**No sweat by Michelle Magorian**

**Part 1**

Mark walked out of the men's changing room to the big pool. At the end of the roped off lanes, under the charity Swimathon banner, sat men and women with clipboards. Like the attendants they were wearing red Swimathon T- shirts.

Mark stood uncertainly for a moment. He had been told his lane was the second one in from the far side. He walked alongside the pool past the white plastic chairs to where a young man was sitting.   
‘Are you the lap counter for the 12-14 group?’ he asked.  
‘Yes. Which one are you?’  
‘Mark. Mark Stevens.’  
The man ticked his name. ‘Where’s the rest of your team?’  
‘They’re coming later. I’m swimming the first hundred lengths and they’re sharing the next hundred between them.’  
The man nodded.   
No sweat, thought mark.

Mark sat down; his towel draped round his shoulders. Not that he needed it. It was boiling. He twisted the red bathing cap they had distributed to all the participants and gazed past the rows of flags, which had been hung above the pool, towards the clock. Nearly two. He dropped his shoulders and blew out a few breaths. Relax, he told himself.

Just then pop music began blaring out of two speakers. He shaded his eyes with his hands. Even though it was daytime the light seemed brighter than usual, and there were more of them. He glanced across at the balloons decked out over the boarded-out baby pool. Already people were sitting there at white tables and chairs drinking tea or fruit juice.

To his surprise his stomach was already fluttering. He mustn't get too nervous. Nerves could exhaust you.

He began to take in the teams on either side of his lane. Looking at them through Jacko and Terry's eyes he couldn't help grinning.

On one side was a team of four youths aged between sixteen and eighteen years old. A short stocky man in his forties wearing a peaked cap was giving them a pep talk, revving them up and waving a stopwatch. Mark guessed they were from a youth club. Boy Scout stuff.

He, Jacko and Terry didn't need to join a club. They just got on and did things. No sweat.

Knowing that he was at least four years younger than the team of youths, Mark felt very superior. Just look at them, he thought, hanging on to the coaches every word, looking as serious as if they were entering The Olympics.

The young men began shaking their legs, warming up. Daft that they were all there at the same time, Mark thought. The ones that were third and fourth would be worn out from watching before they had begun. He glanced at the team on the other side. He couldn't see anyone at first. And then he did.

She was an elderly woman with cropped grey hair. A wrinkly! He smothered a laugh. He was going to be swimming next to a bunch of wrinklies! He could hear Jacko and Terry shrieks and feel their powerful elbows crashing into his ribs with mirth.

He looked down hastily. He mustn't get an attack of laughter. He'd never get through one length if he did.

Out of the corner of his eye he watched her take off a heavy purple towelling robe and pull on her Swimathon bathing cap. Embarrassing to go around in a swimsuit at her age.

‘Attention everyone!’ A voice Rang out. Mark sat up straight. This was it.

A tall man in his fifties was addressing them. Mark knew the rules. He didn't have to hear them. He, Jacko and Terry had studied them enough in the sports centre canteen. No sweat.

Before long he saw the man approach him.   
‘On your own?’ he asked.  
‘The rest of my team are coming later.’  
‘He’s doing a hundred,’ said Mark’s lap counter.  
‘How old are you?’  
‘Twelve,’ nearly, he added inside his head. ‘The others are fourteen’  
The man smiled. ‘Good on you.’

To Mark’s annoyance he felt a flush of pleasure. He shrugged off the man’s remark.  
‘You’ll notice some of the teams will be swimming very fast,’ said the man. ‘Don’t let that bother you. Go at your own pace.’  
Mark nodded.  
‘Hello Joan,’ said the man, and he waved at the old woman next to him. ‘Back again?’

So the wrinkly’s name was Joan. Mark shut his ears to their conversation and looked up at the clock.

He could swim a length a minute up to about thirty lengths and then he’d begin to slow down.

Two hours, he reckoned. Two hours of swimming. Not the best way of thinking about it. He must pace himself, length by length and keep adding up how much money he could raise for the Children's Hospital.   
Nice to think he'd be earning money by doing something he enjoyed.

‘Everyone ready?’ said the man in charge.

The coach on his left had his hand on the shoulder of the first youth.   
‘You can do it,’ he was saying firmly.   
‘Wally’ muttered Mark. He was going to be swimming half the distance mark was going to swim. Mark pulled on his hat and slipped off his towel.

He heard the wrinkly lower herself into the water. The rest of her team would probably be hobbling in hours later. That is if they hadn't pegged out first. He was grinning again. Concentrate, he told himself firmly. He stood up and slipped into the water.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------  
**part 2**

To his surprise he felt tired. After only one length he was ready to get out. Perhaps breaststroke was the wrong one to choose. But it was his best stroke. He'd never be able to do the crawl for hundred lengths.

A high wave from the youth in the next Lane sent a gallon of chlorine down marks throughout and into his eyes. He coughed, gasping for breath. This was a disaster.

Relax, he told himself.

By the third length he got his wind back, but he still felt wiped out. He steered to the side of the lane, away from the Olympic youth who was crawling at high speed and making waves all around him. The wrinkly was a more sedate swimmer.

It wasn't till he was ten lengths in that the tiredness dissipated. With relief he realised that he had been warming up in the water. That and shaking off his nerves. He had also worked out a steady rhythm. One that he felt would carry him to hundred.

Now he was enjoying himself. He had started to glide. There was nothing to think about, nothing to worry about. There was just him and the water, the bright lights, the pumping music, the loud splashing and the reverberating voices of the spectators. The noise was deafening.

The first forty lengths were a doddle. It was around his forty second length when the coach in the next lane started yelling at the youth in the water. ‘You can do it! You can do it!’

The three other youths were yelling too, fit to burst. It annoyed Mark, the big deal they were making of it.

Mark couldn't see the youth’s head, just a flurry of water drawing closer to the end of the lane. The coach pressed his stopwatch and the next youth lowered himself in. Within seconds the coach had a towel round the first youth’s shoulders and was sending someone off to get hot chocolate like he'd climbed Mount Everest. Mark turned and pushed off, glancing round for Jacko and Terry. No sign of them yet. Still, there was plenty of time.

It was when the second youth was being urged on to swim faster that the penny dropped. They weren't getting worked up about the number of laps they were swimming. It was a time they were taking to swim them. They were obviously trying to win some record for speed. That's what all the excitement was about.

As mark touched the side of the bath, his lap counter looked up. ‘Twelve lengths to go,’ he said.

And there was no Jacko and no Terry. They had to arrive soon otherwise Mark’s hundred lengths wouldn't even be counted and his team would be disqualified.

Three months of working himself up to a hundred lengths down the tube. And would his sponsors pay up if their team hadn't done the two hundred lengths?

As he turned at the end of the pool, someone put a new tape on. The sound blasted out of the two speakers so loudly it nearly knocked him over.

As Mark headed back towards his lap counter, he realised that part of what had driven him to do a hundred lengths was the desire to impress Jacko and Terry. It was important that they knew he was as tough as them, even though they were approaching six feet and broad shouldered with it. They had to be there to see him swim that hundred lengths. Be there to show their amazement and slapped him on the back even though it stung like a bird when they did it. Then he'd be one of them. They would be a trio, not a duo and a hanger on. He would never feel lost for words with them again and he'd be able to make jokes as brilliantly as them.

Ninety- eight lengths, two to go.

Two his annoyance he felt a stab of jealousy for the team in the next lane. Not for their swimming ability, he was as good, but because they had mates rooting for every length they swam. No one was even noticing Mark, aside from the lap counter, who he realised now wasn't allowed to flicker a face muscle. It was then that he remembered the wrinkly. She was still swimming to. He had been so wrapped up in himself that he hadn't noticed that her team hadn't shown up either.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Part 3**

Mark swam slowly towards the end of the lane. His heart sinking, his fingers touched the wall.   
‘A hundred,’ said the lap counter.   
Mark rested his arms over the end.   
‘What are you going to do?’ asked the man.  
Mark had a lump in his throat the size of a fist. Do, he thought, do? Cry my bloody eyes out, that’s what he felt like doing.   
‘Sorry, I’m afraid your hundred doesn’t count,’ he continued.   
Mark nodded miserably.

Next to him the youths were whistling and cheering. If only they'd shut up and the music was turned down, he could think more clearly.

A refined voice pierced through his misery. It was the wrinkly.   
‘What’s up?’  
None of your business, you old prune, he whispered angrily inside his head.   
‘his team haven’t turned up.’  
‘Can’t he keep swimming till they do?’  
‘He’s already swum a hundred.’  
‘I know.’ She turned to him. ‘I’ve been watching you out of the corner of my eye. You’ve done marvellously. Come on, keep going. You can give me moral support.’  
‘Where’s your team?’ he asked.   
She pointed to herself. ‘I’m my team. I’m trying for the two hundred-lengths certificate.’  
‘Two hundred? But that’s three miles,’ and her stared at her, stunned.   
‘And a bit.’  
‘Sorry’ he added quickly, realising his jaw was still open. But he couldn’t help himself. A wrinkly going for two hundred lengths!   
She laughed.   
Mark looked up at his lap counter. ‘Can I?’  
‘Sure if you can manage it.’  
‘They’ll be here soon, I know they will. They’ve never let me down before. I expect they’ve been held up somewhere.’  
The man nodded.   
‘let’s go,’ said the woman smiling.   
And Mark, in spite of his desire to remain Mr Cool, found himself smiling back.

They pushed themselves on.

Now he really would need to pace himself. He consciously relaxed his shoulders again and pushed more firmly with his legs. No, he thought, his mates had never let him down. Come to think of it, though, he'd never asked them to do anything before. But he hadn't asked them. They'd volunteered. No sweat, they had said. Fifty lengths. Dead easy.

So what had happened to them? He pictured them lying in a pool of blood on Wembley High Street, gasping out some garbled message to the ambulance men about telling Mark they couldn't make it, but both sinking into unconsciousness before their vital message could be understood . He touched the wall and turned. A hundred and one. Take it easy, he told himself. They'll be here. There's probably been a hold up on the tube. They were always having trouble on their line. They were probably stuck somewhere, unable to ring the sports centre because the nearest phones had been vandalised. They'd be in a right Stu, cursing and pacing the platform and punching walls.

A hundred and two lengths.

He blew heavily into the water. They could be ill of course. Both of them? Unless it was food poisoning from a takeaway kebab or pizza. Yes, they were probably heaving up somewhere, unable to keep down a teaspoon of water, struggling to get to the door, picking up their towels, all strength gone, but still determined to make it.

A hundred and three lengths.

When Mark swam his hundred and fiftieth length he knew that Jacko and Terry weren't going to make it. He turned over onto his back. His neck ached so painfully that he thought it would crack. He’d done a hundred and fifty useless lengths. Useless because in no way could he swim any further. If he could get out and have a break, he might make it to two hundred, but it wouldn't count.

He was past caring now. He was so tired he could hardly breathe. He’d take a rest doing a slow backstroke before climbing out.

Joan was still going. He had to call her Joan now. Wrinkly was the word Jacko and Terry used for anyone elderly and it didn't suit her. He glanced aside at her. She had more guts, stamina, and strength than the two of them rolled together. He pictured them making their comments in their trendy jeans and the latest trainers and jackets. legs just that little too far apart, macho men. Hey, Marco we forgot. He could hear them saying it. No hard feelings, eh? Slam of hand on shoulder. You know how it is? Yeah, thought Mark. I know how it is. Next year, eh? yeah, next year, or the year after.

He smiled bitterly. His so- called mates had never intended coming at all. Oh yeah, we can do this. Oh yeah, we can do that. No sweat.   
  
And that summed them up. No sweat. They were incapable of producing a drop of it because they didn't do anything. They were all talk.   
Yet he had longed to be one of them. Long to stop feeling tongue- tied and small and boring. But it wasn't him that was boring. He had just been bored in their company. Bored, bored, bored.

A hundred and fifty-one.

Why hadn't he seen through them before? How come he had believed all their blether? As he lay on his back, a new emotion swept through him. Anger. Anger at them. And anger with himself. As soon as he touched the wall he turned over and began to crawl. He still knew he wouldn’t make it, but at least moving his neck from side to side would ease the pain. He lashed furiously in the water like a tiger released from captivity. Wild and powerful, yet still in control. Still graceful.

As he crawled length after length, he swam out all the feelings he had kept bottled up inside him for months. All the doubts he had ignored when Jacko and Terry never turned up for a practise with him but told him they were practising on other days. How could he have been so stupid? Because he was desperate to have friends. Any friends.

Almost the dullest in his class, but not quite. Never feeling he could mix with the dumbos or the ones that got by. Switched off and switched out. That was him.

A hundred and seventy lengths.

The team beside him had finished. They were jubilant. Well pleased with themselves. Joan was still swimming. As if she sensed him looking at her she beamed at him. ‘Think I’ll make it?’ she yelled.   
Yeah, course you will.’ He nearly said, no sweat, but stopped himself.

His neck had eased up now. His shoulders and ankles ached instead. He rolled over into the back-stroke again to give himself another rest.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------  
**Part 4**  
By the time Mark completed his hundred and eightieth length there was no one else left in the pool except him and Joan. The only people around the pool were their two lap counters and a lifeguard on a high seated podium at the side. The man who was in charge came out of the office and gazed in Mark’s direction. Don't say he's going to disqualify me now, thought Mark. But the man grinned and raised two thumbs. He was rooting for him! He gave Joan the same message.

It was then that mark noticed that the lifeguard was smiling. Mark hadn't even bothered to look at him. And he gave a thumbs up sign too! Three people wanted him to make it. It pushed him to complete the next length.

Soon after this incident, attendants came out of the office, curious to watch Joan and him. They appeared relaxed and not at all bothered at having to stay behind.

The early evening sun had found its way to a long window at the side and it streamed into the pool. Someone had turned the music off. It was so quiet that Mark could hear the water lapping around him. He could have been swimming in a private pool in Malibu.

Two attendants were removing the flags above their heads.   
‘Take your time,’ said his lap counter, picking up Mark’s anxiety. ‘Keep to your own steady pace, we’re not in a hurry.’

Ten lengths to go and he knew. He knew he was going to make it.

Please don’t let me pass out, get cramp, or die, he told himself. Attendants had begun to gather round his lap counter who was now fighting down a smile.

‘Come on, you’re nearly there,’ shouted a tall blond-haired girl.

Mark nearly choked. Jacko and Terry had been lusting after her for weeks. They never said hello to her of course. They just stared at her and talked about her. And here she was rooting for him, twelve years old, nearly, and puny. Correction, he told himself. Puny people don’t swim a hundred and ninety-two lengths. Three miles!

He laughed. He had no friends and he was laughing. Crazy. But he decided he’d rather be himself and have no friends than try and pretend to be someone he wasn’t. And it made him feel feather light.

It was the last length and it was so sweet he didn’t want to rush it. Joan knew and she cheered him from the water. And then everyone round the pool was clapping. And the man in charge was clasping his hands above his head.

Mark came in on a leisured crawl, touched the side and hung there, high. He swam to the steps at the side. He was too weak to pull himself out of the pool from the water. He had hardly reached the chairs when his legs buckled. He sat down quickly and wrapped the towel around his aching shoulders. His legs were shaking.

His ankles ached and his feet felt as though someone had stuck them in a fridge. All he wanted to do was collapse into bed and sleep.   
‘Two hundred lengths,’ said his lap counter, smiling.   
Mark nodded, still trying to catch his breath. The man in charge grinned down at him.   
‘looks like you didn’t need your teammates after all.’  
‘yeah’ he agreed.

The man handed him an orange juice. Mark held it for a moment and then sipped it slowly. He wanted to sit still and take in what he had achieved. ‘Two hundred lengths’ he whispered.   
‘I have just swum two hundred lengths.’ He had just proved something to himself. He wasn’t sure what, but it felt very good.  
‘You’d best get dressed before you get too cold,’ said the lap counter.  
‘Not yet,’ said Mark, putting down the beaker.  
‘It’s over now.’  
‘Not for Joan it isn’t’. And he pulled himself shakily to his feet stumbled over to her lane and started yelling.