

THE VANISHED CRAFT

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There was a smell of hay and woodsmoke wafting on the air.

We were cruising on the narrow road North of Lake Wolfgang, heading West.

Topography changes little during fifty years, but it becomes hidden with the doings of man. The lakeshore, almost deserted when last I knew it, was now hemmed in with gardens, villas and hotels.

We were footloose in Europe, free as air and looking for a place to sleep.

Perhaps not quite as free as air. There was something buried within me that navigated my course, not quite known to me, but still there. It was this instinct that flipped the indicator and turned the wheel to the left, squeezing the car into the only unoccupied parking bay of eight. The parking space was for the guests of a new, very trim little hotel that promised "Windsurfing and Own Bathing Beach."

"Let's look at the beach," said my wife.

It consisted of a lawn running down to the lake and a wooden stair leading into the clear blue depth. There were two fibre-glass row-boats and a number of expensive surf-boards on racks in the little boat-house.

"So far, so good," said my wife. "Let's ask for a room."

We went into the bar. It was panelled throughout and would have been an excellent room, had not the walls been adorned with as many hunting trophies as could be accommodated.

Behind the bar stood a man of forty or so with a round face, who gave us the time of day and asked what we needed.

My wife told him, and he said: "All our rooms have showers and toilets, and you can have one that gives on the lake."

He called a girl and gave her a room-number.

"Please, see if you like the room," I asked my wife, and she left with the maid.

I asked for a beer, and the landlord drew it and put it on the bar. There was no-one else in the room, and we looked at each other. His eyes were light blue, flat and very steady - hunter's eyes, poacher's eyes,



sharp-shooter's eyes. I said:

"Out there, were the boat-house now stands...There used to be a fisherman's house, built of wood, with a thatched roof."

The landlord fidgeted and blinked twice. It is discomforting to be stared at over a distance of three generations. I shifted my gaze to the beer, which had held its head well. I took a sip. It was very good, and I said so.

"Yes," said the landlord, "you can sell bad beer only once. - A fisherman's house? Oh yes. That would be my grandfather's. But that was a good many years ago."

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The elapsed time between the question and the answer may have been twenty or thirty seconds. But the picture that came to my mind spanned three summers, three care-free long vacations of a nine-, ten-, eleven-year-old boy. I remembered the little bay as it had been during our first summer there. The old fisherman's house, the four rustic tables under the cherry trees, the little landing stage with the two gundelows tied alongside.

The gundelows: My first triumph over the seemingly impossible. That was fifty, almost fifty-one years ago, during a significant episode of childhood.

My parents used to hire a row-boat by the day to transport the family and our occasional guests to bathing-beaches and points of interest around the lake. Nowadays families use an outboard motor to provide the motive power for such trips. My family used me. Not that I felt put upon: Though small at age nine, I was well-muscled and enduring, toughened by running all day in the woods and swimming long distances in the lake.

At that time, row-boats were used exclusively by the summer people: Anyone could row. The natives used long, slender, stately gundelows to transport both passengers and freight, and for fishing. A gundelow is a flat-bottomed craft with a high, raking prow and a decked poop. The oarsman stands on the poop, facing forward, and propels the craft with a single broadbladed heavy oar pivoted in a forked row-lock on the right side.

Anyone who has ever skulled the usual row-boat is aware that you can't keep a straight course or manoeuvre at will with only one oar. Thus, I found the fast and easy progress of the native-manned gundelow intriguing. The large oar is moved with short strokes very close to the side of the boat and is brought back in the water with a figure-eight squiggle to counteract the bias. To move to the left, the oar is stroked further from the gunwale



and brought back in the air. A right turn is generated by using the oar like a rudder, holding it at an angle. All this sounds complicated while you set it down. But in fact it was a very graceful and precise craft, and I longed to master it.

At the time, fishermen were poor folk. This particular fisherman's wife supplemented the family income by serving rustic teas, good coffee, bread-and-butter and lovely homemade cakes. You could get a simple supper, fresh lake fish and potatoes.

My parents discovered the potentialities of the place quite by accident when we passed by in our row-boat one afternoon. We were quite a large party the family and friends with their children, and we promptly settled down to a lavish tea.

But my mind was not on cakes and coffee. I refused a second piece of plumtart, and my mother eyed me thoughtfully, concluding that there must be something wrong with me, since there was nothing wrong with the plumtart.

I blushed and whispered in my mother's ear. She promptly called the landlady.

"Could the boy use a gundelow for half-an-hour or so?"

This demand was unusual. Summer people did not use gundelows. The landlady was doubtful.

"He might fall in."

My mother did not suppress a peal of laughter. The idea tickled her sense of humour.

"Serve him right. He swims like a fish."

I did not fall in, but neither did I succeed in moving in a straight line. I made several lefthand circuits before my mother called to me to row us home in our boat, and I reached the jetty only with a supreme effort.

But, being young, I was not discouraged. One of the delusions of childhood is that, what one man can do, another man can do too. Now faith may move mountains, but it does not move gundelows - at least not where you want them to go. You have to know the craft, and I was determined to know it.

Next time, we arrived at the fisherman's inn on foot. A two-hour hike was not considered excessive to have tea at a given place. I had the loan of the gundelow again and felt very much like a cripple hopping around on one leg. But the next time I managed to lay a straight course - the quick, short backward stroke and the forward squiggle came out fine. I had less success with the right turn. Either nothing at all happened, or the gundelow

stopped in its tracks, swinging broadside. It was a very subdued boy who walked home with the family that night. My parents did not inquire about my progress. But I felt at the very edge of a breakthrough, the way the Manhattan Project team must have felt before El Alamo: Next time, everything would click!

Well, everything did not click next time, but I was past the critical point. I crossed the lake, almost fell in when I beached the craft, practiced left turns, right turns and figure-eights. I returned late, my parents were furious, but I was triumphant: I had mastered a craft, a real craft, something none of the summer people could do, and I had done it all on my own.

From this day on, I refused to pilot anything but a gundelow. The man from whom we hired our boats was a little taken aback by our request, but he promised to provide a gundelow at the price of a keelboat, and so he did. Summer people were all mad anyhow, and some were a little madder than others.

And thus it came about that, for three long summers, I did all the boating required by our family with a gundelow. I have since had many ordinary successes: I became the fastest sprinter at my school, I passed my driving test first time off with a complimentary remark from the tester, I turned out to be the best rifle shot within a large body of men - none of these gave me the sweetness, the sudden upsurge of spirit that this my first, puny triumph over a simple craft had given me.

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I finished my beer and addressed the landlord again.

"Do you know what a gundelow is?"

The card once inserted, one could almost hear the wheels whirr. After ten seconds, the other card dropped out.

"You mean those flatbottomed craft with the one oar at the stern?"

"Exactly. Are they still around? I want to hire one."

All summer people are mad, some more than others.

"Oh, well. There may be one or two rotting away in boathouses around the lake, but I doubt you'd find a one that wouldn't founder."

So I would never know if I still had the craft.

The craft was gone.