch. “Have we got time? I hope Peter and Val aren’t late picking us up. You know what that motorway’s like! We might get held up in traffic when we leave Dunbridge – and what would happen then? Would the ship go without us?”

Shaking his head with affectionate disbelief, Harry poured a little boiling water in to warm the teapot, then opened the tea caddy.

“Please mind my suitcase! It cost a fortune!”

Carole Swinton’s piercing instruction cut through the babble of excited chatter from the crowd gathering around the coach. It was parked outside the lychgate of St Jude’s Church in Burntacre, a few miles north of Ashbourne in Derbyshire. It was half past eight in the morning and the passengers due to board *The Pilgrim* at Tilbury later that day were putting their bags into the luggage compartment at the side of the coach, before taking their leave of family members with loving hugs and a few tearful goodbyes. The crowd obediently parted as Carole and her husband Garry marched up to the middle of the luggage

compartment and pushed other lesser bags unceremoniously to one side as they slid in their elegant leather suitcases.

"We need to sit at the front of the coach," said Carole loudly. "Garry, make sure you tell them to keep our two seats at the very front. I've organized this trip and I'll have to use the mike to give out instructions."

"And that way you and I can be first off too," hissed Garry in her ear. "If there are four hundred other passengers booking onto this cruise today, I've no intention of being anywhere except at the head of the queue."

"Good to see you in your civvies, Vicar," giggled Sheila, one of three ladies who usually formed the entire alto section of the church choir.

"I must say you look very fetching in shorts!" added Sheila's friend, Marion.

Bustling up to join them came Betty, who was almost as wide as she was tall.

"Claire, I am seeing your husband in a completely new light. He's quite a looker without the dog collar."

"Believe me," laughed Claire, "having a job which requires a sort of uniform is a great relief for Neil. He has no fashion sense at all, so it's good he doesn't usually have to think beyond a pair of trousers and a clerical shirt."

"So you've put your foot down while he's on holiday?"

"She certainly has," agreed Neil. "She said shorts are the order of the day. Is she having me on? Do I look ridiculous?"

"Come on, ladies and gents!" called the driver. "Time's ticking on and we've a long journey ahead. Sort yourselves out, please!"

"Hang on!" muttered Jill, who was also in the choir at St Jude's. "Where did I put the passports? Are they in your pocket, Rob? Rob! I'm asking you a question! Did you pick up our passports?"

Her husband turned around to stare irritably at her.

"I've not seen them. You're in charge of paperwork. You're in charge of everything, remember?"

Seeing how flustered and embarrassed Jill was becoming, her fellow soprano, Deirdre, stepped up to lend a hand.

“Could you have put them in your handbag?”

“My handbag!” squealed Jill, looking around her frantically. “Where’s my handbag? I didn’t leave it on the kitchen table, did I? I bet I did. There was so much to think about before we left this morning, I must have forgotten it. Will the coach be able to wait? Do you think it could take a slight detour to drive my way out of the village?”

“It’s not this one, is it?” offered Deirdre, noticing a well-used brown bag on the ground just behind them.

“Oh, that’s it! Deirdre, you’re an angel. And here are the passports, thank goodness! Come on, Rob. Where’s Rob?”

“He’s already on the coach, I think,” said Deirdre, the Irish lilt in her voice still noticeable in spite of the years she’d spent living in rural Derbyshire. “Look, I can see him sitting towards the back.”

“Careful, Dad,” came a voice behind them. It was Pete Jones, a popular local builder, carefully guiding ninety-one-year-old Arthur towards the coach steps. Bringing up the rear, carrying a backpack and another travel bag, came Pete’s teenage son Callum, earphones in as he chatted away on his mobile phone. Pete’s wife had opted to hold the fort at home while three generations of men in the family made this special trip together. The last stop on the cruise was Honfleur on the Normandy coast, near where Arthur had been wounded on D-Day more than seventy years before. This journey would be, without doubt, a very moving pilgrimage for him, not least because his son and grandson would be able to share it with him.

“Hi, Carole,” smiled Pete as he reached the top of the steps into the coach. “Would it be okay if Dad and I sat at the front here, to save him having to struggle any further down?”

“Oh, but I’ve got to sit here!” Carole’s voice pitched up a tone in indignant panic. “I have to give instructions over the microphone, so this is my seat – and Garry obviously needs to sit beside me.”

“Take my seat, Arthur,” said a calm voice on the other side of the aisle. “I’ll move back.”

Mark Stratton quickly removed himself and his bags, so that Pete could edge into the window seat and manoeuvre Arthur safely into place.

As soon as he stood up Mark saw Deirdre stepping onto the coach. He moved swiftly down the aisle, wondering if there was any chance she might consider sitting beside him. Choosing a seat halfway down on his right, he smiled up at her as she came towards him. She gave him a shy half-smile in return, clearly hesitating about where to sit. In the end, she lowered herself into the window seat directly across from him.

Next, Jill Grenville flapped her way down the coach to where her husband had spread his briefcase and a range of newspapers all over the seat. When it became clear that Rob had no intention of making room for her, she slid awkwardly into the seat in front of him, her cheeks reddening with the knowledge that several people in the coach were watching her reaction with interest.

“Right,” announced Neil, as he and Claire eventually climbed on board. “I’ve done a final check to make sure we’ve not forgotten anyone or anything. Are we ready to go?”

“One minute, Vicar,” interrupted Carole. “I have a few important announcements to make.”

“Really?”

“I need to tell everyone about the arrangements for getting their luggage onto the ship when we reach the dock...”

“Tell you what, Carole, why don’t you do that a bit nearer to Tilbury? That way we’ll be more likely to remember. But first, before we get on the road, shall we ask God to bless us on this journey, and be with us throughout the time we’re going to spend together?”

Heads obediently bowed throughout the coach.

“Father, today this group of friends is to become a band of pilgrims – travelling together in the footsteps of the ancient saints who established our faith and inspired our knowledge

of you. Be with us every step of the way, guiding our feet and our hearts towards a greater understanding and closeness to you. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray..."

"Amen" echoed throughout the coach.

"Are you done now?" asked the bored voice of the driver.

"Thank you, yes."

"And are you and your missus about to sit down, Vicar?"

"Oh, right, yes we will."

"Good. So can we *finally* get on the road?"

"What are you waiting for?" squealed the excited voice of Betty from the back row, where she had spread out alongside Sheila and Marion. And as the three women launched into a lively chorus of "I Love to Go A-Wandering", while others yelled goodbyes to family and friends who were waiting to see them off, the driver thought dismally to himself that it was a very long way to Essex.

* * *

The group from Bedfordshire had opted to travel in individual cars to Tilbury. At the same time as Peter Fellowes, the St Stephen's churchwarden, and his wife Val were picking up Harry and Iris, Brian Lambert, the organist, and his wife Sylvia were also setting off from home. As their car was a seven-seater, they had offered to transport one of the choir members, Julia Dawes, along with her elderly mother Ida. Ida had dementia and it had made her withdrawn and frail. Julia, her only child, was devoted to her, bringing her to church on Sundays in the wheelchair. She had often wondered what it was like on a cruise ship – and what had finally decided her to make this journey possible for Mum was that, down the years, Ida had always been drawn to the wisdom and sayings of the ancient saints. Even if Mum missed a great deal about what was going on around her, Julia wanted to do this for her – and without exception, the church group going on the cruise with

them thought it was both kind and right that she should make this voyage happen.

As Brian loaded the chair and all their bags into the boot of the car, Julia and Sylvia gently guided Ida into the back seat, surrounded by her favourite, familiar cushions. Ida's face registered nothing – not surprise, not interest, just nothing.

"Are the others likely to be ahead of us?" asked Julia, as Brian pulled away from the kerb.

"Not by much," he replied. "I think Barbara and John were setting off about the same time as us."

At that exact moment, Barbara and John Curtis were picking up Clifford Davies, a rather theatrical but hugely talented organist. Now well into his sixties, he added to his pension by providing the music several times a week for services at the crematorium. Clifford's colourful stories about his time in variety theatre and the early days of television raised a few eyebrows among the more conservative members of St Stephen's, but he rather enjoyed the thought that he occasionally shook things up a bit.

Clifford was a little uncertain about the last passenger due to travel with them from Dunbridge to Tilbury. Raymond Callaghan was a large, untidy man with a sunny smile and great enthusiasm for life, in spite of the fact that he appeared to have no family left around him now, and he was steadily becoming very deaf. Not that he realized it, even when other members of the choir dug him in the ribs in an attempt to at least keep him in time, if not in tune. He simply smiled broadly at them and continued to sing with gusto in his booming voice.

Raymond was waiting at the gate when they arrived, and within seconds he was trying to fold his gangly arms and legs into the back seat alongside Clifford. His smile was infectious and there was an air of excitement in the car as they headed towards the motorway.

"So have you managed to organize cover for yourself at the playgroup, Barbara?" Clifford asked.

“Yes, they’ve all rallied round. John and I haven’t had a holiday for a while, so this break is long overdue, isn’t it, love?”

“Well, to be honest,” answered John, “it’s the itinerary of the cruise that swung it for me. I love history. I can’t think of anything better than standing where something important was actually said, done or thought. We’re going to such interesting places, the cradle of Christianity and culture in the British Isles. I’m going to make the most of every minute.”

“And I’m going to capture it all on my camera, aren’t I, love?” smiled Barbara. “Then we can remember those moments over and over again. In fact, we were thinking, when we’re all safely back home again, we could organize an evening when we show everyone our holiday snaps. That would go down well, don’t you think?”

“Oh, I’d like that,” agreed Raymond.

Clifford managed to smother a groan as he turned to watch the world go by through the car window.