Keith Paull: Donkey Bends and Pirate Hitches: Keith Paull gets tied up in Swallowdale

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‘Roger, hop ashore and make the painter fast to that stump.’ said Captain John.
‘Aye, aye, sir!’ answered Roger.
‘Fisherman’s, round turn and two half hitches, clove, cow or donkey?’

That passage does not come from any of the books, but it might well have done. Throughout the stories Ransome refers to a variety of knots, bends and hitches, sometimes by name and often by inference. For example, discounting the specialist technique of tying flies for fishing, *Swallowdale* alone contains more than twenty occasions when knots would have been used.

In these days of clips, pre-cut nylon rope and patent fastenings the old skills of pully-hauly seamanship are fast disappearing, but when the Swallows and the Amazons sailed the high seas these arts were second nature to sailing folk, so what knots the children knew and where they learned them is fairly clear.

Daddy was in all probability a cadet at Dartmouth before the First World War, and would have learned his ropcwork from instructors who had sailed in square riggers. Such skills were mandatory for naval officers in those day. Those knots found in *The Manual of Seamanship* plus a few specialities gleaned from a lifetime of experience would have been the ones he taught to John and Susan at Falmouth while instructing them in the art of sailing.

The Amazons had their Uncle Jim, who whilst not a naval man, seems to have had a lot of mining experience in addition to a wealth of seamanlike skills picked up in far-flung corners of the world, so it is likely that he taught them some very useful and unusual knots. Remembering that Nancy and Peggy were brought up beside the lake, it would also be remarkable if they had not been taught some simple knots by a friendly boatman at a very early age.

There are thousands of knots which may be tied and a lifetime could be spent in discovering them, but a small number carefully learned would have met all the needs of the Swallows and Amazons. As befits a pirate captain and Terror of the Seas, Nancy could probably have worked a decorative knot such as a Turk’s Head on the tiller of *Amazon* and Susan might well have slung her whistle on a lanyard plaited with fancy sennits.

With all this in mind, the next line of the imaginary passage might well have been, 'Don't be a donkey yourself, Roger! Just drop a bowline over it!' replied the captain.

'Oughtn't we to have reefed?' said the mate.

The name 'knot' is properly given to knots tied in the same piece of rope, to make a loop, lock one end or join both ends together, as in the case of the most well-known knot of all, the Reef Knot. It get its name from its job of securing the reefing points in a sail, pieces of rope hanging in pairs and used to shorten canvas. It lies flat and has a firm hold, but the most important and surprising thing about the Reef Knot is the ease with which it is released.

It is worked by making two half-knots in reverse directions as shown in the diagram, making sure that a reasonable length of the running ends stands clear of the knot. To release it again, take hold of both the standing and running parts at one end and jerk them straight. This capsizes the knot into a Cow Hitch around the straight rope and this can be easily removed by sliding it off the end.

We won't even talk about the lubberly result of tying the two half-knots in the same direction except to say that this is the infamous Granny Knot and no Swallow or Amazon would ever admit to tying one!

Amongst other things, Reef Knots are ideal for handkerchiefs pressed into service as bandages for scraped knees and knuckles. It is an ideal way to tie shoelaces if made into a bow, and, as Titty told the Ship's Boy, it can be used for joining them together to hang round the neck while creeping under bridges!

If, on the other hand, two separate ropes are being made fast to each other the knot is properly called a Bend, and the seamanlike one to use is the Sheet Bend. The name came about because it was used to add extra rope to the sheet, or controlling line of a sail. When tied safely the two running ends come out on the same side of the knot as shown in the diagram.

'Peggy flung her a rope

and made it fast to a ringbolt
in the stern.'

When John moored Swallow to the stump in the harbour or slung the line which acted as a ridge for the stores tent, he would have used some kind of Hitch, the correct name of the family of knots which fasten ropes to rigid objects.

The Clove Hitch is a very useful member of this tribe and consists of of two Half Hitches going the same way round the spar to which they are fastened. A Half Hitch is simply a turn of rope in which the running end passed under the standing part. To make a Clove Hitch completely secure all you do is put an extra Half Hitch round the standing part. Not only is this a very firm hitch, you have just discovered another knot, the Soldier's Hitch!

It is very likely that Captain Flint used a Soldier's Hitch, at one end of the bracken parcel containing the trout, taking additional half-hitches called Marling Hitches every couple of inches along the bundle to keep it firm, finally tying it off at the other end with another Soldier's Hitch. The same idea could well be used for tying up bundles of tent-poles or firewood or for that matter any long thin packages. In the old day sailors stowed their hammocks by securing them with a series of Marling Hitches.

We cannot leave the subject of hitches without mentioning a knot that John was bound to have been taught and whose name tells you exactly how to do it. It is the Round Turn and Two Half Hitches, a hitch so firm that it can be used to moor a battleship to a buoy or even a War Canoe to an overhanging branch. An added advantage of this particular hitch is that the line can be hauled fairly taut as the turn is taken, making it useful for rigging such things as clothes-lines if the crew have been shipwrecked.

'Nancy rigged up a regular
cat's cradle of rope between
the two poles and folded up
the tent for a mattress.'

Many of us can dimly remember that when we were small children we were were shown a complicated network of string constructed on the fingers of both hands and told it was a Cat's Cradle. It used to puzzle me as to how small the cat would need to be and why it should want a cradle in the first place.

In Nelson's navy, a larger version of this childhood puzzle was known to men in charge of practical seamanship such as the Bos'n and it is just possible that it got its name from a mental association with his other cat, the one with nine tails.

When laid out in rope by brawny Jack Tars, the Cat's Cradle became a self-adjusting sling on which very heavy objects such as gun barrels could be manhandled, but it is doubtful if even Captain Nancy would have had the skill to make such a thing. The simplest way in which she could have made a stretcher for Roger would be by thrusting the two tent poles through a coil of rope, spreading it evenly along the length, and making the ends fast to the poles with clove hitches. When the coils are padded this becomes a very practical stretcher.

‘The arrow . . . had been neatly spliced with red string.’

To stop the end of a rope from fraying, it is usual to bind it with a length of thin twine, a technique called Whipping. There are many with exotic names such as the West Country, American and Sailmaker’s, but the one which John would most likely have know would have been the Common Whipping. As we can see from the diagram, the principle is simply that the twine is wound tightly round the rope and the end hauled back under to keep it taut.

A whipping can also be used to retain solid objects such as the fletchings on arrows, or for repairing a broken shaft and hiding a message under it. When used in this way it is quite often called a splice, but we have to be careful we don’t confuse the name with that of a family of knots with which ropes are fastened by working their strands together. The Common Whipping would have made a very neat method of making a bunch of heather fast to a handle when Susan wanted a brush to sweep out Peter Duck’s cave.

Although in some of the books, particularly *Winter Holiday*, the Swallows and Amazons practised their signalling, we are never told that the Captains issued lengths of rope to each member of the crew and had knotting sessions. Perhaps each individual worked at his or her knots during term time when anything which seemed to bring the lake and island closer would have been welcome, but practice is the only way to master the art. There is no such thing as a knot being half correct and good seamen should be able to tie them blindfold, behind their backs, or hanging upside-down under water! Do get hold of a bit of proper rope for practice though. Knots have to be worked up and drawn together firmly, and string tends to slip, capsize and generally turn out an unseamanlike mess.

We have now learned more than enough to do every job mentioned in *Swallowdale*, but I know someone is going to ask about the Donkey that Roger mentioned in the imaginary extract at the beginning. It does not appear in any of the stories but if Nancy knew it she would without doubt have used it often; in fact she might have even renamed it the Pirate Hitch.

The Donkey Hitch is a kind of trick knot that can be used to make a boat fast but can be released with a sudden jerk on the running part if a pirate needs to make a quick getaway. When you have become expert with the Donkey Hitch, also sometimes known as the Highwayman’s Hitch, see how many times you can tie and release it in ten seconds.