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Opening extract from

The Boy Who Swam with Piranhas

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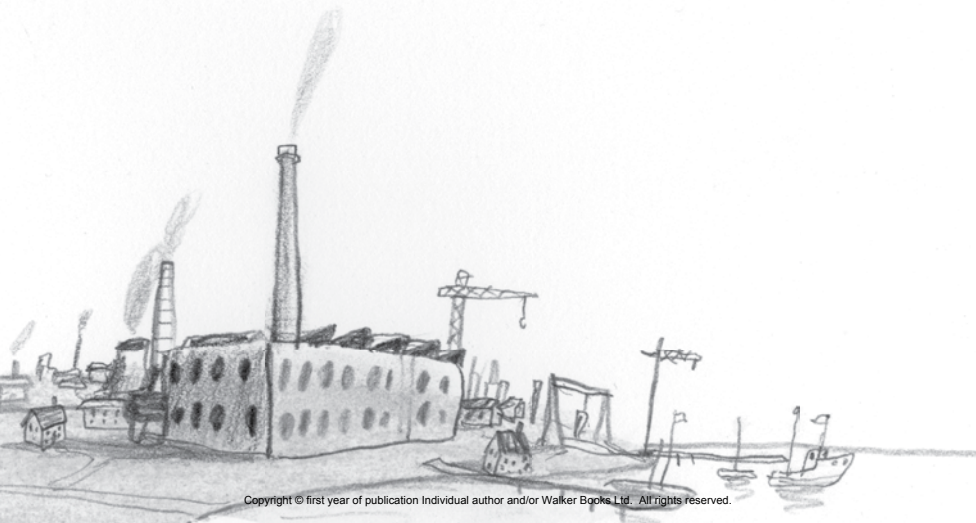
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1.

THE FACTORY



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ONE

It all started when Simpson's Shipyard shut. Simpson's had been on the river since the year dot. Blokes that lived by the river had been working at Simpson's since the year dot. Stan's dad had worked there until the accident. Uncle Ernie had worked there since he was a lad, just like his brother and their dad and their dad's dad and their dad's dad's dad. Then – *kapow!* – it was all over. They made cheaper ships and better ships in Korea and Taiwan and China and Japan. So Simpson's gates were slammed shut and the workers were given a few quid each and told to go away and the demolition gangs moved in. No more jobs for blokes like Uncle Ernie. But blokes like Uncle Ernie were proud and hard-working and they had families to care for.

Some found other jobs – in Perkins' Plastic Packaging Factory, for instance, or answering telephones for the Common Benefit Insurance and Financial Society or filling shelves at Stuffco or showing folks round the Great Industrial Heritage

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Museum (special exhibits: Superb Ships Shaped at Simpson's Shipyard Since the Year Dot). Some blokes just turned glum and shuffled round the streets all day or hung about on street corners or got ill and started to fade away. A few turned to the bottle, a few turned to crime and a couple ended up in the clink. But some, like Stan's uncle, Mr Ernest Potts, had big, big plans.

A couple of months after they'd flung him out of Simpson's, Ernie was standing with Stan and Annie on the riverbank. The cranes and the warehouses were being torn down. Fences and walls were getting smashed. There was wreckage all around. Wharves and jetties were being ripped apart. The air was filled with the noise of wrenching and ripping and banging and smashing. The earth trembled and juddered under their feet. The river was all wild waves and turbulence. The wind whipped in from the distant sea. Seagulls screeched like they'd never seen anything like it.

Ernie had been yelling and groaning and moaning for weeks. Now he sighed and grunted and cursed and spat.

''The world's gone mad!'' he yelled into the

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wind. ''It's gone absolutely bonkers!'' He stamped his feet. He shook his fists at the sky. ''But you'll not beat me!'' he yelled. ''No, you'll not get the better of Ernest Potts!''

And he looked beyond the old shipyard to where the river opened out to the shimmering silvery sea. There was a trawler coming in. It was red and beautiful and there was a flock of white seagulls all around it. It was lovely, shining in the sunlight and bouncing on the tide. It was a vision. It was like something arriving from a dream. It was a gift, a gorgeous promise. The trawler came to rest at the fish quay. A massive netful of beautiful silvery fish was unloaded. Ernie looked at the fish, and suddenly everything became plain to him.

''That's the answer!'' he cried.

''What's the answer?'' said Annie.

''What's the question?'' said Stan.

But too late. Ernie was off. He belted down to the quay and bought a couple of pounds of pilchards. He belted home and put the pilchards on to boil. He got his wheelbarrow and he belted back to Annie and Stan, who were still standing there on

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the riverbank. He put a few sheets of scrap metal onto the barrow.

Annie and Stan trotted at his side as he wobbled back home with them.

"What you doing, Ernie?" asked Annie.

"What you doing, Uncle Ernie?" asked Stan.

Ernie just winked at them. He dumped the metal in the garden. He opened his toolbox and took out his cutting gear and his welding gear and his pliers and his hammers, and he set to work cutting the sheets of metal and welding and hammering them into cylinders and curves.

"What you doing, Ernie?" asked Annie again.

"What you doing, Uncle Ernie?" asked Stan again.

Ernie pushed back his welding visor. He grinned. He winked. "Changing the world!" he said. He snapped the visor shut again.

Half an hour later, he'd made his first can. It was heavy and lumpy and rusty and misshapen but it was a can. Half an hour after that, the boiled and pulpy pilchards were squashed into it and a lid



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was welded on it. Ernie scribbled the name onto the can with a felt tip: Potts's Pilchards.

He punched the air. He did a little dance. ''It works!'' he declared.

Annie and Stan inspected the can. They looked into Ernie's goggly eyes. Ernie's eyes goggled back at them.

''There's a long way to go,'' said Ernie, ''but it absolutely positively definitely works.''

He cleared his throat. ''The future of this family,'' he announced, ''will be in the fish-canning business!''

And that was the start of Ernie's great venture: Potts's Spectacular Sardines; Potts's Magnificent Mackerel; and Potts's Perfect Potted Pilchards.

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