

Holy Smokes!

An account of how not to run a rapid on the Petawawa River in Algonquin Park, Ontario

by Jonathan Lomas

"Oh no!" It was the moment I realized we were beyond the point of recovery. In the front, Tom was futilely, nay desperately, leaning away from the giant boulder that was soon to be our demise. It was as if he believed that, by sheer force of his considerable personality, the canoe, now two-thirds full of water, could be leveraged off this rude intrusion of Canadian Shield. It was hopeless. The canoe was pinned; time for us to bail out. "Tom," I yelled above the cacophonous din of rushing water, "it's hopeless. Just get the hell out."

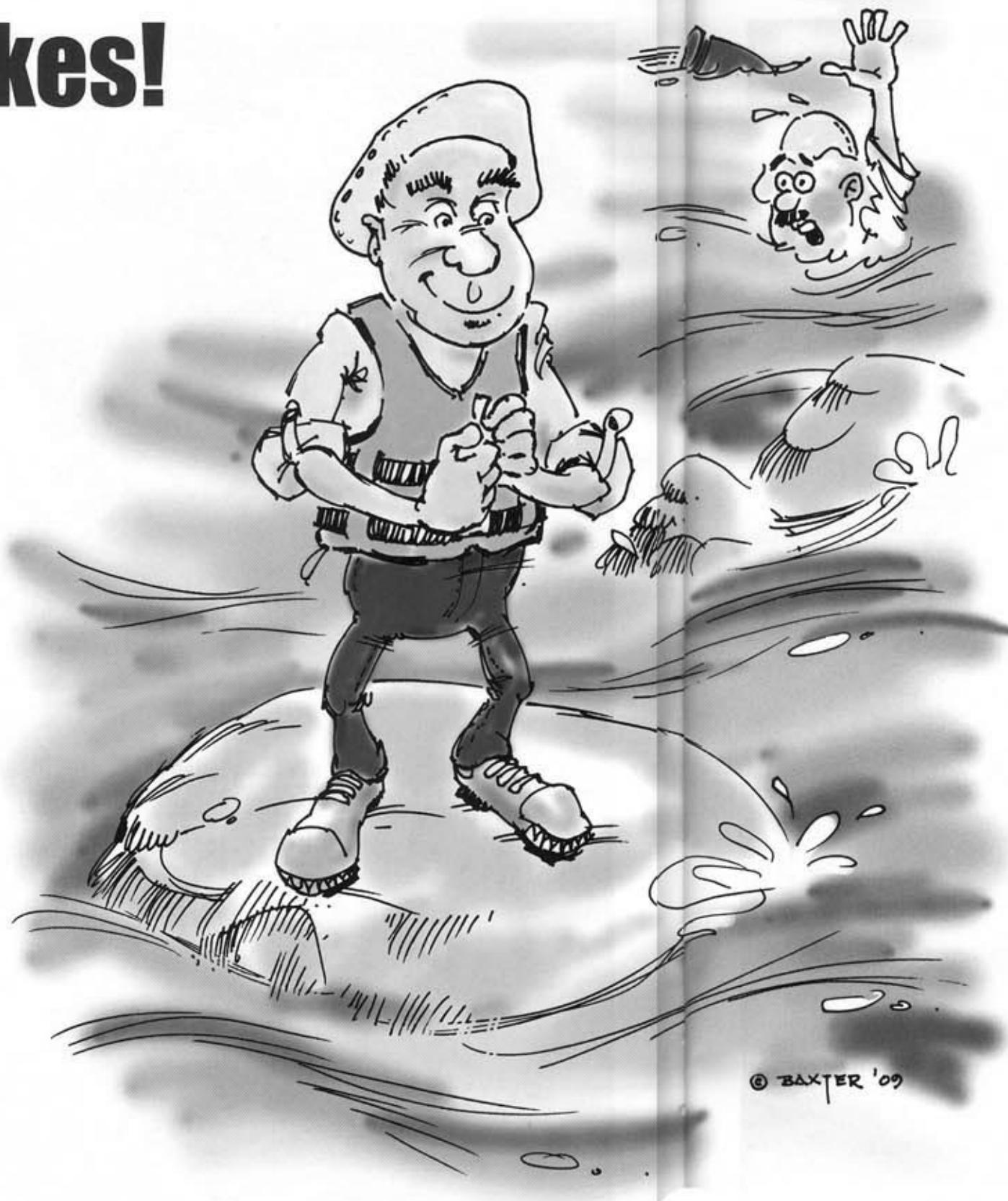
I reached forward and pulled myself up onto the boulder, paddle still in hand and heart still in mouth. I was grateful for the surprisingly flat surface, rubbed smooth by countless springs of grinding gravel, ice, and the flotsam of receding northern winters. Space enough for two. "Get up here," I yelled, reaching down to help him onto our granite raft.

We stood up to survey the scene for the first time. Quietly and almost simultaneously we inhaled through clenched teeth, "Holy jeez, what now?" We'd been doing this together long enough that neither of us took time for recriminations. Shit happens. We watched as first our food barrel and then Tom's pack bobbed off down the rapids. Thank goodness for these drop and pool rapids. The barrel and packs, Tom's now joined by mine, were soon circulating in the pool below.

Unburdened by the loss of its load and with a hefty shove from us, the canoe was liberated to make its escape. "Watch out!" Tom yelled, as a slow grinding and a sound like the last gasps of exiting bath-

water announced the end of the canoe's love affair with the rock. It dropped to the pool some 60 metres downriver, lumbering there through the rapids like an over-laden pack mule well beyond capacity, finally settling into sedate circuits behind the packs.

We two forsaken souls now stood alone on a rock slap bang in the middle of the raging waters, with no visible means to explain our arrival in the midst of the maelstrom. Should anyone have happened along at that moment they may have mistaken us for idiots, on a rest-stop



during some crazy craftless descent of the river.

It was difficult to concentrate over the rapids' incessant roar. When we'd scouted it from the shore, just minutes before, the river looked like it was offering up a wel-

coming path, a clear highway through the liquid minefield. Now, in amongst it – the bubbling sink holes, the washing-machine hydraulics, the sheer standing waves – it was an assault on the senses. Foaming spray leapt off the boulders to soak our last unbaptised regions, misting our vision of what the God of Chaos had created. She had touched her wand to the waters, scattering random explosions like a no-man's land between opposing trenches. The angry rush and roar of water, robbed of its natural course, made exhausting yells the only possible way to communicate. Even the rivery smells of decomposition and decay, formerly so familiar, now carried a foreboding edge.

I was the first to broach the idea of an exit plan: "What do you think, Tom?" In a surprisingly calm yell, and with the resignation of the condemned, Tom replied, "Not much else for it but jump." He paused before continuing. "You first." Never one to procrastinate, especially when the impending course of action left much room for rational second thought, I leapt into the cauldron.

My first thought, after my reluctant late-leaping brain began to catch up with my precipitous gung-ho body, was whether I had remembered to do up my life jacket. Phew, I had. Next, the mantra of canoe wet entry started its incessant beat in my head: "Watch your feet, watch your feet, watch your feet..." You see, bouncing down rapids on your ass while viewing your feet is far safer than head first with the danger of feet stuck under a rock; the sheer force of waves will drown such a head-first escapee with a never-ending face wash.

I was in the groove, secure in the knowledge that my emergency training was working. Despite the frequent stabbing pains as rock after boulder after stone inflicted its toll on my bouncing rear end, I was feeling confident that I might get out of this alive. I was composed enough to peer back up river to check out Tom's progress, expecting him to be right behind. Instead I was astounded to see him still upon the boulder, not plucking up the courage to enter the fearsome waves but, apparently, re-arranging the contents of his pockets and adjusting his attire. Did he think he

was a bloody Hollywood film star with a camera crew on the bank!?

The search for an explanation came to an abrupt halt as the surging waters spat me into the circling orbit of the pool, with its already captured canoe and packs. My brain, by now re-established in my body, was issuing instructions to retrieve these sole means of eventual escape and get them to shore.

I grabbed the gunwale of the green craft as it swept by on one of its laps. Tugging with all my might I started the long haul to shore. I may as well have been trying to pull the Titanic with a Tonka toy. Loaded with water, the canoe was like a cast-iron bath tub. Try as I might, progress was painfully slow and increasingly exhausting. Not a good swimmer at the best of times, I was starting to feel panic well up from some primordial place of self-preservation. "Jesus," I thought, "I can hardly get my breath. But I've gotta get this canoe ashore. Can't get it to shore, must get it to shore. Got to let it go, can't let it go. Got no energy, got no strength. I'm going to drown! Must let go." With a pathetic half-shove I separated myself from the dead weight. Marshalling the last shreds of my flagging will and digging deep for the last gulps of air I splashed my way across the cavernous gap to the shore. Finally it was within reach, just a few more strokes; I flopped onto the muddy bank, pine and spruce pressing in on the water's edge, looking down with disapproving judgment on my efforts.

I made it to my feet just in time to see Tom latch onto the canoe and haul it those last few metres to land. "Thank God for that," I gasped, still struggling for breath. "I thought I was a goner trying to get that thing here. Anyway, what the hell were you doing back on that rock for so long? It looked like you were preening for a picture!?"

"Nothing much," said Tom. "Just double-wrapping the Colts. Didn't want them getting wet on the swim." While I was nearly drowning, Tom was ensuring the trip's supply of smokes!

Jonathan Lomas is a retired university professor from Ottawa. He has been canoeing the rivers of Ontario and Quebec for over thirty years, mostly without incident.