

**JOHN MEADE
FALKNER**

MOONFLEET

John Meade Falkner

Moonfleet

«Public Domain»

Falkner J.

Moonfleet / J. Falkner — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER 1	6
CHAPTER 2	11
CHAPTER 3	16
CHAPTER 4	22
CHAPTER 5	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

John Meade Falkner

Moonfleet

Says the Cap'n to the Crew,
We have slipped the Revenue,
I can see the cliffs of Dover on the lee:
Tip the signal to the *Swan*,
And anchor broadside on,
And out with the kegs of Eau-de-Vie,
Says the Cap'n:
Out with the kegs of Eau-de-Vie.
Says the Lander to his men,
Get your grummets on the pin,
There's a blue light burning out at sea.
The windward anchors creep,
And the Gauger's fast asleep,
And the kegs are bobbing one, two, three,
Says the Lander:
The kegs are bobbing one, two, three.

But the bold Preventive man
Primes the powder in his pan
And cries to the Posse, Follow me.
We will take this smuggling gang,
And those that fight shall hang
Dingle dangle from the execution tree,
Says the Gauger:
Dingle dangle with the weary moon to see.

CHAPTER 1 IN MOONFLEET VILLAGE

So sleeps the pride of former days—More

The village of Moonfleet lies half a mile from the sea on the right or west bank of the Fleet stream. This rivulet, which is so narrow as it passes the houses that I have known a good jumper clear it without a pole, broadens out into salt marshes below the village, and loses itself at last in a lake of brackish water. The lake is good for nothing except sea-fowl, herons, and oysters, and forms such a place as they call in the Indies a lagoon; being shut off from the open Channel by a monstrous great beach or dike of pebbles, of which I shall speak more hereafter. When I was a child I thought that this place was called Moonfleet, because on a still night, whether in summer, or in winter frosts, the moon shone very brightly on the lagoon; but learned afterwards that 'twas but short for 'Mohune-fleet', from the Mohunes, a great family who were once lords of all these parts.

My name is John Trenchard, and I was fifteen years of age when this story begins. My father and mother had both been dead for years, and I boarded with my aunt, Miss Arnold, who was kind to me in her own fashion, but too strict and precise ever to make me love her.

I shall first speak of one evening in the fall of the year 1757. It must have been late in October, though I have forgotten the exact date, and I sat in the little front parlour reading after tea. My aunt had few books; a Bible, a Common Prayer, and some volumes of sermons are all that I can recollect now; but the Reverend Mr. Glennie, who taught us village children, had lent me a story-book, full of interest and adventure, called the *Arabian Nights Entertainment*. At last the light began to fail, and I was nothing loth to leave off reading for several reasons; as, first, the parlour was a chilly room with horse-hair chairs and sofa, and only a coloured-paper screen in the grate, for my aunt did not allow a fire till the first of November; second, there was a rank smell of molten tallow in the house, for my aunt was dipping winter candles on frames in the back kitchen; third, I had reached a part in the *Arabian Nights* which tightened my breath and made me wish to leave off reading for very anxiousness of expectation. It was that point in the story of the 'Wonderful Lamp', where the false uncle lets fall a stone that seals the mouth of the underground chamber; and immures the boy, Aladdin, in the darkness, because he would not give up the lamp till he stood safe on the surface again. This scene reminded me of one of those dreadful nightmares, where we dream we are shut in a little room, the walls of which are closing in upon us, and so impressed me that the memory of it served as a warning in an adventure that befell me later on. So I gave up reading and stepped out into the street. It was a poor street at best, though once, no doubt, it had been finer. Now, there were not two hundred souls in Moonfleet, and yet the houses that held them straggled sadly over half a mile, lying at intervals along either side of the road. Nothing was ever made new in the village; if a house wanted repair badly, it was pulled down, and so there were toothless gaps in the street, and overrun gardens with broken-down walls, and many of the houses that yet stood looked as though they could stand but little longer.

The sun had set; indeed, it was already so dusk that the lower or sea-end of the street was lost from sight. There was a little fog or smoke-wreath in the air, with an odour of burning weeds, and that first frosty feeling of the autumn that makes us think of glowing fires and the comfort of long winter evenings to come. All was very still, but I could hear the tapping of a hammer farther down the street, and walked to see what was doing, for we had no trades in Moonfleet save that of fishing. It was Ratsey the sexton at work in a shed which opened on the street, lettering a tombstone with a mallet and graver. He had been mason before he became fisherman, and was handy with his tools; so that if anyone wanted a headstone set up in the churchyard, he went to Ratsey to get it done. I lent

over the half-door and watched him a minute, chipping away with the graver in a bad light from a lantern; then he looked up, and seeing me, said:

'Here, John, if you have nothing to do, come in and hold the lantern for me, 'tis but a half-hour's job to get all finished.'

Ratsey was always kind to me, and had lent me a chisel many a time to make boats, so I stepped in and held the lantern watching him chink out the bits of Portland stone with a graver, and blinking the while when they came too near my eyes. The inscription stood complete, but he was putting the finishing touches to a little sea-piece carved at the top of the stone, which showed a schooner boarding a cutter. I thought it fine work at the time, but know now that it was rough enough; indeed, you may see it for yourself in Moonfleet churchyard to this day, and read the inscription too, though it is yellow with lichen, and not so plain as it was that night. This is how it runs:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF DAVID BLOCK

Aged 15, who was killed by a shot fired from the *Elector* Schooner, 21 June 1757.

Of life bereft (by fell design),
I mingle with my fellow clay.
On God's protection I recline
To save me in the Judgement Day.

There too must you, cruel man, appear,
Repent ere it be all too late;
Or else a dreadful sentence fear,
For God will sure revenge my fate.

The Reverend Mr. Glennie wrote the verses, and I knew them by heart, for he had given me a copy; indeed, the whole village had rung with the tale of David's death, and it was yet in every mouth. He was only child to Elzevir Block, who kept the Why Not? inn at the bottom of the village, and was with the contrabandiers, when their ketch was boarded that June night by the Government schooner. People said that it was Magistrate Maskew of Moonfleet Manor who had put the Revenue men on the track, and anyway he was on board the *Elector* as she overhauled the ketch. There was some show of fighting when the vessels first came alongside of one another, and Maskew drew a pistol and fired it off in young David's face, with only the two gunwales between them. In the afternoon of Midsummer's Day the *Elector* brought the ketch into Moonfleet, and there was a posse of constables to march the smugglers off to Dorchester Jail. The prisoners trudged up through the village ironed two and two together, while people stood at their doors or followed them, the men greeting them with a kindly word, for we knew most of them as Ringstave and Monkbury men, and the women sorrowing for their wives. But they left David's body in the ketch, so the boy paid dear for his night's frolic.

'Ay, 'twas a cruel, cruel thing to fire on so young a lad,' Ratsey said, as he stepped back a pace to study the effect of a flag that he was chiselling on the Revenue schooner, 'and trouble is likely to come to the other poor fellows taken, for Lawyer Empson says three of them will surely hang at next Assize. I recollect', he went on, 'thirty years ago, when there was a bit of a scuffle between the *Royal Sophy* and the *Marnhull*, they hanged four of the contrabandiers, and my old father caught his death of cold what with going to see the poor chaps turned off at Dorchester, and standing up to his knees in the river Frome to get a sight of them, for all the countryside was there, and such a press there was no place on land. There, that's enough,' he said, turning again to the gravestone. 'On Monday I'll line the ports in black, and get a brush of red to pick out the flag; and now, my son, you've helped with the

lantern, so come down to the Why Not? and there I'll have a word with Elzevir, who sadly needs the talk of kindly friends to cheer him, and we'll find you a glass of Hollands to keep out autumn chills.'

I was but a lad, and thought it a vast honour to be asked to the Why Not?—for did not such an invitation raise me at once to the dignity of manhood. Ah, sweet boyhood, how eager are we as boys to be quit of thee, with what regret do we look back on thee before our man's race is half-way run! Yet was not my pleasure without alloy, for I feared even to think of what Aunt Jane would say if she knew that I had been at the Why Not?—and beside that, I stood in awe of grim old Elzevir Block, grimmer and sadder a thousand times since David's death.

The Why Not? was not the real name of the inn; it was properly the Mohune Arms. The Mohunes had once owned, as I have said, the whole of the village; but their fortunes fell, and with them fell the fortunes of Moonfleet. The ruins of their mansion showed grey on the hillside above the village; their almshouses stood half-way down the street, with the quadrangle deserted and overgrown; the Mohune image and superscription was on everything from the church to the inn, and everything that bore it was stamped also with the superscription of decay. And here it is necessary that I say a few words as to this family badge; for, as you will see, I was to bear it all my life, and shall carry its impress with me to the grave. The Mohune shield was plain white or silver, and bore nothing upon it except a great black 'Y'. I call it a 'Y', though the Reverend Mr. Glennie once explained to me that it was not a 'Y' at all, but what heralds call a *cross-pall*. *Cross-pall* or no *cross-pall*, it looked for all the world like a black 'Y', with a broad arm ending in each of the top corners of the shield, and the tail coming down into the bottom. You might see that cognizance carved on the manor, and on the stonework and woodwork of the church, and on a score of houses in the village, and it hung on the signboard over the door of the inn. Everyone knew the Mohune 'Y' for miles around, and a former landlord having called the inn the Why Not? in jest, the name had stuck to it ever since.

More than once on winter evenings, when men were drinking in the Why Not?, I had stood outside, and listened to them singing 'Ducky-stones', or 'Kegs bobbing One, Two, Three', or some of the other tunes that sailors sing in the west. Such songs had neither beginning nor ending, and very little sense to catch hold of in the middle. One man would crone the air, and the others would crone a solemn chorus, but there was little hard drinking, for Elzevir Block never got drunk himself, and did not like his guests to get drunk either. On singing nights the room grew hot, and the steam stood so thick on the glass inside that one could not see in; but at other times, when there was no company, I have peeped through the red curtains and watched Elzevir Block and Ratsey playing backgammon at the trestle-table by the fire. It was on the trestle-table that Block had afterwards laid out his son's dead body, and some said they had looked through the window at night and seen the father trying to wash the blood-matting out of the boy's yellow hair, and heard him groaning and talking to the lifeless clay as if it could understand. Anyhow, there had been little drinking in the inn since that time, for Block grew more and more silent and morose. He had never courted customers, and now he scowled on any that came, so that men looked on the Why Not? as a blighted spot, and went to drink at the Three Choughs at Ringstave.

My heart was in my mouth when Ratsey lifted the latch and led me into the inn parlour. It was a low sanded room with no light except a fire of seawood on the hearth, burning clear and lambent with blue salt flames. There were tables at each end of the room, and wooden-seated chairs round the walls, and at the trestle table by the chimney sat Elzevir Block smoking a long pipe and looking at the fire. He was a man of fifty, with a shock of grizzled hair, a broad but not unkindly face of regular features, bushy eyebrows, and the finest forehead that I ever saw. His frame was thick-set, and still immensely strong; indeed, the countryside was full of tales of his strange prowess or endurance. Blocks had been landlords at the Why Not? father and son for years, but Elzevir's mother came from the Low Countries, and that was how he got his outland name and could speak Dutch. Few men knew much of him, and folks often wondered how it was he kept the Why Not? on so little custom as went that way. Yet he never seemed to lack for money; and if people loved to tell stories of his strength,

they would speak also of widows helped, and sick comforted with unknown gifts, and hint that some of them came from Elzevir Block for all he was so grim and silent.

He turned round and got up as we came in, and my fears led me to think that his face darkened when he saw me.

'What does this boy want?' he said to Ratsey sharply.

'He wants the same as I want, and that's a glass of Ararat milk to keep out autumn chills,' the sexton answered, drawing another chair up to the trestle-table.

'Cows' milk is best for children such as he,' was Elzevir's answer, as he took two shining brass candlesticks from the mantel-board, set them on the table, and lit the candles with a burning chip from the hearth.

'John is no child; he is the same age as David, and comes from helping me to finish David's headstone. 'Tis finished now, barring the paint upon the ships, and, please God, by Monday night we will have it set fair and square in the churchyard, and then the poor lad may rest in peace, knowing he has above him Master Ratsey's best handiwork, and the parson's verses to set forth how shamefully he came to his end.'

I thought that Elzevir softened a little as Ratsey spoke of his son, and he said, 'Ay, David rests in peace. 'Tis they that brought him to his end that shall not rest in peace when their time comes. And it may come sooner than they think,' he added, speaking more to himself than to us. I knew that he meant Mr. Maskew, and recollected that some had warned the magistrate that he had better keep out of Elzevir's way, for there was no knowing what a desperate man might do. And yet the two had met since in the village street, and nothing worse come of it than a scowling look from Block.

'Tush, man!' broke in the sexton, 'it was the foulest deed ever man did; but let not thy mind brood on it, nor think how thou mayest get thyself avenged. Leave that to Providence; for He whose wisdom lets such things be done, will surely see they meet their due reward. "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord".' And he took his hat off and hung it on a peg.

Block did not answer, but set three glasses on the table, and then took out from a cupboard a little round long-necked bottle, from which he poured out a glass for Ratsey and himself. Then he half-filled the third, and pushed it along the table to me, saying, 'There, take it, lad, if thou wilt; 'twill do thee no good, but may do thee no harm.'

Ratsey raised his glass almost before it was filled. He sniffed the liquor and smacked his lips. 'O rare milk of Ararat!' he said, 'it is sweet and strong, and sets the heart at ease. And now get the backgammon-board, John, and set it for us on the table.' So they fell to the game, and I took a sly sip at the liquor, but nearly choked myself, not being used to strong waters, and finding it heady and burning in the throat. Neither man spoke, and there was no sound except the constant rattle of the dice, and the rubbing of the pieces being moved across the board. Now and then one of the players stopped to light his pipe, and at the end of a game they scored their totals on the table with a bit of chalk. So I watched them for an hour, knowing the game myself, and being interested at seeing Elzevir's backgammon-board, which I had heard talked of before.

It had formed part of the furniture of the Why Not? for generations of landlords, and served perhaps to pass time for cavaliers of the Civil Wars. All was of oak, black and polished, board, dice-boxes, and men, but round the edge ran a Latin inscription inlaid in light wood, which I read on that first evening, but did not understand till Mr. Glennie translated it to me. I had cause to remember it afterwards, so I shall set it down here in Latin for those who know that tongue, *Ita in vita ut in lusu alae pessima jactura arte corrigenda est*, and in English as Mr. Glennie translated it, *As in life, so in a game of hazard, skill will make something of the worst of throws*. At last Elzevir looked up and spoke to me, not unkindly, 'Lad, it is time for you to go home; men say that Blackbeard walks on the first nights of winter, and some have met him face to face betwixt this house and yours.' I saw he wanted to be rid of me, so bade them both good night, and was off home, running all the way thither, though

not from any fear of Blackbeard, for Ratsey had often told me that there was no chance of meeting him unless one passed the churchyard by night.

Blackbeard was one of the Mohunes who had died a century back, and was buried in the vault under the church, with others of his family, but could not rest there, whether, as some said, because he was always looking for a lost treasure, or as others, because of his exceeding wickedness in life. If this last were the true reason, he must have been bad indeed, for Mohunes have died before and since his day wicked enough to bear anyone company in their vault or elsewhere. Men would have it that on dark winter nights Blackbeard might be seen with an old-fashioned lanthorn digging for treasure in the graveyard; and those who professed to know said he was the tallest of men, with full black beard, coppery face, and such evil eyes, that any who once met their gaze must die within a year. However that might be, there were few in Moonfleet who would not rather walk ten miles round than go near the churchyard after dark; and once when Cracky Jones, a poor doited body, was found there one summer morning, lying dead on the grass, it was thought that he had met Blackbeard in the night.

Mr. Glennie, who knew more about such things than anyone else, told me that Blackbeard was none other than a certain Colonel John Mohune, deceased about one hundred years ago. He would have it that Colonel Mohune, in the dreadful wars against King Charles the First, had deserted the allegiance of his house and supported the cause of the rebels. So being made Governor of Carisbrooke Castle for the Parliament, he became there the King's jailer, but was false to his trust. For the King, carrying constantly hidden about his person a great diamond which had once been given him by his brother King of France, Mohune got wind of this jewel, and promised that if it were given him he would wink at His Majesty's escape. Then this wicked man, having taken the bribe, plays traitor again, comes with a file of soldiers at the hour appointed for the King's flight, finds His Majesty escaping through a window, has him away to a stricter ward, and reports to the Parliament that the King's escape is only prevented by Colonel Mohune's watchfulness. But how true, as Mr. Glennie said, that we should not be envious against the ungodly, against the man that walketh after evil counsels. Suspicion fell on Colonel Mohune; he was removed from his Governorship, and came back to his home at Moonfleet. There he lived in seclusion, despised by both parties in the State, until he died, about the time of the happy Restoration of King Charles the Second. But even after his death he could not get rest; for men said that he had hid somewhere that treasure given him to permit the King's escape, and that not daring to reclaim it, had let the secret die with him, and so must needs come out of his grave to try to get at it again. Mr. Glennie would never say whether he believed the tale or not, pointing out that apparitions both of good and evil spirits are related in Holy Scripture, but that the churchyard was an unlikely spot for Colonel Mohune to seek his treasure in; for had it been buried there, he would have had a hundred chances to have it up in his lifetime. However this may be, though I was brave as a lion by day, and used indeed to frequent the churchyard, because there was the widest view of the sea to be obtained from it, yet no reward would have taken me thither at night. Nor was I myself without some witness to the tale, for having to walk to Ringstave for Dr. Hawkins on the night my aunt broke her leg, I took the path along the down which overlooks the churchyard at a mile off; and thence most certainly saw a light moving to and fro about the church, where no honest man could be at two o'clock in the morning.

CHAPTER 2

THE FLOODS

*Then banks came down with ruin and rout,
Then beaten spray flew round about,
Then all the mighty floods were out,
And all the world was in the sea —Jean Ingelow*

On the third of November, a few days after this visit to the Why Not?, the wind, which had been blowing from the south-west, began about four in the afternoon to rise in sudden strong gusts. The rooks had been pitch-falling all the morning, so we knew that bad weather was due; and when we came out from the schooling that Mr. Glennie gave us in the hall of the old almshouses, there were wisps of thatch, and even stray tiles, flying from the roofs, and the children sang:

Blow wind, rise storm,
Ship ashore before morn.

It is heathenish rhyme that has come down out of other and worse times; for though I do not say but that a wreck on Moonfleet beach was looked upon sometimes as little short of a godsend, yet I hope none of us were so wicked as to *wish* a vessel to be wrecked that we might share in the plunder. Indeed, I have known the men of Moonfleet risk their own lives a hundred times to save those of shipwrecked mariners, as when the *Darius*, East Indiaman, came ashore; nay, even poor nameless corpses washed up were sure of Christian burial, or perhaps of one of Master Ratsey's headstones to set forth sex and date, as may be seen in the churchyard to this day.

Our village lies near the centre of Moonfleet Bay, a great bight twenty miles across, and a death-trap to up-channel sailors in a south-westerly gale. For with that wind blowing strong from south, if you cannot double the Snout, you must most surely come ashore; and many a good ship failing to round that point has beat up and down the bay all day, but come to beach in the evening. And once on the beach, the sea has little mercy, for the water is deep right in, and the waves curl over full on the pebbles with a weight no timbers can withstand. Then if poor fellows try to save themselves, there is a deadly under-tow or rush back of the water, which sucks them off their legs, and carries them again under the thundering waves. It is that back-suck of the pebbles that you may hear for miles inland, even at Dorchester, on still nights long after the winds that caused it have sunk, and which makes people turn in their beds, and thank God they are not fighting with the sea on Moonfleet beach.

But on this third of November there was no wreck, only such a wind as I have never known before, and only once since. All night long the tempest grew fiercer, and I think no one in Moonfleet went to bed; for there was such a breaking of tiles and glass, such a banging of doon and rattling of shutters, that no sleep was possible, and we were afraid besides lest the chimneys should fall and crush us. The wind blew fiercest about five in the morning, and then some ran up the street calling out a new danger—that the sea was breaking over the beach, and that all the place was like to be flooded. Some of the women were for flitting forthwith and climbing the down; but Master Ratsey, who was going round with others to comfort people, soon showed us that the upper part of the village stood so high, that if the water was to get thither, there was no knowing if it would not cover Ridgedown itself. But what with its being a spring-tide, and the sea breaking clean over the great outer beach of pebbles—a thing that had not happened for fifty years—there was so much water piled up in the lagoon, that it passed its bounds and flooded all the sea meadows, and even the lower end of the street. So

when day broke, there was the churchyard flooded, though 'twas on rising ground, and the church itself standing up like a steep little island, and the water over the door-sill of the Why Not?, though Elzevir Block would not budge, saying he did not care if the sea swept him away. It was but a nine-hours' wonder, for the wind fell very suddenly; the water began to go back, the sun shone bright, and before noon people came out to the doors to see the floods and talk over the storm. Most said that never had been so fierce a wind, but some of the oldest spoke of one in the second year of Queen Anne, and would have it as bad or worse. But whether worse or not, this storm was a weighty matter enough for me, and turned the course of my life, as you shall hear.

I have said that the waters came up so high that the church stood out like an island; but they went back quickly, and Mr. Glennie was able to hold service on the next Sunday morning. Few enough folks came to Moonfleet Church at any time; but fewer still came that morning, for the meadows between the village and the churchyard were wet and miry from the water. There were streamers of seaweed tangled about the very tombstones, and against the outside of the churchyard wall was piled up a great bank of it, from which came a salt rancid smell like a guillemot's egg that is always in the air after a south-westerly gale has strewn the shore with wrack.

This church is as large as any other I have seen, and divided into two parts with a stone screen across the middle. Perhaps Moonfleet was once a large place, and then likely enough there were people to fill such a church, but never since I knew it did anyone worship in that part called the nave. This western portion was quite empty beyond a few old tombs and a Royal Arms of Queen Anne; the pavement too was damp and mossy; and there were green patches down the white walls where the rains had got in. So the handful of people that came to church were glad enough to get the other side of the screen in the chancel, where at least the pew floors were boarded over, and the panelling of oak-work kept off the draughts.

Now this Sunday morning there were only three or four, I think, beside Mr. Glennie and Ratsey and the half-dozen of us boys, who crossed the swampy meadows strewn with drowned shrew-mice and moles. Even my aunt was not at church, being prevented by a migraine, but a surprise waited those who did go, for there in a pew by himself sat Elzevir Block. The people stared at him as they came in, for no one had ever known him go to church before; some saying in the village that he was a Catholic, and others an infidel. However that may be, there he was this day, wishing perhaps to show a favour to the parson who had written the verses for David's headstone. He took no notice of anyone, nor exchanged greetings with those that came in, as was the fashion in Moonfleet Church, but kept his eyes fixed on a prayer-book which he held in his hand, though he could not be following the minister, for he never turned the leaf.

The church was so damp from the floods, that Master Ratsey had put a fire in the brazier which stood at the back, but was not commonly lighted till the winter had fairly begun. We boys sat as close to the brazier as we could, for the wet cold struck up from the flags, and besides that, we were so far from the clergyman, and so well screened by the oak backs, that we could bake an apple or roast a chestnut without much fear of being caught. But that morning there was something else to take off our thoughts; for before the service was well begun, we became aware of a strange noise under the church. The first time it came was just as Mr. Glennie was finishing 'Dearly Beloved', and we heard it again before the second lesson. It was not a loud noise, but rather like that which a boat makes jostling against another at sea, only there was something deeper and more hollow about it. We boys looked at each other, for we knew what was under the church, and that the sound could only come from the Mohune Vault. No one at Moonfleet had ever seen the inside of that vault; but Ratsey was told by his father, who was clerk before him, that it underlay half the chancel, and that there were more than a score of Mohunes lying there. It had not been opened for over forty years, since Gerald Mohune, who burst a blood-vessel drinking at Weymouth races, was buried there; but there was a tale that one Sunday afternoon, many years back, there had come from the vault so horrible

and unearthly a cry, that parson and people got up and fled from the church, and would not worship there for weeks afterwards.

We thought of these stories, and huddled up closer to the brazier, being frightened at the noise, and uncertain whether we should not turn tail and run from the church. For it was certain that something was moving in the Mohune vault, to which there was no entrance except by a ringed stone in the chancel floor, that had not been lifted for forty years.

However, we thought better of it, and did not budge, though I could see when standing up and looking over the tops of the seats that others beside ourselves were ill at ease; for Granny Tucker gave such starts when she heard the sounds, that twice her spectacles fell off her nose into her lap, and Master Ratsey seemed to be trying to mask the one noise by making another himself, whether by shuffling with his feet or by thumping down his prayer-book. But the thing that most surprised me was that even Elzevir Block, who cared, men said, for neither God nor Devil, looked unquiet, and gave a quick glance at Ratsey every time the sound came. So we sat till Mr. Glennie was well on with the sermon. His discourse interested me though I was only a boy, for he likened life to the letter 'Y', saying that 'in each man's life must come a point where two roads part like the arms of a "Y", and that everyone must choose for himself whether he will follow the broad and sloping path on the left or the steep and narrow path on the right. For,' said he, 'if you will look in your books, you will see that the letter "Y" is not like the Mohunes', with both arms equal, but has the arm on the left broader and more sloping than the arm on the right; hence ancient philosophers hold that this arm on the left represents the easy downward road to destruction, and the arm on the right the narrow upward path of life.' When we heard that we all fell to searching our prayer-books for a capital 'Y'; and Granny Tucker, who knew not A from B, made much ado in fumbling with her book, for she would have people think that she could read. Then just at that moment came a noise from below louder than those before, hollow and grating like the cry of an old man in pain. With that up jumps Granny Tucker, calling out loud in church to Mr. Glennie—

'O Master, however can'ee bide there preaching when the Moons be rising from their graves?' and out from the church.

That was too much for the others, and all fled, Mrs. Vining crying, 'Lordsakes, we shall all be throttled like Cracky Jones.'

So in a minute there were none left in the church, save and except Mr. Glennie, with me, Ratsey, and Elzevir Block. I did not run: first, not wishing to show myself coward before the men; second, because I thought if Blackbeard came he would fall on the men rather than on a boy; and third, that if it came to blows, Block was strong enough to give account even of a Mohune. Mr. Glennie went on with his sermon, making as though he neither heard any noise nor saw the people leave the church; and when he had finished, Elzevir walked out, but I stopped to see what the minister would say to Ratsey about the noise in the vault. The sexton helped Mr. Glennie off with his gown, and then seeing me standing by and listening, said—

'The Lord has sent evil angels among us; 'tis a terrible thing, Master Glennie, to hear the dead men moving under our feet.'

'Tut, tut,' answered the minister, 'it is only their own fears that make such noises terrible to the vulgar. As for Blackbeard, I am not here to say whether guilty spirits sometimes cannot rest and are seen wandering by men; but for these noises, they are certainly Nature's work as is the noise of waves upon the beach. The floods have filled the vault with water, and so the coffins getting afloat, move in some eddies that we know not of, and jostle one another. Then being hollow, they give forth those sounds you hear, and these are your evil angels. 'Tis very true the dead do move beneath our feet, but 'tis because they cannot help themselves, being carried hither and thither by the water. Fie, Ratsey man, you should know better than to fright a boy with silly talk of spirits when the truth is bad enough.'

The parson's words had the ring of truth in them to me, and I never doubted that he was right. So this mystery was explained, and yet it was a dreadful thing, and made me shiver, to think of the

Mohunes all adrift in their coffins, and jostling one another in the dark. I pictured them to myself, the many generations, old men and children, man and maid, all bones now, each afloat in his little box of rotting wood; and Blackbeard himself in a great coffin bigger than all the rest, coming crashing into the weaker ones, as a ship in a heavy sea comes crashing down sometimes in the trough, on a small boat that is trying to board her. And then there was the outer darkness of the vault itself to think of, and the close air, and the black putrid water nearly up to the roof on which such sorry ships were sailing.

Ratsey looked a little crestfallen at what Mr. Glennie said, but put a good face on it, and answered—

'Well, master, I am but a plain man, and know nothing about floods and these eddies and hidden workings of Nature of which you speak; but, saving your presence, I hold it a fond thing to make light of such warnings as are given us. 'Tis always said, "When the Moons move, then Moonfleet mourns"; and I have heard my father tell that the last time they stirred was in Queen Anne's second year, when the great storm blew men's homes about their heads. And as for frightening children, 'tis well that heady boys should learn to stand in awe, and not pry into what does not concern them—or they may come to harm.' He added the last words with what I felt sure was a nod of warning to myself, though I did not then understand what he meant. So he walked off in a huff with Elzevir, who was waiting for him outside, and I went with Mr. Glennie and carried his gown for him back to his lodging in the village.

Mr. Glennie was always very friendly, making much of me, and talking to me as though I were his equal; which was due, I think, to there being no one of his own knowledge in the neighbourhood, and so he had as lief talk to an ignorant boy as to an ignorant man. After we had passed the churchyard turnstile and were crossing the sludgy meadows, I asked him again what he knew of Blackbeard and his lost treasure.

'My son,' he answered, 'all that I have been able to gather is, that this Colonel John Mohune (foolishly called Blackbeard) was the first to impair the family fortunes by his excesses, and even let the almshouses fall to ruin, and turned the poor away. Unless report strangely belies him, he was an evil man, and besides numberless lesser crimes, had on his hands the blood of a faithful servant, whom he made away with because chance had brought to the man's ears some guilty secret of the master. Then, at the end of his life, being filled with fear and remorse (as must always happen with evil livers at the last), he sent for Rector Kindersley of Dorchester to confess him, though a Protestant, and wished to make amends by leaving that treasure so ill-gotten from King Charles (which was all that he had to leave) for the repair and support of the almshouses. He made a last will, which I have seen, to this effect, but without describing the treasure further than to call it a diamond, nor saying where it was to be found. Doubtless he meant to get it himself, sell it, and afterwards apply the profit to his good purpose, but before he could do so death called him suddenly to his account. So men say that he cannot rest in his grave, not having made even so tardy a reparation, and never will rest unless the treasure is found and spent upon the poor.'

I thought much over what Mr. Glennie had said and fell to wondering where Blackbeard could have hid his diamond, and whether I might not find it some day and make myself a rich man. Now, as I considered that noise we had heard under the church, and Parson Glennie's explanation of it, I was more and more perplexed; for the noise had, as I have said, something deep and hollow-booming in it, and how was that to be made by decayed coffins. I had more than once seen Ratsey, in digging a grave, turn up pieces of coffins, and sometimes a tarnished name-plate would show that they had not been so very long underground, and yet the wood was quite decayed and rotten. And granting that such were in the earth, and so might more easily perish, yet when the top was taken off old Guy's brick grave to put his widow beside him, Master Ratsey gave me a peep in, and old Guy's coffin had cracks and warps in it, and looked as if a sound blow would send it to pieces. Yet here were the Mohune coffins that had been put away for generations, and must be rotten as tinder, tapping against

each other with a sound like a drum, as if they were still sound and air-tight. Still, Mr. Glennie must be right; for if it was not the coffins, what should it be that made the noise?

So on the next day after we heard the sounds in church, being the Monday, as soon as morning school was over, off I ran down street and across meadows to the churchyard, meaning to listen outside the church if the Mohunes were still moving. I say outside the church, for I knew Ratsey would not lend me the key to go in after what he had said about boys prying into things that did not concern them; and besides that, I do not know that I should care to have ventured inside alone, even if I had the key.

When I reached the church, not a little out of breath, I listened first on the side nearest the village, that is the north side; putting my ear against the wall, and afterwards lying down on the ground, though the grass was long and wet, so that I might the better catch any sound that came. But I could hear nothing, and so concluded that the Mohunes had come to rest again, yet thought I would walk round the church and listen too on the south or sea side, for that their worships might have drifted over to that side, and be there rubbing shoulders with one another. So I went round, and was glad to get out of the cold shade into the sun on the south. But here was a surprise; for when I came round a great buttress which juts out from the wall, what should I see but two men, and these two were Ratsey and Elzevir Block. I came upon them unawares, and, lo and behold, there was Master Ratsey lying also on the ground with his ear to the wall, while Elzevir sat back against the inside of the buttress with a spy-glass in his hand, smoking and looking out to sea.

Now, I had as much right to be in the churchyard as Ratsey or Elzevir, and yet I felt a sudden shame as if I had been caught in some bad act, and knew the blood was running to my cheeks. At first I had it in my mind to turn tail and make off, but concluded to stand my ground since they had seen me, and so bade them 'Good morning'. Master Ratsey jumped to his feet as nimbly as a cat; and if he had not been a man, I should have thought he was blushing too, for his face was very red, though that came perhaps from lying on the ground. I could see he was a little put about, and out of countenance, though he tried to say 'Good morning, John', in an easy tone, as if it was a common thing for him to be lying in the churchyard, with his ear to the wall, on a winter's morning. 'Good morning, John,' he said; 'and what might you be doing in the churchyard this fine day?'

I answered that I was come to listen if the Mohunes were still moving.

'Well, that I can't tell you,' returned Ratsey, 'not wishing to waste thought on such idle matters, and having to examine this wall whether the floods have not so damaged it as to need under-pinning; so if you have time to gad about of a morning, get you back to my workshop and fetch me a plasterer's hammer which I have left behind, so that I can try this mortar.'

I knew that he was making excuses about underpinning, for the wall was sound as a rock, but was glad enough to take him at his word and beat a retreat from where I was not wanted. Indeed, I soon saw how he was mocking me, for the men did not even wait for me to come back with the hammer, but I met them returning in the first meadow. Master Ratsey made another excuse that he did not need the hammer now, as he had found out that all that was wanted was a little pointing with new mortar. 'But if you have such time to waste, John,' he added, 'you can come tomorrow and help me to get new thwarts in the *Petrel*, which she badly wants.'

So we three came back to the village together; but looking up at Elzevir once while Master Ratsey was making these pretences, I saw his eyes twinkle under their heavy brows, as if he was amused at the other's embarrassment.

The next Sunday, when we went to church, all was quiet as usual, there was no Elzevir, and no more noises, and I never heard the Mohunes move again.

CHAPTER 3

A DISCOVERY

*Some bold adventurers disdain
The limits of their little reign,
And unknown regions dare descry;
Still, as they run, they look behind,
They hear a voice in every wind
And snatch a fearful joy—Gray*

I have said that I used often in the daytime, when not at school, to go to the churchyard, because being on a little rise, there was the best view of the sea to be had from it; and on a fine day you could watch the French privateers creeping along the cliffs under the Snout, and lying in wait for an Indiaman or up-channel trader. There were at Moonfleet few boys of my own age, and none that I cared to make my companion; so I was given to muse alone, and did so for the most part in the open air, all the more because my aunt did not like to see an idle boy, with muddy boots, about her house.

For a few weeks, indeed, after the day that I had surprised Elzevir and Ratsey, I kept away from the church, fearing to meet them there again; but a little later resumed my visits, and saw no more of them. Now, my favourite seat in the churchyard was the flat top of a raised stone tomb, which stands on the south-east of the church. I have heard Mr. Glennie call it an altar-tomb, and in its day it had been a fine monument, being carved round with festoons of fruit and flowers; but had suffered so much from the weather, that I never was able to read the lettering on it, or to find out who had been buried beneath. Here I chose most to sit, not only because it had a flat and convenient top, but because it was screened from the wind by a thick clump of yew-trees. These yews had once, I think, completely surrounded it, but had either died or been cut down on the south side, so that anyone sitting on the grave-top was snug from the weather, and yet possessed a fine prospect over the sea. On the other three sides, the yews grew close and thick, embowering the tomb like the high back of a fireside chair; and many times in autumn I have seen the stone slab crimson with the fallen waxy berries, and taken some home to my aunt, who liked to taste them with a glass of sloe-gin after her Sunday dinner. Others beside me, no doubt, found this tomb a comfortable seat and look-out; for there was quite a path worn to it on the south side, though all the times I had visited it I had never seen anyone there.

So it came about that on a certain afternoon in the beginning of February, in the year 1758, I was sitting on this tomb looking out to sea. Though it was so early in the year, the air was soft and warm as a May day, and so still that I could hear the drumming of turnips that Gaffer George was flinging into a cart on the hillside, near half a mile away. Ever since the floods of which I have spoken, the weather had been open, but with high winds, and little or no rain. Thus as the land dried after the floods there began to open cracks in the heavy clay soil on which Moonfleet is built, such as are usually only seen with us in the height of summer. There were cracks by the side of the path in the sea-meadows between the village and the church, and cracks in the churchyard itself, and one running right up to this very tomb.

It must have been past four o'clock in the afternoon, and I was for returning to tea at my aunt's, when underneath the stone on which I sat I heard a rumbling and crumbling, and on jumping off saw that the crack in the ground had still further widened, just where it came up to the tomb, and that the dry earth had so shrunk and settled that there was a hole in the ground a foot or more across. Now this hole reached under the big stone that formed one side of the tomb, and falling on my hands and knees and looking down it, I perceived that there was under the monument a larger cavity, into which

the hole opened. I believe there never was boy yet who saw a hole in the ground, or a cave in a hill, or much more an underground passage, but longed incontinently to be into it and discover whither it led. So it was with me; and seeing that the earth had fallen enough into the hole to open a way under the stone, I slipped myself in feet foremost, dropped down on to a heap of fallen mould, and found that I could stand upright under the monument itself.

Now this was what I had expected, for I thought that there had been below this grave a vault, the roof of which had given way and let the earth fall in. But as soon as my eyes were used to the dimmer light, I saw that it was no such thing, but that the hole into which I had crept was only the mouth of a passage, which sloped gently down in the direction of the church. My heart fell to thumping with eagerness and surprise, for I thought I had made a wonderful discovery, and that this hidden way would certainly lead to great things, perhaps even to Blackbeard's hoard; for ever since Mr. Glennie's tale I had constantly before my eyes a vision of the diamond and the wealth it was to bring me. The passage was two paces broad, as high as a tall man, and cut through the soil, without bricks or any other lining; and what surprised me most was that it did not seem deserted nor mouldy and cobwebbed, as one would expect such a place to be, but rather a well-used thoroughfare; for I could see the soft clay floor was trodden with the prints of many boots, and marked with a trail as if some heavy thing had been dragged over it.

So I set out down the passage, reaching out my hand before me lest I should run against anything in the dark, and sliding my feet slowly to avoid pitfalls in the floor. But before I had gone half a dozen paces, the darkness grew so black that I was frightened, and so far from going on was glad to turn sharp about, and see the glimmer of light that came in through the hole under the tomb. Then a horror of the darkness seized me, and before I well knew what I was about I found myself wriggling my body up under the tombstone on to the churchyard grass, and was once more in the low evening sunlight and the soft sweet air.

Home I ran to my aunt's, for it was past tea-time, and beside that I knew I must fetch a candle if I were ever to search out the passage; and to search it I had well made up my mind, no matter how much I was scared for this moment. My aunt gave me but a sorry greeting when I came into the kitchen, for I was late and hot. She never said much when displeased, but had a way of saying nothing, which was much worse; and would only reply yes or no, and that after an interval, to anything that was asked of her. So the meal was silent enough, for she had finished before I arrived, and I ate but little myself being too much occupied with the thought of my strange discovery, and finding, beside, the tea lukewarm and the victuals not enticing.

You may guess that I said nothing of what I had seen, but made up my mind that as soon as my aunt's back was turned I would get a candle and tinder-box, and return to the churchyard. The sun was down before Aunt Jane gave thanks for what we had received, and then, turning to me, she said in a cold and measured voice:

'John, I have observed that you are often out and about of nights, sometimes as late as half past seven or eight. Now, it is not seemly for young folk to be abroad after dark, and I do not choose that my nephew should be called a gadabout. "What's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh", and 'twas with such loafing that your father began his wild ways, and afterwards led my poor sister such a life as never was, till the mercy of Providence took him away.'

Aunt Jane often spoke thus of my father, whom I never remembered, but believe him to have been an honest man and good fellow to boot, if something given to roaming and to the contraband.

'So understand', she went on, 'that I will not have you out again this evening, no, nor any other evening, after dusk. Bed is the place for youth when night falls, but if this seem to you too early you can sit with me for an hour in the parlour, and I will read you a discourse of Doctor Sherlock that will banish vain thoughts, and leave you in a fit frame for quiet sleep.'

So she led the way into the parlour, took the book from the shelf, put it on the table within the little circle of light cast by a shaded candle, and began. It was dull enough, though I had borne such

tribulations before, and the drone of my aunt's voice would have sent me to sleep, as it had done at other times, even in a straight-backed chair, had I not been so full of my discovery, and chafed at this delay. Thus all the time my aunt read of spiritualities and saving grace, I had my mind on diamonds and all kinds of mammon, for I never doubted that Blackbeard's treasure would be found at the end of that secret passage. The sermon finished at last, and my aunt closed the book with a stiff 'good night' for me. I was for giving her my formal kiss, but she made as if she did not see me and turned away; so we went upstairs each to our own room, and I never kissed Aunt Jane again.

There was a moon three-quarters full, already in the sky, and on moonlight nights I was allowed no candle to show me to bed. But on that night I needed none, for I never took off my clothes, having resolved to wait till my aunt was asleep, and then, ghosts or no ghosts, to make my way back to the churchyard. I did not dare to put off that visit even till the morning, lest some chance passer-by should light upon the hole, and so forestall me with Blackbeard's treasure.

Thus I lay wide awake on my bed watching the shadow of the tester-post against the whitewashed wall, and noting how it had moved, by degrees, as the moon went farther round. At last, just as it touched the picture of the Good Shepherd which hung over the mantelpiece, I heard my aunt snoring in her room, and knew that I was free. Yet I waited a few minutes so that she might get well on with her first sleep, and then took off my boots, and in stockinged feet slipped past her room and down the stairs. How stair, handrail, and landing creaked that night, and how my feet and body struck noisily against things seen quite well but misjudged in the effort not to misjudge them! And yet there was the note of safety still sounding, for the snoring never ceased, and the sleeper woke not, though her waking then might have changed all my life. So I came safely to the kitchen, and there put in my pocket one of the best winter candles and the tinder-box, and as I crept out of the room heard suddenly how loud the old clock was ticking, and looking up saw the bright brass band marking half past ten on the dial.

Out in the street I kept in the shadow of the houses as far as I might, though all was silent as the grave; indeed, I think that when the moon is bright a great hush falls always upon Nature, as though she was taken up in wondering at her own beauty. Everyone was fast asleep in Moonfleet and there was no light in any window; only when I came opposite the Why Not? I saw from the red glow behind the curtains that the bottom room was lit up, so Elzevir was not yet gone to bed. It was strange, for the Why Not? had been shut up early for many a long night past, and I crossed over cautiously to see if I could make out what was going forward. But that was not to be done, for the panes were thickly steamed over; and this surprised me more as showing that there was a good company inside. Moreover, as I stood and listened I could hear a mutter of deep voices inside, not as of roisterers, but of sober men talking low.

Eagerness would not let me wait long, and I was off across the meadows towards the church, though not without sad misgivings as soon as the last house was left well behind me. At the churchyard wall my courage had waned somewhat: it seemed a shameless thing to come to rifle Blackbeard's treasure just in the very place and hour that Blackbeard loved; and as I passed the turnstile I half-expected that a tall figure, hairy and evil-eyed, would spring out from the shadow on the north side of the church. But nothing stirred, and the frosty grass sounded crisp under my feet as I made across the churchyard, stepping over the graves and keeping always out of the shadows, towards the black clump of yew-trees on the far side.

When I got round the yews, there was the tomb standing out white against them, and at the foot of the tomb was the hole like a patch of black velvet spread upon the ground, it was so dark. Then, for a moment, I thought that Blackbeard might be lying in wait in the bottom of the hole, and I stood uncertain whether to go on or back. I could catch the rustle of the water on the beach—not of any waves, for the bay was smooth as glass, but just a lipper at the fringe; and wishing to put off with any excuse the descent into the passage, though I had quite resolved to make it, I settled with myself that I would count the water wash twenty times, and at the twentieth would let myself down into the

hole. Only seven wavelets had come in when I forgot to count, for there, right in the middle of the moon's path across the water, lay a lugger moored broadside to the beach. She was about half a mile out, but there was no mistake, for though her sails were lowered her masts and hull stood out black against the moonlight. Here was a fresh reason for delay, for surely one must consider what this craft could be, and what had brought her here. She was too small for a privateer, too large for a fishing-smack, and could not be a revenue boat by her low freeboard in the waist; and 'twas a strange thing for a boat to cast anchor in the midst of Moonfleet Bay even on a night so fine as this. Then while I watched I saw a blue flare in the bows, only for a moment, as if a man had lit a squib and flung it overboard, but I knew from it she was a contrabandier, and signalling either to the shore or to a mate in the offing. With that, courage came back, and I resolved to make this flare my signal for getting down into the hole, screwing my heart up with the thought that if Blackbeard was really waiting for me there, 'twould be little good to turn tail now, for he would be after me and could certainly run much faster than I. Then I took one last look round, and down into the hole forthwith, the same way as I had got down earlier in the day. So on that February night John Trenchard found himself standing in the heap of loose fallen mould at the bottom of the hole, with a mixture of courage and cowardice in his heart, but overruling all a great desire to get at Blackbeard's diamond.

Out came tinder-box and candle, and I was glad indeed when the light burned up bright enough to show that no one, at any rate, was standing by my side. But then there was the passage, and who could say what might be lurking there? Yet I did not falter, but set out on this adventurous journey, walking very slowly indeed—but that was from fear of pitfalls—and nerving myself with the thought of the great diamond which surely would be found at the end of the passage. What should I not be able to do with such wealth? I would buy a nag for Mr. Glennie, a new boat for Ratsey, and a silk gown for Aunt Jane, in spite of her being so hard with me as on this night. And thus I would make myself the greatest man in Moonfleet, richer even than Mr. Maskew, and build a stone house in the sea-meadows with a good prospect of the sea, and marry Grace Maskew and live happily, and fish. I walked on down the passage, reaching out the candle as far as might be in front of me, and whistling to keep myself company, yet saw neither Blackbeard nor anyone else. All the way there were footprints on the floor, and the roof was black as with smoke of torches, and this made me fear lest some of those who had been there before might have made away with the diamond. Now, though I have spoken of this journey down the passage as though it were a mile long, and though it verily seemed so to me that night, yet I afterwards found it was not more than twenty yards or thereabouts; and then I came upon a stone wall which had once blocked the road, but was now broken through so as to make a ragged doorway into a chamber beyond. There I stood on the rough sill of the door, holding my breath and reaching out my candle arm's-length into the darkness, to see what sort of a place this was before I put foot into it. And before the light had well time to fall on things, I knew that I was underneath the church, and that this chamber was none other than the Mohune Vault.

It was a large room, much larger, I think, than the schoolroom where Mr. Glennie taught us, but not near so high, being only some nine feet from floor to roof. I say floor, though in reality there was none, but only a bottom of soft wet sand; and when I stepped down on to it my heart beat very fiercely, for I remembered what manner of place I was entering, and the dreadful sounds which had issued from it that Sunday morning so short a time before. I satisfied myself that there was nothing evil lurking in the dark corners, or nothing visible at least, and then began to look round and note what was to be seen. Walls and roof were stone, and at one end was a staircase closed by a great flat stone at top—that same stone which I had often seen, with a ring in it, in the floor of the church above. All round the sides were stone shelves, with divisions between them like great bookcases, but instead of books there were the coffins of the Mohunes. Yet these lay only at the sides, and in the middle of the room was something very different, for here were stacked scores of casks, kegs, and runlets, from a storage butt that might hold thirty gallons down to a breaker that held only one. They were marked all of them in white paint on the end with figures and letters, that doubtless set forth

the quality to those that understood. Here indeed was a discovery, and instead of picking up at the end of the passage a little brass or silver casket, which had only to be opened to show Blackbeard's diamond gleaming inside, I had stumbled on the Mohunes' vault, and found it to be nothing but a cellar of gentlemen of the contraband, for surely good liquor would never be stored in so shy a place if it ever had paid the excise.

As I walked round this stack of casks my foot struck sharply on the edge of a butt, which must have been near empty, and straightway came from it the same hollow, booming sound (only fainter) which had so frightened us in church that Sunday morning. So it was the casks, and not the coffins, that had been knocking one against another; and I was pleased with myself, remembering how I had reasoned that coffin-wood could never give that booming sound.

It was plain enough that the whole place had been under water: the floor was still muddy, and the green and sweating walls showed the flood-mark within two feet of the roof; there was a wisp or two of fine seaweed that had somehow got in, and a small crab was still alive and scuttled across the corner, yet the coffins were but little disturbed. They lay on the shelves in rows, one above the other, and numbered twenty-three in all: most were in lead, and so could never float, but of those in wood some were turned slantways in their niches, and one had floated right away and been left on the floor upside down in a corner when the waters went back.

First I fell to wondering as to whose cellar this was, and how so much liquor could have been brought in with secrecy; and how it was I had never seen anything of the contraband-men, though it was clear that they had made this flat tomb the entrance to their storehouse, as I had made it my seat. And then I remembered how Ratsey had tried to scare me with talk of Blackbeard; and how Elzevir, who had never been seen at church before, was there the Sunday of the noises; and how he had looked ill at ease whenever the noise came, though he was bold as a lion; and how I had tripped upon him and Ratsey in the churchyard; and how Master Ratsey lay with his ear to the wall: and putting all these things together and casting them up, I thought that Elzevir and Ratsey knew as much as any about this hiding-place. These reflections gave me more courage, for I considered that the tales of Blackbeard walking or digging among the graves had been set afloat to keep those that were not wanted from the place, and guessed now that when I saw the light moving in the churchyard that night I went to fetch Dr. Hawkins, it was no corpse-candle, but a lantern of smugglers running a cargo. Then, having settled these important matters, I began to turn over in my mind how to get at the treasure; and herein was much cast down, for in this place was neither casket nor diamond, but only coffins and double-Hollands. So it was that, having no better plan, I set to work to see whether I could learn anything from the coffins themselves; but with little success, for the lead coffins had no names upon them, and on such of the wooden coffins as bore plates I found the writing to be Latin, and so rusted over that I could make nothing of it.

Soon I wished I had not come at all, considering that the diamond had vanished into air, and it was a sad thing to be cabined with so many dead men. It moved me, too, to see pieces of banners and funeral shields, and even shreds of wreaths that dear hearts had put there a century ago, now all ruined and rotten—some still clinging, water-sodden, to the coffins, and some trampled in the sand of the floor. I had spent some time in this bootless search, and was resolved to give up further inquiry and foot it home, when the clock in the tower struck midnight. Surely never was ghostly hour sounded in more ghostly place. Moonfleet peal was known over half the county, and the finest part of it was the clock bell. 'Twas said that in times past (when, perhaps, the chimes were rung more often than now) the voice of this bell had led safe home boats that were lost in the fog; and this night its clangour, mellow and profound, reached even to the vault. Bim-bom it went, bim-bom, twelve heavy thuds that shook the walls, twelve resonant echoes that followed, and then a purring and vibration of the air, so that the ear could not tell when it ended.

I was wrought up, perhaps, by the strangeness of the hour and place, and my hearing quicker than at other times, but before the tremor of the bell was quite passed away I knew there was some

other sound in the air, and that the awful stillness of the vault was broken. At first I could not tell what this new sound was, nor whence it came, and now it seemed a little noise close by, and now a great noise in the distance. And then it grew nearer and more defined, and in a moment I knew it was the sound of voices talking. They must have been a long way off at first, and for a minute, that seemed as an age, they came no nearer. What a minute was that to me! Even now, so many years after, I can recall the anguish of it, and how I stood with ears pricked up, eyes starting, and a clammy sweat upon my face, waiting for those speakers to come. It was the anguish of the rabbit at the end of his burrow, with the ferret's eyes gleaming in the dark, and gun and lurcher waiting at the mouth of the hole. I was caught in a trap, and knew beside that contraband-men had a way of sealing prying eyes and stilling babbling tongues; and I remembered poor Cracky Jones found dead in the churchyard, and how men *said* he had met Blackbeard in the night.

These were but the thoughts of a second, but the voices were nearer, and I heard a dull thud far up the passage, and knew that a man had jumped down from the churchyard into the hole. So I took a last stare round, agonizing to see if there was any way of escape; but the stone walls and roof were solid enough to crush me, and the stack of casks too closely packed to hide more than a rat. There was a man speaking now from the bottom of the hole to others in the churchyard, and then my eyes were led as by a loadstone to a great wooden coffin that lay by itself on the top shelf, a full six feet from the ground. When I saw the coffin I knew that I was respited, for, as I judged, there was space between it and the wall behind enough to contain my little carcass; and in a second I had put out the candle, scrambled up the shelves, half-stunned my senses with dashing my head against the roof, and squeezed my body betwixt wall and coffin. There I lay on one side with a thin and rotten plank between the dead man and me, dazed with the blow to my head, and breathing hard; while the glow of torches as they came down the passage reddened and flickered on the roof above.

CHAPTER 4 IN THE VAULT

Let us hob and nob with Death—Tennyson

Though nothing of the vault except the roof was visible from where I lay, and so I could not see these visitors, yet I heard every word spoken, and soon made out one voice as being Master Ratsey's. This discovery gave me no surprise but much solace, for I thought that if the worst happened and I was discovered, I should find one friend with whom I could plead for life.

'It is well the earth gave way', the sexton was saying, 'on a night when we were here to find it. I was in the graveyard myself after midday, and all was snug and tight then. 'Twould have been awkward enough to have the hole stand open through the day, for any passer-by to light on.'

There were four or five men in the vault already, and I could hear more coming down the passage, and guessed from their heavy footsteps that they were carrying burdens. There was a sound, too, of dumping kegs down on the ground, with a swish of liquor inside them, and then the noise of casks being moved.

'I thought we should have a fall there ere long,' Ratsey went on, 'what with this drought parching the ground, and the trampling at the edge when we move out the side stone to get in, but there is no mischief done beyond what can be easily made good. A gravestone or two and a few spades of earth will make all sound again. Leave that to me.'

'Be careful what you do,' rejoined another man's voice that I did not know, 'lest someone see you digging, and scent us out.'

'Make your mind easy,' Ratsey said; 'I have dug too often in this graveyard for any to wonder if they see me with a spade.'

Then the conversation broke off, and there was little more talking, only a noise of men going backwards and forwards, and of putting down of kegs and the hollow gurgle of good liquor being poured from breakers into the casks. By and by fumes of brandy began to fill the air, and climb to where I lay, overcoming the mouldy smell of decayed wood and the dampness of the green walls. It may have been that these fumes mounted to my head, and gave me courage not my own, but so it was that I lost something of the stifling fear that had gripped me, and could listen with more ease to what was going forward. There was a pause in the carrying to and fro; they were talking again now, and someone said—

'I was in Dorchester three days ago, and heard men say it will go hard with the poor chaps who had the brush with the *Electer* last summer. Judge Barentyne comes on Assize next week, and that old fox Maskew has driven down to Taunton to get at him before and coach him back; making out to him that the Law's arm is weak in these parts against the contraband, and must be strengthened by some wholesome hangings.'

'They are a cruel pair,' another put in, 'and we shall have new gibbets on Ridgedown for leading lights. Once I get even with Maskew, the other may go hang, ay, and they may hang me too.'

'The Devil send him to meet me one dark night on the down alone,' said someone else, 'and I will give him a pistol's mouth to look down, and spoil his face for him.'

'No, thou wilt not,' said a deep voice, and then I knew that Elzevir was there too; 'none shall lay hand on Maskew but I. So mark that, lad, that when his day of reckoning comes, 'tis *I* will reckon with him.'

Then for a few minutes I did not pay much heed to what was said, being terribly straitened for room, and cramped with pain from lying so long in one place. The thick smoke from the pitch torches too came curling across the roof and down upon me, making me sick and giddy with its evil smell

and taste; and though all was very dim, I could see my hands were black with oily smuts. At last I was able to wriggle myself over without making too much noise, and felt a great relief in changing sides, but gave such a start as made the coffin creak again at hearing my own name.

'There is a boy of Trenchard's,' said a voice that I thought was Parmiter's, who lived at the bottom of the village—'there is a boy of Trenchard's that I mistrust; he is for ever wandering in the graveyard, and I have seen him a score of times sitting on this tomb and looking out to sea. This very night, when the wind fell at sundown, and we were hung up with sails flapping, three miles out, and waited for the dark to get the sweeps, I took my glass to scan the coast-line, and lo, here on the tomb-top sits Master Trenchard. I could not see his face, but knew him by his cut, and fear the boy sits there to play the spy and then tells Maskew.'

'You're right,' said Greening of Ringstave, for I knew his slow drawl; 'and many a time when I have sat in The Wood, and watched the Manor to see Maskew safe at home before we ran a cargo, I have seen this boy too go round about the place with a hangdog look, scanning the house as if his life depended on't.'

'Twas very true what Greening said; for of a summer evening I would take the path that led up Weatherbeece Hill, behind the Manor; both because 'twas a walk that had a good prospect in itself, and also a sweet charm for me, namely, the hope of seeing Grace Maskew. And there I often sat upon the stile that ends the path and opens on the down, and watched the old half-ruined house below; and sometimes saw white-frosted Gracie walking on the terrace in the evening sun, and sometimes in returning passed her window near enough to wave a greeting. And once, when she had the fever, and Dr. Hawkins came twice a day to see her, I had no heart for school, but sat on that stile the livelong day, looking at the gabled house where she was lying ill. And Mr. Glennie never rated me for playing truant, nor told Aunt Jane, guessing, as I thought afterwards, the cause, and having once been young himself. 'Twas but boy's love, yet serious for me; and on the day she lay near death, I made so bold as to stop Dr. Hawkins on his horse and ask him how she did; and he bearing with me for the eagerness that he read in my face, bent down over his saddle and smiled, and said my playmate would come back to me again.

So it was quite true that I had watched the house, but not as a spy, and would not have borne tales to old Maskew for anything that could be offered. Then Ratsey spoke up for me and said—"Tis a false scent. The boy is well enough, and simple, and has told me many a time he seeks the churchyard because there is a fine view to be had there of the sea, and 'tis the sea he loves. A month ago, when the high tide set, and this vault was so full of water that we could not get in, I came with Elzevir to make out if the floods were going down inside, or what eddy 'twas that set the casks tapping one against another. So as I lay on the ground with my ear glued close against the wall, who should march round the church but John Trenchard, Esquire, not treading delicately like King Agag, or spying, but just come on a voyage of discovery for himself. For in the church on Sunday, when we heard the tapping in the vault below, my young gentleman was scared enough; but afterwards, being told by Parson Glennie—who should know better—that such noises were not made by ghosts, but by the Mohunes at sea in their coffins, he plucks up heart, and comes down on the Monday to see if they are still afloat. So there he caught me lying like a zany on the ground. You may guess I stood at attention soon enough, but told him I was looking at the founds to see if they wanted underpinning from the floods. And so I set his mind at ease, for 'tis a simple child, and packed him off to get my dubbing hammer. And I think the boy will not be here so often now to frighten honest Parmiter, for I have weaved him some pretty tales of Blackbeard, and he has a wholesome scare of meeting the Colonel. But after dark I pledge my life that neither he nor any other in the town would pass the churchyard wall, no, not for a thousand pounds.'

I heard him chuckling to himself, and the others laughed loudly too, when he was telling how he palmed me off; but 'he laughs loudest who laughs last', thought I, and should have chuckled too,

were it not for making the coffin creak. And then, to my surprise, Elzevir spoke: 'The lad is a brave lad; I would he were my son. He is David's age, and will make a good sailor later on.'

They were simple words, yet pleasing to me; for Elzevir spoke as if he meant them, and I had got to like him a little in spite of all his grimness; and beside that, was sorry for his grief over his son. I was so moved by what he said, that for a moment I was for jumping up and calling out to him that I lay here and liked him well, but then thought better of it, and so kept still.

The carrying was over, and I fancy they were all sitting on the ends of kegs or leaning up against the pile; but could not see, and was still much troubled with the torch smoke, though now and then I caught through it a whiff of tobacco, which showed that some were smoking.

Then Greening, who had a singing voice for all his drawl, struck up with—

Says the Cap'n to the crew,
We have slipt the revenue,

but Ratsey stopped him with a sharp 'No more of that; the words aren't to our taste tonight, but come as wry as if the parson called *Old Hundred* and I tuned up with *Veni*.' I knew he meant the last verse with a hanging touch in it; but Greening was for going on with the song, until some others broke in too, and he saw that the company would have none of it.

'Not but what the labourer is worthy of his hire,' went on Master Ratsey; 'so spile that little breaker of Schiedam, and send a rummer round to keep off midnight chills.'

He loved a glass of the good liquor well, and with him 'twas always the same reasoning, namely, to keep off chills; though he chopped the words to suit the season, and now 'twas autumn, now winter, now spring, or summer chills.

They must have found glasses, though I could not remember to have seen any in the vault, for a minute later fogleman Ratsey spoke again—

'Now, lads, glasses full and bumpers for a toast. And here's to Blackbeard, to Father Blackbeard, who watches over our treasure better than he did over his own; for were it not the fear of him that keeps off idle feet and prying eyes, we should have the gaugers in, and our store ransacked twenty times.'

So he spoke, and it seemed there was a little halting at first, as of men not liking to take Blackbeard's name in Blackbeard's place, or raise the Devil by mocking at him. But then some of the bolder shouted 'Blackbeard', and so the more timid chimed in, and in a minute there were a score of voices calling 'Blackbeard, Blackbeard', till the place rang again.

Then Elzevir cried out angrily, 'Silence. Are you mad, or has the liquor mastered you? Are you Revenue-men that you dare shout and roister? or contrabandiers with the lugger in the offing, and your life in your hand. You make noise enough to wake folk in Moonfleet from their beds.'

'Tut, man,' retorted Ratsey testily, 'and if they waked, they would but pull the blankets tight about their ears, and say 'twas Blackbeard piping his crew of lost Mohunes to help him dig for treasure.'

Yet for all that 'twas plain that Block ruled the roost, for there was silence for a minute, and then one said, 'Ay, Master Elzevir is right; let us away, the night is far spent, and we have nothing but the sweeps to take the lugger out of sight by dawn.'

So the meeting broke up, and the torchlight grew dimmer, and died away as it had come in a red flicker on the roof, and the footsteps sounded fainter as they went up the passage, until the vault was left to the dead men and me. Yet for a very long time—it seemed hours—after all had gone I could hear a murmur of distant voices, and knew that some were talking at the end of the passage, and perhaps considering how the landslip might best be restored. So while I heard them thus conversing I dared not descend from my perch, lest someone might turn back to the vault, though I was glad enough to sit up, and ease my aching back and limbs. Yet in the awful blackness of the place even

the echo of these human voices seemed a kindly and blessed thing, and a certain shrinking loneliness fell on me when they ceased at last and all was silent. Then I resolved I would be off at once, and get back to the moonlight bed that I had left hours ago, having no stomach for more treasure-hunting, and being glad indeed to be still left with the treasure of life.

Thus, sitting where I was, I lit my candle once more, and then clambered across that great coffin which, for two hours or more, had been a mid-wall of partition between me and danger. But to get out of the niche was harder than to get in; for now that I had a candle to light me, I saw that the coffin, though sound enough to outer view, was wormed through and through, and little better than a rotten shell. So it was that I had some ado to get over it, not daring either to kneel upon it or to bring much weight to bear with my hand, lest it should go through. And now having got safely across, I sat for an instant on that narrow ledge of the stone shelf which projected beyond the coffin on the vault side, and made ready to jump forward on to the floor below. And how it happened I know not, but there I lost my balance, and as I slipped the candle flew out of my grasp. Then I clutched at the coffin to save myself, but my hand went clean through it, and so I came to the ground in a cloud of dust and splinters; having only got hold of a wisp of seaweed, or a handful of those dragged funeral trappings which were strewn about this place. The floor of the vault was sandy; and so, though I fell crookedly, I took but little harm beyond a shaking; and soon, pulling myself together, set to strike my flint and blow the match into a flame to search for the fallen candle. Yet all the time I kept in my fingers this handful of light stuff; and when the flame burnt up again I held the thing against the light, and saw that it was no wisp of seaweed, but something black and wiry. For a moment, I could not gather what I had hold of, but then gave a start that nearly sent the candle out, and perhaps a cry, and let it drop as if it were red-hot iron, for I knew that it was a man's beard.

Now when I saw that, I felt a sort of throttling fright, as though one had caught hold of my heartstrings; and so many and such strange thoughts rose in me, that the blood went pounding round and round in my head, as it did once afterwards when I was fighting with the sea and near drowned. Surely to have in hand the beard of any dead man in any place was bad enough, but worse a thousand times in such a place as this, and to know on whose face it had grown. For, almost before I fully saw what it was, I knew it was that black beard which had given Colonel John Mohune his nickname, and this was his great coffin I had hid behind.

I had lain, therefore, all that time, cheek by jowl with Blackbeard himself, with only a thin shell of tinder wood to keep him from me, and now had thrust my hand into his coffin and plucked away his beard. So that if ever wicked men have power to show themselves after death, and still to work evil, one would guess that he would show himself now and fall upon me. Thus a sick dread got hold of me, and had I been a woman or a girl I think I should have swooned; but being only a boy, and not knowing how to swoon, did the next best thing, which was to put myself as far as might be from the beard, and make for the outlet. Yet had I scarce set foot in the passage when I stopped, remembering how once already this same evening I had played the coward, and run home scared with my own fears. So I was brought up for very shame, and beside that thought how I had come to this place to look for Blackbeard's treasure, and might have gone away without knowing even so much as where he lay, had not chance first led me to be down by his side, and afterwards placed my hand upon his beard. And surely this could not be chance alone, but must rather be the finger of Providence guiding me to that which I desired to find. This consideration somewhat restored my courage, and after several feints to return, advances, stoppings, and panics, I was in the vault again, walking carefully round the stack of barrels, and fearing to see the glimmer of the candle fall upon that beard. There it was upon the sand, and holding the candle nearer to it with a certain caution, as though it would spring up and bite me, I saw it was a great full black beard, more than a foot long, but going grey at the tips; and had at the back, keeping it together, a thin tissue of dried skin, like the false parting which Aunt Jane wore under her cap on Sundays. This I could see as it lay before me, for I did not handle or lift it,

but only peered into it, with the candle, on all sides, busying myself the while with thoughts of the man of whom it had once been part.

In returning to the vault, I had no very sure purpose in mind; only a vague surmise that this finding of Blackbeard's coffin would somehow lead to the finding of his treasure. But as I looked at the beard and pondered, I began to see that if anything was to be done, it must be by searching in the coffin itself, and the clearer this became to me, the greater was my dislike to set about such a task. So I put off the evil hour, by feigning to myself that it was necessary to make a careful scrutiny of the beard, and thus wasted at least ten minutes. But at length, seeing that the candle was burning low, and could certainly last little more than half an hour, and considering that it must now be getting near dawn, I buckled to the distasteful work of rummaging the coffin. Nor had I any need to climb up on to the top shelf again, but standing on the one beneath, found my head and arms well on a level with the search. And beside that, the task was not so difficult as I had thought; for in my fall I had broken off the head-end of the lid, and brought away the whole of that side that faced the vault. Now, any lad of my age, and perhaps some men too, might well have been frightened to set about such a matter as to search in a coffin; and if any had said, a few hours before, that I should ever have courage to do this by night in the Mohune vault, I would not have believed him. Yet here I was, and had advanced along the path of terror so gradually, and as it were foot by foot in the past night, that when I came to this final step I was not near so scared as when I first felt my way into the vault. It was not the first time either that I had looked on death; but had, indeed, always a leaning to such sights and matters, and had seen corpses washed up from the *Darius* and other wrecks, and besides that had helped Ratsey to case some poor bodies that had died in their beds.

The coffin was, as I have said, of great length, and the side being removed, I could see the whole outline of the skeleton that lay in it. I say the outline, for the form was wrapped in a woollen or flannel shroud, so that the bones themselves were not visible. The man that lay in it was little short of a giant, measuring, as I guessed, a full six and a half feet, and the flannel having sunk in over the belly, the end of the breast-bone, the hips, knees, and toes were very easy to be made out. The head was swathed in linen bands that had been white, but were now stained and discoloured with damp, but of this I shall not speak more, and beneath the chin-cloth the beard had once escaped. The clutch which I had made to save myself in falling had torn away this chin-band and let the lower jaw drop on the breast; but little else was disturbed, and there was Colonel John Mohune resting as he had been laid out a century ago. I lifted that portion of the lid which had been left behind, and reached over to see if there was anything hid on the other side of the body; but had scarce let the light fall in the coffin when my heart gave a great bound, and all fear left me in the flush of success, for there I saw what I had come to seek.

On the breast of this silent and swathed figure lay a locket, attached to the neck by a thin chain, which passed inside the linen bandages. A whiter portion of the flannel showed how far the beard had extended, but locket and chain were quite black, though I judged that they were made of silver. The shape of this locket was not unlike a crown-piece, only three times as thick, and as soon as I set eyes upon it I never doubted but that inside would be found the diamond.

It was then that a great pity came over me for this thin shadow of man; thinking rather what a fine, tall gentleman Colonel Mohune had once been, and a good soldier no doubt besides, than that he had wasted a noble estate and played traitor to the king. And then I reflected that it was all for the bit of flashing stone, which lay as I hoped within the locket, that he had sold his honour; and wished that the jewel might bring me better fortune than had fallen to him, or at any rate, that it might not lead me into such miry paths. Yet such thoughts did not delay my purpose, and I possessed myself of the locket easily enough, finding a hasp in the chain, and so drawing it out from the linen folds. I had expected as I moved the locket to hear the jewel rattle in the inside, but there was no sound, and then I thought that the diamond might cleave to the side with damp, or perhaps be wrapped in wool. Scarcely was the locket well in my hand before I had it undone, finding a thumb-nick whereby,

after a little persuasion, the back, though rusted, could be opened on a hinge. My breath came very fast, and I shook so that I had a difficulty to keep my thumbnail in the nick, yet hardly was it opened before exalted expectation gave place to deepest disappointment.

For there lay all the secret of the locket disclosed, and there was no diamond, no, nor any other jewel, and nothing at all except a little piece of folded paper. Then I felt like a man who has played away all his property and stakes his last crown—heavy-hearted, yet hoping against hope that luck may turn, and that with this piece he may win back all his money. So it was with me; for I hoped that this paper might have written on it directions for the finding of the jewel, and that I might yet rise from the table a winner. It was but a frail hope, and quickly dashed; for when I had smoothed the creases and spread out the piece of paper in the candle-light, there was nothing to be seen except a few verses from the Psalms of David. The paper was yellow, and showed a lattice of folds where it had been pressed into the locket; but the handwriting, though small, was clear and neat, and there was no mistaking a word of what was there set down. 'Twas so short, I could read it at once:

The days of our age are threescore years and ten;
And though men be so strong that they come
To fourscore years, yet is their strength then
But labour and sorrow, so soon passeth it
Away, and we are gone.

—*Psalm 90, 21*

And as for me, my feet are almost gone; My treadings are wellnigh slipped. —73, 6
But let not the waterflood drown me; neither let The deep swallow me up. —69, 11

So, going through the vale of misery, I shall
Use it for a well, till the pools are filled
With water.

—84, 14

For thou hast made the North and the South: Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice in thy name.
—89, 6

So here was an end to great hopes, and I was after all to leave the vault no richer than I had entered it. For look at it as I might, I could not see that these verses could ever lead to any diamond; and though I might otherwise have thought of ciphers or secret writing, yet, remembering what Mr. Glennie had said, that Blackbeard after his wicked life desired to make a good end, and sent for a parson to confess him, I guessed that such pious words had been hung round his neck as a charm to keep the spirits of evil away from his tomb. I was disappointed enough, but before I left picked up the beard from the floor, though it sent a shiver through me to touch it, and put it back in its place on the dead man's breast. I restored also such pieces of the coffin as I could get at, but could not make much of it; so left things as they were, trusting that those who came there next would think the wood had fallen to pieces by natural decay. But the locket I kept, and hung about my neck under my shirt; both as being a curious thing in itself, and because I thought that if the good words inside it were strong enough to keep off bad spirits from Blackbeard, they would be also strong enough to keep Blackbeard from me.

When this was done the candle had burnt so low, that I could no longer hold it in my fingers, and was forced to stick it on a piece of the broken wood, and so carry it before me. But, after all, I was not to escape from Blackbeard's clutches so easily; for when I came to the end of the passage, and was prepared to climb up into the churchyard, I found that the hole was stopped, and that there was no exit.

I understood now how it was that I had heard talking so long after the company had left the vault; for it was clear that Ratsey had been as good as his word, and that the falling in of the ground had been repaired before the contraband-men went home that night. At first I made light of the matter, thinking I should soon be able to dislodge this new work, and so find a way out. But when I looked more narrowly into the business, I did not feel so sure; for they had made a sound job of it, putting one very heavy burial slab at the side to pile earth against till the hole was full, and then covering it with another. These were both of slate, and I knew whence they came; for there were a dozen or more of such disused and weather-worn covers laid up against the north side of the church, and every one of them a good burden for four men. Yet I hoped by grouting at the earth below it to be able to dislodge the stone at the side; but while I was considering how best to begin, the candle flickered, the wick gave a sudden lurch to one side, and I was left in darkness.

Thus my plight was evil indeed, for I had nothing now to burn to give me light, and knew that 'twas no use setting to grout till I could see to go about it. Moreover, the darkness was of that black kind that is never found beneath the open sky, no, not even on the darkest night, but lurks in close and covered places and strains the eyes in trying to see into it. Yet I did not give way, but settled to wait for the dawn, which must, I knew, be now at hand; for then I thought enough light would come through the chinks of the tomb above to show me how to set to work. Nor was I even much scared, as one who having been in peril of life from the contraband-men for a spy, and in peril from evil ghosts for rifling Blackbeard's tomb, deemed it a light thing to be left in the dark to wait an hour till morning. So I sat down on the floor of the passage, which, if damp, was at least soft, and being tired with what I had gone through, and not used to miss a night's rest, fell straightway asleep.

How long I slept I cannot tell, for I had nothing to guide me to the time, but woke at length, and found myself still in darkness. I stood up and stretched my limbs, but did not feel as one refreshed by wholesome sleep, but sick and tired with pains in back, arms, and legs, as if beaten or bruised. I have said I was still in darkness, yet it was not the blackness of the last night; and looking up into the inside of the tomb above, I could see the faintest line of light at one corner, which showed the sun was up. For this line of light was the sunlight, filtering slowly through a crevice at the joining of the stones; but the sides of the tomb had been fitted much closer than I reckoned for, and it was plain there would never be light in the place enough to guide me to my work. All this I considered as I rested on the ground, for I had sat down again, feeling too tired to stand. But as I kept my eye on the narrow streak of light I was much startled, for I looked at the south-west corner of the tomb, and yet was looking towards the sun. This I gathered from the tone of the light; and although there was no direct outlet to the air, and only a glimmer came in, as I have said, yet I knew certainly that the sun was low in the west and falling full upon this stone.

Here was a surprise, and a sad one for me, for I perceived that I had slept away a day, and that the sun was setting for another night. And yet it mattered little, for night or daytime there was no light to help me in this horrible place; and though my eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom, I could make out nothing to show me where to work. So I took out my tinder-box, meaning to fan the match into a flame, and to get at least one moment's look at the place, and then to set to digging with my hands.

But as I lay asleep the top had been pressed off the box, and the tinder got loose in my pocket; and though I picked the tinder out easily enough, and got it in the box again, yet the salt damp of the place had soddened it in the night, and spark by spark fell idle from the flint.

And then it was that I first perceived the danger in which I stood; for there was no hope of kindling a light, and I doubted now whether even in the light I could ever have done much to dislodge the great slab of slate. I began also to feel very hungry, as not having eaten for twenty-four hours; and worse than that, there was a parching thirst and dryness in my throat, and nothing with which to quench it. Yet there was no time to be lost if I was ever to get out alive, and so I groped with my hands against the side of the grave until I made out the bottom edge of the slab, and then fell to grubbing

beneath it with my fingers. But the earth, which the day before had looked light and loamy to the eye, was stiff and hard enough when one came to tackle it with naked hands, and in an hour's time I had done little more than further weary myself and bruise my fingers.

Then I was forced to rest; and, sitting down on the ground, saw that the glimmering streak of light had faded, and that the awful blackness of the previous night was creeping up again. And now I had no heart to face it, being cowed with hunger, thirst, and weariness; and so flung myself upon my face, that I might not see how dark it was, and groaned for very lowness of spirit. Thus I lay for a long time, but afterwards stood up and cried aloud, and shrieked if anyone should haply hear me, calling to Mr. Glennie and Ratsey, and even Elzevir, by name, to save me from this awful place. But there came no answer, except the echo of my own voice sounding hollow and far off down in the vault. So in despair I turned back to the earth wall below the slab, and scrabbled at it with my fingers, till my nails were broken and the blood ran out; having all the while a sure knowledge, like a cord twisted round my head, that no effort of mine could ever dislodge the great stone. And thus the hours passed, and I shall not say more here, for the remembrance of that time is still terrible, and besides, no words could ever set forth the anguish I then suffered, yet did slumber come sometimes to my help; for even while I was working at the earth, sheer weariness would overtake me, and I sank on to the ground and fell asleep.

And still the hours passed, and at last I knew by the glimmer of light in the tomb above that the sun had risen again, and a maddening thirst had hold of me. And then I thought of all the barrels piled up in the vault and of the liquor that they held; and stuck not because 'twas spirit, for I would scarce have paused to sate that thirst even with molten lead. So I felt my way down the passage back to the vault, and recked not of the darkness, nor of Blackbeard and his crew, if only I could lay my lips to liquor. Thus I groped about the barrels till near the top of the stack my hand struck on the spile of a keg, and drawing it, I got my mouth to the hold.

What the liquor was I do not know, but it was not so strong but that I could swallow it in great gulps and found it less burning than my burning throat. But when I turned to get back to the passage, I could not find the outlet, and fumbled round and round until my brain was dizzy, and I fell senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER 5

THE RESCUE

*Shades of the dead, have I not heard your voices
Rise on the night-rolling breath of the gale?—Byron*

When I came to myself I was lying, not in the outer blackness of the Mohune vault, not on a floor of sand; but in a bed of sweet clean linen, and in a little whitewashed room, through the window of which the spring sunlight streamed. Oh, the blessed sunshine, and how I praised God for the light! At first I thought I was in my own bed at my aunt's house, and had dreamed of the vault and the smugglers, and that my being prisoned in the darkness was but the horror of a nightmare. I was for getting up, but fell back on my pillow in the effort to rise, with a weakness and sick languor which I had never known before. And as I sunk down, I felt something swing about my neck, and putting up my hand, found 'twas Colonel John Mohune's black locket, and so knew that part at least of this adventure was no dream.

Then the door opened, and to my wandering thought it seemed that I was back again in the vault, for in came Elzevir Block. Then I held up my hands, and cried—

'O Elzevir, save me, save me; I am not come to spy.'

But he, with a kind look on his face, put his hand on my shoulder, and pushed me gently back, saying—

'Lie still, lad, there is none here will hurt thee, and drink this.'

He held out to me a bowl of steaming broth, that filled the room with a savour sweeter, ten thousand times, to me than every rose and lily of the world; yet would not let me drink it at a gulp, but made me sip it with a spoon like any baby. Thus while I drank, he told me where I was, namely, in an attic at the Why Not?, but would not say more then, bidding me get to sleep again, and I should know all afterwards. And so it was ten days or more before youth and health had their way, and I was strong again; and all that time Elzevir Block sat by my bed, and nursed me tenderly as a woman. So piece by piece I learned the story of how they found me.

'Twas Mr. Glennie who first moved to seek me; for when the second day came that I was not at school, he thought that I was ill, and went to my aunt's to ask how I did, as was his wont when any ailed. But Aunt Jane answered him stiffly that she could not say how I did.

'For,' says she, 'he is run off I know not where, but as he makes his bed, must he lie on't; and if he run away for his pleasure, may stay away for mine. I have been pestered with this lot too long, and only bore with him for poor sister Martha's sake; but 'tis after his father that the graceless lad takes, and thus rewards me.'

With that she bangs the door in the parson's face and off he goes to Ratsey, but can learn nothing there, and so concludes that I have run away to sea, and am seeking ship at Poole or Weymouth.

But that same day came Sam Tewkesbury to the Why Not? about nightfall, and begged a glass of rum, being, as he said, 'all of a shake', and telling a tale of how he passed the churchyard wall on his return from work, and in the dusk heard screams and wailing voices, and knew 'twas Blackbeard piping his lost Mohunes to hunt for treasure. So, though he saw nothing, he turned tail and never stopped running till he stood at the inn door. Then, forthwith, Elzevir leaves Sam to drink at the Why Not? alone, and himself sets off running up the street to call for Master Ratsey; and they two make straight across the sea-meadows in the dark.

'For as soon as I heard Tewkesbury tell of screams and wailings in the air, and no one to be seen,' said Elzevir, 'I guessed that some poor soul had got shut in the vault, and was there crying for

his life. And to this I was not guided by mother wit, but by a surer and a sadder token. Thou wilt have heard how thirteen years ago a daft body we called Cracky Jones was found one morning in the churchyard dead. He was gone missing for a week before, and twice within that week I had sat through the night upon the hill behind the church, watching to warn the lugger with a flare she could not put in for the surf upon the beach. And on those nights, the air being still though a heavy swell was running, I heard thrice or more a throttled scream come shivering across the meadows from the graveyard. Yet beyond turning my blood cold for a moment, it gave me little trouble, for evil tales have hung about the church; and though I did not set much store by the old yarns of Blackbeard piping up his crew, yet I thought strange things might well go on among the graves at night. And so I never budged, nor stirred hand or foot to save a fellow-creature in his agony.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.